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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 6 June 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

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

British Transport Police Scottish Division

1. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the plan to merge the British Transport Police Scottish division with Police Scotland. [905612]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): The UK Government are working closely with the Scottish Government, the two police forces and police authorities through a joint programme board to ensure that effective arrangements are in place for cross-border railway policing once responsibilities have been transferred. The safety and security of rail passengers and staff remains our No. 1 priority.

Andrew Rosindell: I hear the Minister's reply, but does he agree that this proposal would let down hard-working and dedicated British Transport police officers and staff in Scotland, who are largely against these changes, and that this ideologically driven merger should not go ahead?

Stuart Andrew: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. As he knows, we are committed to the devolution of powers for railway policing to Scotland and the Scottish Government. We are keeping the promises made in the Scotland Act 2016. Our priority is that the powers are transferred safely and orderly. How the powers are used, however, is a decision for the Scottish Government and they should be rightly held to account by the Scottish Parliament. My hon. Friend will know that our colleagues in Holyrood share his serious concerns and they strongly oppose the SNP's plans. I am sure that they will have heard the point he has made today.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Does the Minister agree with the Scottish Government that the BTP merger will deliver

“continuity of service for rail users and staff”,

or does he agree with the chairman of the British Transport Police Federation, who says that a failure to look at the alternatives would be “somewhat reckless”?

Stuart Andrew: The UK Government are committed to working with the Scottish Government, the British Transport Police Authority and the police authorities to ensure that the terms and conditions of officers and staff transferring to Police Scotland are maintained. However, this is one of the reasons why there has been a delay. It is important that the staff are properly consulted and we would encourage that to happen.

Leaving the EU: Economic Growth

2. **Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): What assessment the Government have made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the level of growth in the Scottish economy. [905613]

10. **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What assessment the Government have made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the level of growth in the Scottish economy. [905621]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The Government are undertaking a wide range of ongoing analysis in support of our EU negotiations and preparations. We want our future relationship with the EU to be a deep and special partnership, taking in both economic and security co-operation.

Stephen Gethins: The UK Government's own analysis shows how devastating Brexit will be for GDP. That has already been felt with crippling uncertainty—so much so that Mr and Mrs Mitchell of Allanhill farm in my constituency have written to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs wondering whether or not they should plant their crop for 2019, because of the uncertainty about seasonal workers. Will he give them certainty today?

David Mundell: The Government have already acknowledged that there will be an ongoing need for a seasonal workers scheme that will support the constituents of the hon. Gentleman, but I thought that he might focus on other constituents, given the report yesterday by the Scottish Government which said that, with Brexit, there will be a huge increase in the number of potential jobs in the fishing industry, which impacts on his constituency, with a £540 million potential boost to the Scottish economy.

Drew Hendry: Non-UK EU nationals in Scotland contribute around £4.5 billion annually to the Scottish economy. Both the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Prime Minister have failed to rule out an immigration skills charge on companies employing EU nationals in future. Will the Secretary of State oppose any such charge applying in Scotland after the UK leaves the EU—yes or no?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman knows very clearly that I oppose there being a separate immigration system in Scotland. Scotland has specific issues in relation to immigration, but those issues also arise in other parts of the United Kingdom. When the Government announce their new immigration policy in relation to leaving the EU, I want to see a policy that takes into account the concerns of Scotland and the whole of the United Kingdom.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Increasing trade is critical to the success of Scotland's economy as we leave the European Union, and I was delighted that the first ever meeting of the Board of Trade in Scotland was held in Stirling just last month. It was a hugely successful day, not least for Stirling's businesses. What lessons has my right hon. Friend taken from listening to Scottish businesses about their experiences in exporting?

David Mundell: I echo my hon. Friend's comments about the suitability of the location of the meeting in Stirling and the beauty of Stirling castle as the setting for such an historic event. It is clear that businesses in Scotland want to get ahead with focusing on taking up the trade opportunities that will arise when we leave the EU.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Figures last month revealed that since 2007 the SNP Scottish Government in Edinburgh have missed five of their economic targets. Does this not demonstrate the incompetence of the Scottish Government in managing Scotland's economy?

David Mundell: I agree with my hon. Friend that there are real concerns. My view is that the single greatest threat to the growth of the Scottish economy is a second independence referendum, which would put business on hold, disrupt our economy and drive away investment.

11. [905622] **Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Given that all of Scotland's projected population growth over the next 25 years is from migration, does the Secretary of State not agree that reducing net migration would be devastating to Scotland? Does he agree with the leader of the Scottish branch of the Conservative party that a tailored solution for Scotland must be the answer?

David Mundell: I am clear that we need an immigration policy that is right for the whole of the United Kingdom and that takes into account the very specific needs that we have identified in Scotland. However, we know that the Scottish Government have powers that have very significant effects on immigration, such as the powers on the level of tax, and that making Scotland the highest-taxed part of the UK is not a way to encourage people to come to Scotland.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that what really matters to the growth rates and success of the Scottish economy is the Union of the United Kingdom? Does he agree that that is most demonstrated by the border area?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree. That is why I am astounded that the SNP now even disputes that there is an internal market in the United Kingdom; even by SNP standards, that is astounding. That internal market is worth four times as much to Scottish business as the whole of the EU put together.

Leaving the EU: Scotch Whisky Industry

3. **Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the effect on the Scotch whisky industry of the UK leaving the EU. [905614]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The UK Government work closely with the Scotch whisky industry and particularly with the Scotch Whisky Association to assess the industry's market access needs. As we leave the EU and build our future trade policy, we are also working to ensure that geographical indications are protected and potentially extended around the world.

Ian Murray: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his response, but given the potential trade war with the US, the Government's strategy to throw in the bin 63 bilateral trade deals when we leave the EU, and reports on both sides of the Atlantic that the three-year designation for Scotch whisky could be removed in any trade deal with the US, what is he specifically doing to protect that vital industry for Scotland and the UK in the Brexit negotiations?

David Mundell: First, the hon. Gentleman will recognise that the industry itself has been very clear that exciting opportunities can flow from trade deals post Brexit. That is what the Scotch Whisky Association has said, but the points he makes are very serious ones. I make sure that they are absolutely at the heart of the Brexit negotiations.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Scotch whisky is hugely important to my Moray constituency. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the most immediate threat to the industry is the possibility that the EU could include bourbon as a counter-measure against US trade tariffs? Therefore, does he agree that we should urge the EU not to include bourbon for fear of the retaliation action that the US could take?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend is a great champion of the whisky industry and raises an extremely serious and important point. I reassure him that I am in direct contact with the Scotch Whisky Association on that issue and will ensure that the points he has made are fully understood within the UK Government and the EU.

Mr Speaker: We are most grateful to the Secretary of State.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): The Scotch whisky industry is very important, but does the Secretary of State agree that the construction industry in Scotland is, too. Crummock, a construction firm in my constituency, went bust last week, with almost 300 redundancies. What is he doing to protect construction in Scotland?

David Mundell: I recognise the issues that the hon. Lady raises, because unfortunately a construction company in my own constituency, Graham's in Langholm, also went into administration last week. There are significant challenges facing the industry and I would be happy to meet her to discuss the specific issue in her constituency.

Mr Speaker: These dilations are of considerable interest, I am sure, but they are not altogether related to the matter of whisky. I fear that the Secretary of State was drawn away from the path of virtue, to which I know he will now speedily return, aided and abetted by the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers).

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): In future trade talks with India, will the Secretary of State place a priority on improving access for our exports of whisky from Scotland and Northern Ireland, as it is one of the United Kingdom's greatest products?

David Mundell: I will indeed, and the Secretary of State for Wales would be unhappy if I did not also reference Penderyn, the whisky made in Wales. I can assure my right hon. Friend that I will take exactly that action in relation to all the United Kingdom's whisky products.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, once we leave the EU, trade deals with countries such as Taiwan will open up massive new markets for Scotch whisky exports?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That is why the Scotch Whisky Association and various companies in the industry recognise that there are exciting prospects out there for future trade arrangements, and I see that they have the confidence and the determination to achieve them.

European Union (Withdrawal) Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

4. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the (a) Scottish Government and (b) Prime Minister on the Scottish Parliament's decision not to grant a legislative consent motion for the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. [905615]

5. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the (a) Scottish Government and (b) Prime Minister on the Scottish Parliament's decision not to grant a legislative consent motion for the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. [905616]

13. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the (a) Scottish Government and (b) Prime Minister on the Scottish Parliament's decision not to grant a legislative consent motion for the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. [905624]

15. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the (a) Scottish Government and (b) Prime Minister on the Scottish Parliament's decision not to grant a legislative consent motion for the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. [905626]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Having worked closely with the devolved Administrations on significant amendments, I am of course disappointed that the Scottish Parliament has not yet granted legislative consent to the Bill. The Welsh Assembly agrees that these arrangements fully respect the devolution settlements. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office is in correspondence again this week with Mike Russell, and the door remains open for the Scottish Government to reconsider.

Joanna Cherry: Can the Secretary of State tell us whether he has explained to the Prime Minister that, by a 3:1 majority of MSPs, four of the five parties in the

Scottish Parliament withheld legislative consent? What has he advised her to do to recognise that overwhelming expression of the democratic will of the Scottish people?

David Mundell: What I have done is explain the constitutional settlement in the United Kingdom fully to the Prime Minister, which she was already aware of. I know that the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) does not like the existing constitutional settlement and wants to see another one, but the current settlement, the arrangements within it and the Sewel convention are quite clear.

Patrick Grady: This is the Secretary of State who vowed to make Holyrood "one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments" in the history of the known universe, so why is he prepared to see this Westminster Parliament override the ruling of the Holyrood Parliament, which has withheld its consent? How does that square with his vow to respect and empower Holyrood?

David Mundell: I am not going to take any lectures on devolution from the SNP. Only today, Nicola Sturgeon has written, ahead of the SNP conference, that this weekend "marks the start of a new chapter in Scotland's road to independence". That does not sound very much like standing up for devolution to me.

David Linden: I have recently learned that the great saviour of the Tory party, and perhaps the next Prime Minister, Ruth Davidson, did not actually believe in the vow. Is it not the case that the chickens have come home to roost and that we are now seeing the anti-devolution party once again riding roughshod over Scotland?

David Mundell: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman—the anti-devolution party is riding roughshod over Scotland, but it is the SNP. It does not back devolution; it only backs independence.

Alan Brown: The Tory-friendly *Spectator* magazine has said that no self-respecting Scottish Government of any party could give consent to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill in its current form. So instead of expressing disappointment in the Scottish Government, what is the Secretary of State going to do to engage in cross-party talks and to try to find a solution that respects the will of the Scottish Parliament?

David Mundell: I have wanted to reach an agreement all along, and we have made it clear that we still want to reach an agreement in the exchanges with the Scottish Government this week. Either the Scottish Government need to reconsider their position, or a new proposal needs to emerge.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend think that the Scottish Government ever wanted to do a deal on the withdrawal agreement?

David Mundell: I think that Mr Michael Russell wanted to do a deal on the EU withdrawal agreement.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Why does the Secretary of State think that the UK Government's proposals on the withdrawal Bill were acceptable to a Unionist Government in Wales but not a nationalist Government in Scotland?

David Mundell: I have said many times—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Law, behave in accordance with your surname. Compose yourself, man. Indeed, I advise Members on both sides of the argument to seek to imitate the statesmanlike repose of Mr Alister Jack, from whom we have just heard. He has been attending to our proceedings in a most courteous and civilised way, as is his wont.

David Mundell: The Welsh Government, Welsh Labour representatives in the House of Lords and, indeed, the former Deputy First Minister, Jim Wallace, who is also in the House of Lords, have been clear that the Government's proposals did not in any way undermine the devolution settlement.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I can forgive some members of the Cabinet their ignorance in not understanding the effect of their policies on the devolution settlement, but that is not a quality that we expect from the Secretary of State for Scotland. Does he not agree that it takes a particular form of arrogance to try to force through a position that is supported by only one of the five political parties in Scotland and by less than one quarter of the Members of the Scottish Parliament?

David Mundell: Again, this comes down to the fact that the hon. Gentleman does not accept the current constitutional arrangements, including the Sewel convention. That can probably be explained by this obsession with pursuing independence. The current constitutional arrangements are quite clear, and the Government are proceeding in accordance with them.

Tommy Sheppard: Four out of the five political parties in Scotland now understand that this is the first Secretary of State for Scotland in history who seeks to lessen the control of the Scottish people over their own affairs. Will he now stand down and make way for someone who will respect the wishes of the Scottish people and respect the national Government of Scotland?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman let the cat out of the bag with his final words. Scotland has two Governments. In 2014, Scotland voted to be part of this United Kingdom, and I will continue to stand up and defend Scotland's place in it.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): The Secretary of State should be aware that Scottish Labour leader, Richard Leonard, wrote to the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 10 May asking for Scottish cross-party talks. If the Secretary of State really has been standing up for Scotland, what has he done to get his Cabinet colleague back around the negotiating table?

David Mundell: The hon. Lady knows that I regard the position of Scottish Labour in the Scottish Parliament as pitiful, kowtowing to the SNP and not honouring its proud Unionist credentials. We are clear that, if any new, different proposal emerges, the door is open and we will discuss it. However, no such proposal has come directly from the Scottish Labour party.

Lesley Laird: That door is open. That invitation is there, but the blame for this lies squarely at the doors of the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister. I have a copy of correspondence between the Minister for the

Cabinet Office and Richard Leonard, and the Secretary of State is not even mentioned—he is not even at the table. Does that not epitomise the fact that the Secretary of State is Scotland's invisible man in the Cabinet and that his colleagues are excluding him from future negotiations because of the mess he has already made?

David Mundell: I do not think the hon. Lady follows the media in Scotland very closely, otherwise she would know that Scotland's invisible man is Richard Leonard, leader of the Scottish Labour party, who has simply gone along with the SNP at every turn. I am proud, in the Cabinet and elsewhere, to stand up for Scotland's place in the United Kingdom, and I will continue to do so.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The founding principles of the devolution settlement have been turned on their head in the unelected House of Lords with its amendments to clause 15 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, yet we, Scotland's directly elected Members, will have next to no opportunity to debate and scrutinise what their lordships have decided for us. In what sort of world can that possibly be acceptable?

David Mundell: In exactly the same sort of world in which, two or three months ago, we heard the hon. Gentleman setting out all the virtues of the House of Lords and how it would stand up for the Scottish Government's principles. With your discretion, Mr Speaker, there will be an opportunity in this House to discuss clause 15 next week, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman will take the opportunity to do so.

Leaving the EU: Common Frameworks for Business

6. **Ross Thomson** (Aberdeen South) (Con): What UK-wide common frameworks the Government have assessed as being essential to business after the UK leaves the EU. [905617]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): In March, the UK Government published their provisional analysis of where we believe frameworks may be needed. This showed that, of the over 100 areas in which powers are coming back from Brussels, we think 24 areas may need legislative common frameworks to make sure we maintain the UK's internal market—a market that is worth four times as much to Scottish businesses as the rest of the EU put together.

Ross Thomson: Services account for over half of Scotland's exports to the United Kingdom, so ensuring there are no new barriers to trade in services between Scotland and the rest of the UK is vital for Scotland's economy. Does my right hon. Friend share my belief that, if the Scottish Government really wanted to put Scotland's interests first, they would be working more constructively with the UK Government to preserve, and indeed enhance, the ability of the Scottish services sector to trade with the rest of the United Kingdom?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The Scottish Government could start by retracting their bizarre recent argument that the UK's internal market does not exist. We all know they might want the UK's

internal market not to exist, as we realise they have reached such a stage of denial. The truth is that the UK's internal market is vital to the prosperity and jobs of people across Scotland.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will the new public relations post in the Cabinet Office covering Scotland and Northern Ireland be one of those essential frameworks that are being built? Is the Cabinet Office riding to save the Secretary of State's bacon?

David Mundell: As the hon. Lady is aware, the Cabinet Office performs a vital role in operating an overview of the devolved settlements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and in bringing together those constitutional arrangements.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) is no longer committed to coming in. Never mind. We will get him in another time.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that common frameworks in areas such as fisheries, agriculture, food labelling and animal welfare are crucial to ensuring that trade within the UK is not disrupted when the UK leaves the EU?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree. One of the first frameworks we want to agree is in the area of fisheries, because this Government want to take Scotland and the UK out of the common fisheries policy, exactly the opposite of the SNP.

Universal Credit: Low-income Families

7. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on low-income families of the roll-out of universal credit throughout Scotland. [905618]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): Universal credit is transforming lives across the country. Research also shows that universal credit claimants spend more time searching for work and applying for work than those on previous benefits. It is great news that employment in Scotland is up by more than 190,000 since 2010.

Mr Dhesi: People in my constituency and elsewhere, especially low-income families across the UK, have been suffering as a result of the roll-out of universal credit. In Scotland, there have been numerous reports of people having to apply for emergency support, such as crisis grants and food parcels, to meet their immediate needs, because of the six-week waiting period. Does the Minister think there should be such occurrences in the sixth largest economy in the world?

Stuart Andrew: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have been careful to roll out universal credit and where changes have been needed, we have made them. What is really important is that 77% of people on universal credit are looking to increase their earnings from work, which compares with a figure of just 51% for those on jobseeker's allowance. Universal credit is a pathway to work and that can only be a good thing.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The roll-out of universal credit and personal independence payments has led to £56 million of cuts in disability payments every year, hitting Scotland's poorest the hardest. Six out of the 10 worst-hit constituencies are in Glasgow, and the annual loss to disabled people in my constituency is £2 million. If the Secretary of State is really standing up for Scottish interests, what is he doing to stop this atrocious assault on disabled people?

Stuart Andrew: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that the Government are spending billions and billions of pounds on disability payments, and we are ensuring that we give the support to those people who need it most and encourage people in receipt of such benefits who want to work. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is considerable noise in the Chamber. The Minister is a most courteous fellow who is delivering an informative reply, which very few people can hear. Let us pay him the respect of hearing what he has to say.

Stuart Andrew: That is very kind of you, Mr Speaker. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is also attending the joint ministerial group on welfare this Thursday, where all these issues are discussed regularly.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Yesterday, I was told by a senior member of the Scottish Prison Service management that discharged prisoners in Scotland are now routinely taken to food banks because prison staff know that the six-week lead-in time for universal credit payments will lead to their using food banks. Does that fact alone not illustrate why the roll-out needs to be paused?

Stuart Andrew: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, we made some changes in the Budget, which were announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, following the raising of many of the issues. I should also point out that the Scottish Government do have powers of their own; if they feel they should make further discretionary payments to individuals in Scotland, they have the powers to do so. They have not done so yet.

RBS Branch Closures

8. **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What steps he has taken to respond to recent concerns on the closure of RBS bank branches in Scotland. [905619]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have met RBS to discuss its decision and made it clear that its plans are disappointing for customers and communities across Scotland.

Luke Graham: Yesterday, I, along with other Members of this House, met representatives from RBS to voice the frustration of our constituents about how they have been treated by RBS. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to see what more can be done to pressure RBS to think again about its branch closure scheme in constituencies such as mine?

David Mundell: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend, and I must say that I am very disappointed at the response from RBS to the significant report by the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs on this issue.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): With great swathes of Scotland losing bank branches while they are still awaiting decent broadband from the Scottish Government, what steps are the UK Government taking to support local authorities in the next round of the broadband roll-out, so that people losing local banking services can at least have good broadband?

David Mundell: First, I commend the hon. Lady for her part in the excellent Scottish Affairs Committee report on RBS. She will have heard the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport make it absolutely clear that in future this Government are not going to rely on the Scottish Government for the roll-out of broadband and will engage directly with local authorities in Scotland.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [905627] **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 6 June.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Last Sunday marked the one-year anniversary of the London Bridge terrorist attack. I, and others from this House, attended the very moving memorial service at Southwark cathedral, and I am sure Members from all sides of this House will join me again in offering our deepest condolences to the friends and family of the victims. I would also again like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the extraordinary bravery shown on that night by the emergency services and those who came to the aid of others.

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

Alex Chalk: I would like to associate myself with the remarks about London Bridge.

The number of children growing up in workless households in the United Kingdom has fallen to a record low. Does the Prime Minister agree that to further drive opportunity and social mobility in our country, it is vital to support projects such as the Cheltenham cyber park, so that, in the future, all our children can go as far as their talents will take them?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that we ensure that all children have the opportunity to go as far as their talents will take them, and initiatives such as the Cheltenham cyber park are an important element in that. The wider point that he makes is absolutely right. If we are to ensure that we lift people out of poverty, as we have been doing, then helping them to get into the workplace is the most important thing that we can do. That is why, thanks to this Government's economic strategy, we see employment up to another record high, unemployment at a 40-year low, and, as my hon. Friend has alluded to, 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty since 2010.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I, too, attended the service last Sunday in memory of those who died at London Bridge, and I would like to put on record my thanks to Southwark cathedral and the Borough of Southwark for all the work that they put into that, and, of course, to all our emergency services who keep us safe all the year round. Yesterday, I was able to do that in person at the Fire Brigades Union conference in Brighton where I was able to thank them for the work that they do to keep us all safe.

Last month, the Brexit Secretary promised a "detailed, ambitious and precise" White Paper on the Government's negotiating position. Will it be published in advance of the EU (Withdrawal) Bill debate next week?

The Prime Minister: I echo the right hon. Gentleman's comments about the work that our emergency workers do, day in and day out, to keep us safe, and I think that everybody across this House recognises that and we are all grateful to them for the dedication that they show.

Yes, my right hon. Friend the Brexit Secretary and I agree that we want to publish a White Paper that goes beyond the speeches and the papers that have been given and published so far, that does go into more detail and that ensures that when we publish it we are able to negotiate with our European Union and European Commission colleagues on the basis that this is an ambitious offer from the United Kingdom for an ambitious trade deal and security partnership in the future.

Jeremy Corbyn: The question was a very simple one actually: it was to ask when this White Paper will be published. Next week, we will be debating the most important piece of legislation we have seen for a very long time and we still have not seen the Government's negotiating position. Will the Prime Minister at least assure the House that not only will the White Paper be published ahead of the crucial June EU summit, but that there will be an opportunity to debate it in this House ahead of the summit?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about the votes that will take place in this House next week on the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, and indeed those votes will be important. They will be important to show our commitment to do what the British people have asked us to do, which is to leave the European Union. If he is talking about clarity ahead of those votes, perhaps he will take this opportunity to do what he refused to do when I asked him last time in Prime Minister's questions—
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Yasin, calm yourself. You are normally a model of calm and repose. Relax, there is a long way to go.

The Prime Minister: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman would like to take the opportunity to do what he refused to do two or three weeks ago in this Chamber, which is to stand up and rule out a second referendum.

Jeremy Corbyn: The last time I looked at the Order Paper, it said "Prime Minister's Question Time". We were told three weeks ago, to a great deal of fanfare, that the White Paper would set out the Government's ambition for the UK's future relationship with the EU

and their vision for a future role in the world. It is nowhere to be seen and there is no answer to when it will be published. Four weeks ago the Prime Minister did confirm that the Cabinet was looking at two options for a future customs arrangement with the EU: a customs partnership model and a maximum facilitation option. Will she now tell us which of her sub-committees has met, what decisions they have made, when they are going to report to the Cabinet and whether we will be told about it?

The Prime Minister: We have already set out our ambition for our future relationship with the European Union, but crucially the Government are delivering on the vote of the British people to leave the European Union. I did not ask the right hon. Gentleman a question. I simply suggested that he could stand up and say what the Labour party's policy was on a second referendum. If he wants to enter the debate next week in the right spirit, he will do just that and rule out a second referendum.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is not the Opposition who are conducting the negotiations but, very sadly, it is not the Government either. Last week the Brexit Secretary put forward yet another new plan, including a 10-mile buffer zone in Northern Ireland. Is that now the Government's option?

The Prime Minister: We are looking at the two options for the customs model. Both of those will do what we have committed to do, which is to ensure that we deliver no hard border in Northern Ireland. We were very clear about what that means in the December joint report. It also means that we ensure that there is no border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland—no border down the Irish sea as the European Union proposed. That is why we are putting forward alternative proposals to the European Union. We continue to negotiate with the European Union on all the issues that need to be addressed before we bring legislation before this House with the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill. The debate that will take place in this House next week is important because it will show the sincerity of this House to deliver on the vote of the British people to leave the European Union.

Jeremy Corbyn: We have had no answer on the White Paper and I do not think that we have had an answer on the buffer zone. I could say that the one thing that the buffer zone proposal has achieved is bringing just about everybody in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland together. The British Irish Chamber of Commerce said, "the idea is bonkers". Will the Prime Minister confirm that it remains her plan to leave the European Union in March 2019 and complete the transition by December 2020?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Jeremy Corbyn: Well, I look at the faces behind the Prime Minister and they are not all at one on this matter. The right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) does not share her certainty; he said that there will be a transition period that will follow her implementation period. When it comes to Brexit, this Government have delivered more delays and cancellations than Northern Rail. The Government's White Paper is delayed, their customs proposals have been cancelled

and they have ripped up their own timetable, just like our shambolic privatised railways. This Government's incompetence threatens our economy, businesses, jobs and communities. My question to the Prime Minister is this: which will last longer, the Northern Rail franchise or her premiership?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman is not willing to stand up in this House and talk about the Labour party policy on Europe, we actually learned a little today from the shadow Brexit Secretary about the Labour party's policy on Europe, who made it clear that it was a

"pretence that somehow everybody in the Labour party is in the same place on this".

So now we know what the right hon. Gentleman is. Labour Members voted for a referendum; they voted to trigger article 50; and since then they have tried to frustrate the Brexit process at every stage. Their MEPs voted against moving to negotiate the trade discussions. They voted against the withdrawal Bill. Today, we saw again that they are refusing to rule out a second referendum. The British people voted to leave the European Union, and this Government are delivering on the vote of the British people.

Q2. [905628] **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): Mr Speaker, I know you are keen to learn more about blockchain, so I have written a paper on it for the think-tank Freer, to help inform the people of Bloxwich about the possible benefits of this technology. With some countries saving up to 2% of GDP by deploying this technology, will the Prime Minister commit to harnessing it to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of it as we forge a greater, global Britain?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he has done on distributive ledger technology, as I think we should call it. We are committed to supporting the development and uptake of emerging digital technologies in the UK such as AI and DLT. The Government have invested around £10 million through Innovate UK and our research councils. The Treasury and the Bank of England are working on crypto-currencies and looking at these issues in a working group together. We are deploying the technology that my hon. Friend has referred to in order to help Government discharge our duties more effectively, and many Departments are already developing DLT proofs of concept. I thank him for the work that he has done. He might like to distribute the article on the work that he has done to all Members of this House.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Supermarkets running out of food within days. Hospitals running out of medicines within a fortnight. Petrol reserves dwindling after just two weeks. These are the concerns of UK Government officials, and now the—
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is excessive noise in the Chamber. Mr Wishart, you are a very distinguished fellow, but you are not conducting an orchestra and your services in that regard are not required—at any rate, not on this occasion. Mr Blackford's question must be heard, and however long it takes, it will be heard.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

These are the concerns of UK Government officials, and now the Dutch Government are telling Dutch businesses not to risk buying UK products. Does the Prime Minister understand the catastrophic negotiating position she has cornered herself into?

The Prime Minister: We have already set out our ambition for that trade deal with the European Union in the future. The right hon. Gentleman talks about supermarkets in Scotland and supermarkets across the rest of the UK. He might pay attention to the supermarket chains in Scotland, which said that one of the most important things for Scotland is to remain part of the United Kingdom.

Ian Blackford: Quite simply, the Prime Minister did not listen to the question, because it was about the fears that have been raised by her own officials on the consequences of Brexit.

For this Government in the negotiations, jobs have been an afterthought, the Irish border has been an afterthought, and the economy—at all costs!—has been an afterthought. While the Leader of the Opposition is playing games, the question he should have asked today is: will the Prime Minister stop her charade and vote for the Lords amendments next week for membership of the EEA and the customs union, protecting jobs and prosperity?

The Prime Minister: Jobs are absolutely at the forefront of what we are considering in terms of our future trade partnership. That is why we are as ambitious as we are for the possibilities of that economic partnership in the future.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the Northern Ireland border. The Leader of the Opposition complains that we are giving too much attention to getting the answer right on the Northern Ireland border, and the leader of the Scottish nationalists says that we are using it as an afterthought. We are committed to ensuring that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. We also want to ensure as frictionless trade as possible with the European Union and that we are able to operate our independent trade policy. All those are about ensuring that we protect jobs here in the United Kingdom.

Q6. [905632] **Chris Skidmore** (Kingswood) (Con): The second of July marks the 90th anniversary of the passing of the equal franchise Act, when women won the same right to vote as men. To celebrate that, the Government have established the first National Democracy Week, which will take place that week. Will the Prime Minister personally support National Democracy Week and encourage all Members to get involved in it?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the upcoming National Democracy Week, which is important. I certainly support it, and I hope everybody across the House does. Because it falls on the 90th anniversary of the equal franchise Act, the week gives us an opportunity to look back and see how far we have come as a flourishing democracy. It also gives us an opportunity to champion and encourage greater democratic participation across the country. I hope every Member of the House supports that and will support National Democracy Week.

Q3. [905629] **Mr Steve Reed** (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I would like to give the Prime Minister another chance to answer the question that she keeps avoiding. The Cabinet agreed to publish a Brexit White Paper ahead of this month's crunch EU Council meeting, to allow the Government to negotiate. The Brexit Secretary said it would be "detailed, ambitious and precise". Will she confirm whether the Brexit White Paper will be published before the EU Council meeting, or is she unable to negotiate for the UK because she is negotiating with her own Cabinet?

The Prime Minister: What the Government said is that we will be publishing a White Paper that will be detailed and ambitious, and we will do just that.

Q8. [905634] **Bill Grant** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): In the light of the publication of the Scottish National party's latest independence blueprint, does the Prime Minister agree with the vast majority of Scots that this is not the time to drag us back to another decisive referendum on independence?

The Prime Minister: The people of Scotland voted in a legal and fair referendum to remain part of the United Kingdom, and it is SNP Members, who are completely out of touch with the people of Scotland, who are continuing to press the issue of independence. Now is not the time for a second independence referendum. Now is the time for the United Kingdom to be pulling together, to get the right deal for the United Kingdom and the right deal for Scotland in our negotiations. As I indicated earlier, and as is recognised by many people across Scotland, the most important thing for the future of Scotland is to continue to be part of the UK's internal market.

Q4. [905630] **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Together with my colleagues in the Democratic Unionist party and across all parties in Northern Ireland, I very much welcome the announcement yesterday by the Transport Secretary of Government support for a third runway at Heathrow. To secure additional jobs and business growth for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and to realise tourism potential, will the Prime Minister ensure that there is no undue delay in scheduling a vote on that important matter?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words of support for the third runway at Heathrow. We will ensure that that vote is brought to the House in a timely fashion. There is a requirement for it to be brought within a certain period, and we will ensure that that happens. This is an opportunity to increase job opportunities. It is also an opportunity to increase connectivity with other parts of the United Kingdom, which in itself will be of benefit to jobs in other parts of the UK.

Q11. [905637] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend is aware, this Government are investing more in national infrastructure than any previous Government, from HS2 to the new Lower Thames crossing. However, we must never forget the personal sacrifice that people are asked to make to allow these projects to progress. Will she therefore remind the various Government agencies involved that they

have a duty of care to our constituents and that they should ensure that no one is materially disadvantaged or physically harmed in the name of investment?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes two important points: the first is the importance and significance of the investment that is being put into infrastructure across the country; and the second is of course that, as we do that—when we are putting in place these large infrastructure projects—we must make sure that they are planned in consultation with, and with sympathy towards, local communities. Of course, as we see with the proposals for Heathrow, for example, that does come with a significant compensation package for those people who will be personally affected.

Q5. [905631] **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Grimsby hospital has been forced to spend £50,000 not on patient care, but on fees for doctors' visas. Of those visas, 85% have been rejected because of restrictions that the Prime Minister imposed as Home Secretary, preventing my local NHS from recruiting the doctors my constituents need. It is a waste of taxpayers' money, and it is hitting patient care. When will she exempt NHS staff from the cap?

The Prime Minister: As I have said before in this House, we are aware of the issue that has been raised about—[*Interruption.*] We have already taken action in relation to nurses. We are looking at the most recent figures, and considering what action should be taken.

Q14. [905640] **Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): Some people holding taxpayer-funded jobs in the UK are paid disproportionate amounts relative to their roles. Some town council clerks earn up to £90,000 a year; chief executives of councils earn up to £250,000 a year; and we still have too many managers in the NHS earning up to £200,000 a year. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is important that we always ensure taxpayers' money is spent responsibly and that this money would be better spent on our nurses, our police officers, our firefighters and our frontline services?

The Prime Minister: I am sure my hon. Friend understands and recognises that, alongside other terms and conditions, pay is a matter for authorities to manage as individual employers. Of course, since 2010, the Government have put in place a number of measures to increase accountability and transparency on senior pay. The Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 and the transparency code 2015 require authorities to publish details of senior salaries for staff earning £50,000 or more, which is why we are now able to see the sums that are being earned. We are also legislating on measures—on another issue that has been of concern, I know, to Members in this House—for capping pay-offs at £95,000 and clawing back redundancy payments should workers return to the public sector within 12 months of their exit, making sure that taxpayers' money is spent responsibly.

Q7. [905633] **Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Last year, a quarter of young people thought about suicide, and one in nine attempted suicide. Young people are three times more likely to be lonely than older people. Knife crime is up, and gang crime is up. There are fewer opportunities for young people than ever before—68% of our youth services

have been cut since 2010—with young people having nowhere to go, nothing to do and no one to speak to. Is it now time for a statutory youth service, and will the Prime Minister support my ten-minute rule Bill after Prime Minister's questions?

The Prime Minister: I think “Nice try” is the answer to the hon. Gentleman, but he said that there were fewer opportunities for young people here in this country. May I just point out to him the considerable improvement there has been in the opportunities for young people to get into work and the way in which we have seen youth unemployment coming down?

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Heathrow has played an absolute blinder with the Department for Transport. It is a privately owned company that now has a DFT policy to give it an active monopoly status. Better still, it has somehow managed to get a poison pill clause agreed by the DFT that means the taxpayer has to cover all its costs if things go wrong. Is this not the worst kind of nationalisation—the public sector and taxpayers owning all the Heathrow downsides and risks, and the private sector owning all the upside and the financial returns?

The Prime Minister: Yesterday's decision to support Heathrow's expansion demonstrates this Government's commitment to delivering the jobs and major infrastructure that this country needs to thrive, but the airport expansion will be fully financed by the private sector. The statement of principles is clear that it does not give Heathrow Airport Ltd the right to claim any costs or losses from the Government should its scheme not proceed.

Q9. [905635] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has announced limits to the renewable heat incentive for large projects, which places in jeopardy the delivery of landmark renewable energy projects in strategically important industrial areas such as Grangemouth in my constituency, where the limit is inconsequential relative to the amount of heat energy required. What actions will the Prime Minister therefore take to ensure the future of the Grangemouth renewable energy project?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a specific issue about the Grangemouth renewable energy project. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland will be happy to meet him to discuss it.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): A majority of my Crawley constituents want their trains to arrive without delay, and a majority of them also want Brexit to arrive without delay. Please can we have delivery?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we are taking action on the issues on the railways, to ensure that trains are able to arrive without delay. We will be leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019, and the implementation period will last until the end of December 2020. That is our commitment, and that is what is going to happen.

Q10. [905636] **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Giorgi is 10 years old. He was tragically orphaned in February. He has lived in

Glasgow since he was three years old. His only language is English and he speaks it with the same accent as mine. Yet he now faces being deported to Georgia, his late mother's country of birth, becoming another statistic who suffers at the hands of this Prime Minister's hostile environment policy. Will the Prime Minister promise today that Giorgi will not, under any circumstances, be torn from his school friends in Glasgow and sent to a country that is entirely foreign to him?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a very specific individual case. It is right that it be looked at properly, and that is what I will ask the Home Office to do.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I think Members across the House will recognise the role that animals play during war, not only in the sacrifice they make but in the support they give. I thank the Prime Minister for meeting the war horse memorial group from Windsor. The unveiling will take place this Saturday, and I am very proud of the work the group has done. Does the Prime Minister agree that recognition of the role of animals in war can unite us with the Commonwealth and the entire world?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I was pleased to see the maquette of the war horse memorial, which will be unveiled in his constituency this weekend. I am pleased to say that that model is now in Downing Street. We have recognised the important role played by animals in warfare, and I am sure that when the memorial goes up in his constituency, it will remind many more people that we should never forget the part that animals have played.

Q12. [905638] **Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab):** I am sure that the Prime Minister will join me in congratulating my hon. Friends who are this week celebrating the first anniversary of our election.

In December, the four remaining members of the Social Mobility Commission resigned, with the chair citing the Government's inability to

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

Does the fact that several key roles on the commission were left unfilled for almost two years reflect this Government's lack of commitment to achieving not just social mobility for the few but true social justice for the many?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate all Members who came into this House after the 2017 general election, including colleagues on this side of the Chamber, and I hope they will not take it amiss if I mention in particular the 12 Scottish Conservatives who came in after that election.

This Government takes very seriously the issue of social mobility. We take it seriously through the policies we are implementing to help ensure that our young people get the skills they need, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) mentioned in the first question, so that they can take the jobs of the future. I want a country where how far somebody gets

on is a reflection not of their background or where they come from, but of their abilities and willingness to work hard.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May I urge the Prime Minister to do everything she can to ensure that Network Rail and Govia Thameslink Railway get a grip and bring to an end appalling delays suffered by my constituents on the Great Northern line?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely recognise the problem that passengers have faced. Passengers have been let down and the delays they have been experiencing are unacceptable. That is why we need to take immediate action, which is what the Department for Transport is doing.

Q13. [905639] **Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op):** Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is a condition that affects every part of an individual's life, from their education and employment to their relationships and social life. Through the work of the all-party group on ADHD, which I chair, we know that the current diagnosis and treatment process is not fit for purpose. Data is not collected and there is a vast postcode lottery in waiting times. Will the Prime Minister commit to collecting and monitoring the data and to creating a process that puts the needs of people with ADHD first?

The Prime Minister: I commend the work that the hon. Lady does with the all-party group on this issue, which I know that, as she expressed through her question, she takes very seriously. As she will probably know, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has published guidance that aims to improve the diagnosis of ADHD and the quality of care and support that people receive. She raised the particular issue of the data that is available; the National Institute for Health Research has awarded £800,000 to fund research to help to identify existing services and gaps in provision for young adults with ADHD, and the Department of Health and Social Care is exploring what data on ADHD diagnosis could be made accessible through the mental health services dataset.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): At his valedictory address yesterday morning, the Chief of the Defence Staff said that he was very concerned about the growing practice of legacy investigations of British servicemen and veterans, often many years after the events in question. There is growing concern in the House about the prospect of brave servicemen being, effectively, scapegoated by others for political or financial gain. We call our servicemen and women heroes; we should treat them accordingly, so would the Prime Minister be prepared at least to entertain some investigation of the concept of a statute of limitations to protect those who have served on the frontline and those who will follow them in future?

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend said in his question, we do not just call our servicemen and women heroes; they are heroes. They are incredibly brave and put themselves on the frontline for our safety. We owe a vast debt of gratitude to our servicemen and women, who have shown such heroism and bravery over the years.

We want to ensure that we do not see our servicemen and women—and, indeed, in relation to legacy issues in Northern Ireland, police officers—as the sole subject of investigations, which is what is happening at the moment. I want to ensure that terrorists are investigated for past crimes as well, which is why the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has launched the consultation on legacy issues. It is of course open to people to respond to that consultation. We should recognise the importance of ensuring that these matters are dealt with fairly and proportionately. I want to ensure that a focus is put on and investigation is possible for the terrorists, not just, as we see today, servicemen and women and police officers under investigation and terrorists not investigated.

15. [905641] **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister tell the House whether her hostile environment immigration policy has been a success or a failure?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that as a Government, over the years since 2010, we have taken action against illegal immigration. I am pleased to say that we have been removing illegal immigrants from this country and yes, we have tightened the conditions to ensure that we can take action against illegal immigrants. What is important is that we ensure that people who are here legally are not caught up in the actions intended for those who are here illegally. I hope that the Labour party will understand, recognise and support the need—sadly, one or two comments from those on the Labour party Front Bench suggest that they do not—to take action when people are here illegally.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): The biggest challenge between the Commons and the Lords takes place next week—yes, I am referring to the Lords versus Commons pigeon race, which has been revived after a 90-year gap and takes place at Bletchley Park next Wednesday. Each Member of both Houses has been asked to sponsor a pigeon, and the money will go to that excellent charity Combat Stress. Will my right hon. Friend join me in not only wishing this revived event great success but sponsoring a pigeon?

The Prime Minister: I would be happy to do so. There was a little bit of laughter when my hon. Friend asked his question about the pigeon race, but it is in an extremely good cause: it will raise money for Combat Stress. We have just made the point about the bravery of our servicemen and servicewomen. We should support them in every way we can. I am happy to sponsor a pigeon and I encourage every Member of this House to do so as well.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Brexit vote means that families are already £900 a year worse off, while both Tories and Labour peddle the fiction of single market rewards without responsibility. I ask the Prime Minister, her hon. Friends and the Opposition: how much poorer will families become as they indulge in fantasy politics?

The Prime Minister: I have made clear to the House the ambition we have for our future economic partnership. The hon. Lady stands up and talks about fantasy politics. Perhaps she would like to go out and speak to the people of Wales, who I might remind her voted to leave the European Union.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my disappointment and astonishment that Labour and Scottish National party MEPs last week ignored the interests of British fishermen when they voted to back the European Parliament in an attempt—[*Interruption.*] It is true—to keep the UK inside the common fisheries policy? Will she confirm today that she still intends the UK to become a fully independent coastal state?

The Prime Minister: I find it extraordinary that the SNP and the Labour party are supporting our continued membership of the common fisheries policy. This party, the Conservative party, is the party that will take the United Kingdom out of the common fisheries policy and ensure that we can become the independent fishing state to which my hon. Friend refers.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Despite the Prime Minister's claims that she has put more money into education—she claims she has put £1.5 billion into education—over the past two years she has cut about £4 billion from education. With classroom sizes rising, teachers' pay capped and school budgets cut, what is the Prime Minister going to do about it?

The Prime Minister: I do not recognise the description the hon. Gentleman sets out. We have indeed put more money into education in our schools. Through our national funding formula we are ensuring its fairer distribution across schools and we are making more money available for schools over the next two years.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): We all appreciate what an extremely difficult job the Prime Minister has in striving for the best possible deal for our country regarding Brexit, but has the time not come to reiterate to our EU friends, echoing the words of the Prime Minister herself, that no deal is better than a bad deal? In what circumstances is she prepared to walk away from the negotiations, saving the British taxpayer billions of pounds?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that I have said consistently that no deal is better than a bad deal. I have also said that we are working to ensure that we get the right deal and the best deal possible for the United Kingdom. We recognise the importance of ensuring that as a country we prepare for all scenarios. That is why Government Departments are looking at the issue of a no deal, because they are preparing for all contingencies. That is absolutely right for them to do so. Some of the arrangements that will be put in place for a deal will be the same as arrangements for a no deal and the Treasury has of course made money available to Government Departments to ensure that they are able to make all the preparations necessary.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Wolsingham school in my constituency has been forced to suspend its sixth form as the result of years of cuts to post-16 education by this ruthless Government and a national funding formula that discriminates against smaller rural communities and their schools. The Education Secretary has washed his hands of the issue. As a result, young people in my community will face four hours or more in journey time for their education. Wolsingham is the

first to face this crisis, but sixth forms across the country will collapse under the current funding situation. Will the Prime Minister intervene to help our schools, and the broader network of sixth forms and sixth-form colleges?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased the hon. Lady mentions Wolsingham—I well remember it from when I stood in North West Durham. *[Interruption.]* No, I was not successful. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I hope it is not being suggested that that is some sort of savage personal indictment of the Prime Minister. It probably was not very propitious territory at the time.

The Prime Minister: I understand that the decision to suspend recruitment to Wolsingham School's sixth form was made by the school governing body after student numbers had fallen in recent years and that other good and outstanding school sixth forms and colleges are available within travelling distance of Weardale. Some young people are already choosing to access those, rather than the local school sixth form, but the local authority is looking at the question of future travel arrangements—that is its responsibility for post-16 transport—while our new national funding formula for pre-16 schools will help to safeguard rural schools by ensuring a more appropriate funding formula across the country, with a lump sum for every school and additional support for small rural schools.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating four schools in Redditch—Inkberrow First School, Woodfield Academy,

Crabbs Cross Academy and Ridgeway Academy—which have received nearly £1 million to improve their buildings, which will help our young people get a great start in life? Does she agree that it is only because of our strong management of the economy that we can invest so much to help young people up and down the country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and I am happy to join her in welcoming the funding available to those four schools in Redditch. We are able to put more money into our schools and education only because our strong management of and balanced approach to the economy means that that money is available. Labour in government would borrow more, spend more, tax more and leave the country on the brink of bankruptcy.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Following the tragic murder of a 17-year-old on Saturday in broad daylight in front of his friends, will the Prime Minister meet me and the police and crime commissioner for Suffolk to discuss how such violent crimes might be prevented in Ipswich?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we are deeply concerned about crimes such as the one the hon. Gentleman has referenced, which took place in his constituency. The former Home Secretary had already published a serious violence strategy, and the current Home Secretary will be taking it forward. I am sure the Home Office, working with the police, will look at this issue very carefully to ensure that every effort is being made out there to take the steps necessary to deal with serious violence. I will ask the relevant Home Office Minister if he would be prepared to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter.

Points of Order

Mr Speaker: I call Justine Greening to raise a point of order.

12.48 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wonder if you could give me some advice. I do not think the Department for Transport has given the Prime Minister good advice. The statement of principles referred to—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. This matter and the right hon. Lady deserve to be heard. Although I invited her to raise her point of order, I feel that the House is not able fully to savour it in the present atmosphere. When colleagues have successfully beetled out of the Chamber—preferably without noise—we might be able to proceed with our business and to accord her the courteous reception she deserves.

Justine Greening: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can you give me some advice? I think the Department for Transport has misinformed the Prime Minister about the statement of principles she referred to. Paragraph 2.1.6 states that Heathrow

“reserves its rights (including but not limited to its rights to pursue any and all legal and equitable remedies (including cost recovery) available to it under law) in the event of...an alternative scheme being preferred by the Secretary of State or Government...and/or the withdrawal of the Government’s support for aviation expansion for Heathrow Airport”.

How can I correct this with No. 10?

Mr Speaker: Let me say a number of things to the right hon. Lady. First, I think that she has found her own salvation, because in raising her point of order she has aired her very specific and detailed concern about the alleged inaccuracy of what has been said, and what she has said by way of contradiction of those statements is now on the record and will, as she knows, be published in the *Official Report* tomorrow. It is also imaginable—I put it no more strongly—that the right hon. Lady might wish to communicate what she has said, and supply copies of the *Official Report*, to her constituents or to media outlets in her constituency, which is a perfectly legitimate and proper thing for her to do.

Secondly, I say to the right hon. Lady that this is not a matter for the Chair. Thirdly, I say to her that there are many mechanisms available to her to pursue the matter further. I believe that there is to be a debate in Westminster Hall on the relevant subject tomorrow; there will be business questions tomorrow; and, of course, matters that are judged to be urgent can be heard tomorrow. So I think that there is a long way to go, and I have a sense—knowing the right hon. Lady as well as I do—that we will be hearing from her regularly on this important subject in the period that lies ahead.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions announced in a written statement that the personal independent assessment contracts of current assessors would be extended. Given that two thirds of assessments are overturned on appeal, and given the general public concern about personal independence payments as a whole, is there any advice that you can give to ensure that future announcements of this kind can be properly scrutinised by the House by means of an oral statement?

Mr Speaker: The question of whether either a change of policy or a controversial confirmation of existing policy warrants a written or an oral statement is first and foremost a matter for the Government; it is not a matter for the Chair. If, however, a matter is not treated in the form of an oral statement and a colleague, or maybe more than one colleague, reckons that to be unsatisfactory and thinks that the matter should be aired in the Chamber, there are means by which to increase the prospect of that happening. I think that the record over the years shows that I have not been shy in granting such opportunities.

I am not familiar with the full details of this matter, although I understand the thrust of what the hon. Lady has said, but it seems to me that—rather as with the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening)—there is still a considerable distance to travel, and there are plenty of opportunities for the hon. Lady to try to secure ministerial attention to the subject in the Chamber.

Speaker's Statement

12.52 pm

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the presentation of Bills, there are some words that I want to convey to the House following receipt of a letter.

I have received a letter from the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), the Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, requesting that I give precedence to the matter raised in that Committee's third special report, which was published yesterday, namely a prospective witness's refusal to comply with an order of the Committee to attend. Having considered the issue, I have decided that it is a matter that I should allow the precedence accorded to matters of privilege. Therefore, under the rules set out in pages 273 to 274 of "Erskine May"—pages with which I feel sure colleagues are very closely familiar, and of which I am merely reminding them—the hon. Gentleman may table a motion today for debate at the commencement of public business tomorrow, Thursday 7 June. The hon. Gentleman's motion will appear on tomorrow's Order Paper, to be taken after any urgent questions and statements. I hope that that is helpful and informative to the House.

BILLS PRESENTED

COUNTER-TERRORISM AND BORDER SECURITY

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sajid Javid, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Boris Johnson, Secretary David Gauke, Secretary Chris Grayling, Secretary David Mundell, Secretary Karen Bradley and Mr Ben Wallace, presented a Bill to make provision in relation to terrorism; to make provision enabling persons at ports and borders to be questioned for national security and other related purposes; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 219) with explanatory notes (Bill 219-EN).

PARENTAL LEAVE AND PAY ARRANGEMENTS (PUBLICATION)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Jo Swinson, supported by Caroline Lucas, Mr David Lammy, Ms Harriet Harman, Nicky Morgan, Gareth Thomas, Alison Thewliss, Layla Moran, Sir Edward Davey, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Norman Lamb and Christine Jardine, presented a Bill to require employers with more than 250 employees to publish information about parental leave, and pay in the course of such leave; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June, and to be printed (Bill 220).

Youth (Services and Provisions)

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

12.55 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to promote and secure youth services and provision of a requisite standard; to impose a duty on local authorities to provide youth services and establish local youth service partnerships with youth participation; and for connected purposes.

There is no doubt that youth services improve the life chances of individual young people, taking them beyond the constraints of the contours of their neighbourhoods and offering them new experiences of everything from the arts to outdoor adventures. Young people gain from those experiences. Youth work supports but does not replace formal education. It enhances the readiness for learning in the classroom and learning in life, but it does not only help young people in the classroom; it also helps them to develop the skills and attitudes that are needed for the employment about which the Prime Minister was so boastful today, and, of course, for general adult life, by giving them a chance to learn to relate better to each other and to different adults in a safe and challenging environment. They are enhanced, and our communities are enhanced.

Despite all that, however, a 2016 study showed that 600 youth centres had closed around the country, 3,500 youth workers had lost their jobs, and 140,000 places for young people had been lost. We should bear it in mind that those figures are two years old, and the cuts have only continued. Research carried out this year by the House of Commons Library has shown what the cuts have meant in terms of funding. In 2010 we spent £1.2 billion on youth work, youth services and related youth activity; last year we spent £358 million, which amounts to a 68% cash-terms cut.

I do not know what service or provision would survive that, and the youth sector certainly has not. Many parts of our country now have no youth service at all. Young people simply seek somewhere to go, something to do and someone to speak to. That is the simplest of mottos, but it sums up what youth work is about. Youth workers can prevent young people from undertaking harmful behaviour, and give them advice so that they can make informed decisions. So starkly is all this being felt that young people aged between 16 and 24 are now the highest demographic age group for feeling lonely. One in 10 say that they always or often feel lonely, which is a disgrace. When young people do reach out for help, in my city alone they can face 12 months to see a professional while their mental health continues to spiral downwards.

However, the problem is not just mental health, but crime as well. Young people who are devoid of positive influences can fall foul of negative ones. The Office for National Statistics has found that knife crime has increased by 22% in a year. We have also heard that the Ministry of Justice is cutting youth offending budgets in real terms this year—and so the misery goes on.

Our news media, and some of us in the Chamber, often characterise young people as the problem. The language used to describe some of the problems that they face is a constant reinforcement of that, referring

to “youth gangs” and “young offenders”. The empowerment of young people as actors for positive change is constantly diminished in the narrative that they are a problem to be contained, to be ignored, or to be dealt with. Well, I think we are the problem. Youth work has a positive impact on young people’s lives, and what have we done? We have cut, and cut, and cut again, and then we blame young people when things fall apart. Our young people are not the problem—our inability to support and listen to them is.

I say proudly that I worked in my local youth service for many years and at the National Youth Agency, and I am proud to say that I was also a voluntary group leader in my local youth group, the Woodcraft Folk, and its national chair. Of course, before that, I was a young person involved in the Youth Parliament and British Youth Council.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Not so very long ago.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Thank you. These three roles— young person, voluntary youth leader and professional youth worker—are distinct, but so often they are confused. In times of cuts, voluntary youth organisations are now having to step into professional statutory youth services, with volunteers overworked and frankly under-qualified for the technical detail. Young people have to organise their own activities without the previous support of the voluntary youth leaders who are so busy picking up the pieces. My Bill seeks to clarify the position following the guidelines set out by the Council of Europe and give registered youth workers a footing in law.

Most parents and members of the public will be surprised that the role of youth worker has no professional standards, as there are, say, for teachers, and anyone can profess to be a youth worker. My Bill seeks to redress that while celebrating the important role of voluntary youth leaders in our voluntary youth sector. Youth workers are all too often dismissed. They work long hours in difficult circumstances, often without a “thank you”. For my part, I would like to place on record a sincere thank you to the youth workers who have come to Parliament today to help to lobby for this Bill and for the importance of youth work generally. Thank you for staying back late and having a chat with that young person going through crisis. Thank you for organising those weekend trips or sports activities. Thank you for applying for those grants to give your young people the opportunities that they would never have had. Youth workers’ work is important and that is why they need support, but their support needs resource.

Some may say that councils already have the power to provide resources and to choose to fund youth services, but we know that in times of tight budgets, councils up and down the country are unable to spend what they would like and focus only on statutory provision. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 places a duty on local authorities to secure access to provision, but there are no definitions in that Act of what access to provision would look like, and the Government and councils have largely ignored it. There is little guidance on securing access. There is no requirement to develop plans or monitor the sufficiency of these services. There is no redress if councils fail in this duty and importantly, there is no funding to make sure that it happens.

My Bill rectifies that. It requires each authority to establish a youth services board with young people, parents, professionals and councillors—just like a school governing body—that will assess and plan the provision in that area. My Bill requires the plans to be submitted to the Secretary of State to nominate a body to review those plans. Many bodies exist: the National Youth Agency, for example, hosts much of the standard setting and the joint negotiating bodies for youth work already, but since 2011 it has received no Government funding and has had no statutory underpinning for its work. So bad has the situation got that the all-party group on youth affairs, which I chair, is launching an inquiry into youth services across the country, seeking out good examples and challenges. We have asked MPs to join us and we hope to develop a parliamentary scheme for MPs to visit youth clubs and youth centres around the country during recess. While that cross-party work goes on separately from the Bill, I hope that it too will raise the plight of youth services in our country.

It was the UK that first established clubs such as the YMCA and the Scouts and which pioneered a voluntary youth work sector. The UK, first in Coventry and then in councils around the country, established municipal youth clubs and showed the world how youth services could be run, but these gains have all been whittled or even swept away along with the futures of our young people. This is to our shame. A country where every young person has somewhere to go, someone to speak to and something to do is surely not too much to ask.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Lloyd Russell-Moyle, Emma Hardy, Emma Dent Coad, Thelma Walker, Catherine West, Alex Sobel, Rosie Duffield, Liz Twist, Danielle Rowley, Grahame Morris and Karen Lee present the Bill.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 October, and to be printed (Bill 221).

Opposition Day

[13TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Retail Sector

1.6 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that 21,000 jobs were lost in the retail sector in the first three months of 2018 due to store closures and company administrations, with more announced since; further notes that the retail sector is one of the largest employers in the UK and contributed £94.6 billion to the UK economy in 2016; regrets that the Government's industrial strategy contains only three references to the retail sector; further regrets that the Government has presided over the biggest squeeze in wage growth in a generation, is failing to provide certainty around future trading arrangements after Brexit and has failed to ensure a fair business rates system; and calls on the Government to urgently publish a strategy for the retail sector.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the shadow Minister give way?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I will.

Melanie Onn: I thank the shadow Minister. The point on business rates is one that small businesses in my constituency regularly raise with me as something that not only curtails their opportunity to grow, but impedes their security for the immediate future. Does she think that the Government should do something about this immediately?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and I completely agree. I will come on to business rates and the action that I would suggest that the Government take shortly.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I welcome this debate. My hon. Friend may be aware of research by Revo and intu shopping centres that looked at the UK's appeal to international investors in the retail sector. They highlighted that business rates were the single biggest inhibitor of new international inward investment. Does she agree that that is a further reason why, in a post-Brexit environment, it will be all the more important that we review our business rate regime?

Rebecca Long Bailey: Yes, and I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention—I completely agree. Before I start the substantive part of my comments, it is important to note that the commercial retail sector has faced significant strain over recent years, affecting landlords and tenants alike. That is not least due to the business rates system. A lot of major property investors—for example, St Modwen—have divested themselves of their retail arms, because they are simply not profitable anymore, not only for tenants but for landlords, so it is critical that the business rates question is addressed urgently.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I really appreciate my hon. Friend giving way on such an important issue as business rates. Can she fathom why the Government,

when they announced 15 months ago that they were going to review business rates, have not done anything to progress this issue?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I completely agree, and now I will begin the substantive part of my comments, if I may.

The retail sector is undergoing a period of transformative change that will impact millions of workers across the UK. As has been played out in the press over the last few months, the sector is experiencing huge challenges, with almost silence from the Government, sadly. We have seen an onslaught of store changes; big-name chains that have been the stalwart of our town centres and high streets for years have collapsed and gone into administration.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): My home town of Stockton won the rising star award in the British high street awards, sponsored, ironically, by Marks & Spencer, which is now abandoning our town after taking profits from our people for over a century. We believe however that our town has got a future, but does my hon. Friend agree that firms like Marks & Spencer should consider the future prospects of towns properly, and show a bit of loyalty to their loyal customers instead of taking their profits and running off to out-of-town shopping centres?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I agree with my hon. Friend, but the issue is twofold. It is not simply about imposing obligations on businesses; the Government have a duty to provide a fertile business environment in which large and small businesses can grow and provide a positive contribution to their communities.

Toys R Us and Maplin collapsed on the same day in February, putting 5,500 jobs at risk in one day. Card Factory, Moss Bros, Laura Ashley, Carpetright and Mothercare have all issued profit warnings this year, and some have entered into company voluntary arrangements, with hundreds of store closures expected. In April we heard news of a possible merger between Asda and Sainsbury's; a couple of weeks ago the one and only Marks & Spencer announced it will be closing 14 branches this year and 100 stores by 2022; and just this week there were reports that House of Fraser is on the brink of collapse and attempting to negotiate a CVA. That list is not exhaustive but it clearly demonstrates the scale of the challenge faced by the industry.

I am sure many Members across the House will at one point or another have worked in the retail sector; it is many people's first experience of the working world, as it was for me. My first job was as an assistant at a pawn shop. I must clarify that it was a pawn, not a porn, shop—at a meeting a few years ago I said I had worked in a pawn shop and one lady in the audience, thinking it was a porn shop, was horrified. That first job was important because it taught me valuable skills and allowed me to gain some financial independence, but for millions of people retail is not just a Saturday job; it is their livelihood. It is therefore vital that the Government take the challenges facing the sector seriously and provide support to it.

The industry is one of the largest sectors in the UK, contributing £94.6 billion to the UK economy in 2016. However, staggeringly, its productivity is less than four-fifths

that of the national average, and this low productivity drags down the productivity of the UK, a point made recently by the Institute for Public Policy Research. And, sadly, with low productivity comes low pay. We should not fall into the trap of thinking that all people in retail are low paid and in economic hardship—the student doing a summer job would certainly not be in that position—but there is a widespread problem in the retail sector, and according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation there are around 1.5 million people in low pay in retail, with a higher proportion of households facing economic hardship than in working households generally.

Because retail is such a large sector, the industry now accounts for just under one third of the total number of people in low pay in the UK. The economic importance of the sector should therefore not be understated, and the Government should be doing more to support it. I am sure the Secretary of State will listen to my suggestions today, but I hope that when he speaks later he staggers me with a comprehensive plan to support the sector.

I will start my kind suggestions to the Secretary of State by saying that one of the most glaring omissions from the industrial strategy White Paper was an appreciation that an industrial strategy is not just about labs or hard-hats, but is also about low productivity service sectors, where the majority of people work. Investing in and talking about headline-grabbing hi-tech industries is of course critical, but this alone does not constitute an industrial strategy. Despite the Government's intention to improve productivity, sadly the industrial strategy Green Paper mentioned retail only twice in 132 pages, and the White Paper only three times in 256 pages, with vague references to working

“closely with sectors such as hospitality, retail and tourism on each of the foundations of productivity”,

but with very little detail to match.

Many challenges are facing the sector, and I will touch on just a few key areas today. Retail firms have since the economic crisis come under increasing pressure. Things have got so bad that in the first three months of 2018 some 21,000 jobs in the retail sector were at risk. The drive towards online retailing, and indeed bad weather, have of course had a significant impact on our spending habits, but one reason for this that is rarely mentioned is a clear failure to sustain wage growth. Wages are not expected to return to pre-crash levels until at least 2022, and household debt has spiralled to unprecedented levels. This clearly has a significant impact on what people spend their money on, with many, sadly, relying on credit cards just to get by each week, never mind buy luxury items.

The Office for National Statistics has stated that consumer spending is worth around 60% of GDP, and it has been one of the driving forces behind the recovery of the UK economy. Interestingly, however, trends are showing that British consumers have stopped taking on more debt, and Credit Suisse recently told clients that it believes this trend will continue, which would damage one of the key drivers of GDP growth.

Another issue is the increasingly hostile business environment many retailers are now facing. But it is not just businesses that will lose out: communities are having their hearts ripped out and high street after high street is becoming littered with empty shops, charity shops and bookmakers.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that another issue for high streets is that the banks have been leaving? Many retailers tell me that having an ATM beside their business makes all the difference to their takings. Does my hon. Friend think that the Government, as the majority shareholder in RBS, should step up to the mark and take action on branch closures?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I completely agree, and interestingly historically RBS had a last-man-standing agreement to be the last bank on many high streets, and that does not seem to have been enforced by the Government, so I call on the Secretary of State to look at this. My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point, and it is not just bank closures that are damaging the high street infrastructure; the closure of post offices is also a significant issue.

These issues are exacerbated even further by years of under-investment in many of our regions and nations. If the Government are not prepared to provide the tools businesses and communities need to provide a fertile environment for local businesses, how can we expect these fortunes to change? A worrying report by David Jinks called “The Death of the High Street” argues that, unless we see radical change within 13 years, the impact of online shopping and home deliveries will “destroy” over half of today's town centre stores. His report also argues that between 2020 and 2030 half of the UK's existing shop premises will disappear; 100,000 stores will close, leaving just 120,000 shops on our high streets.

Britain's high streets are fading away because new shops are not opening fast enough to replace those that close. The Government attempted to deal with this issue through the Portas review, which advised that town teams be created to assist towns undergoing significant strain, but official funding for town teams ended on 1 April 2015.

The Government's recent announcement to develop local industrial strategies was a welcome step forward. However, think-tank Localis stated last month that there was a capacity gap in Whitehall for developing these, leading to concern that a pipeline of local industrial strategies will face significant delays. I will be grateful if the Secretary of State provides clarity on this and confirms what resources are available to local enterprise partnerships and local authorities in taking these strategies forward.

EU funding has also been a significant supporting factor to many areas in decline; it has always been strongly targeted at less prosperous regions. The Government are currently failing to provide any certainty to business over the UK's future trading relationship with the EU, the extent of regulatory alignment, or access to labour, but they have also failed to provide clarity on one key tool that previously helped spur the regeneration of many towns and high streets that had been starved of investment: EU structural funds. We know that the Government are planning a new fund to replace them when we leave the EU, but so far there has been no commitment on the scale of that fund, on how it will be administered or which investment it will be directed at. Will the Secretary of State give us more information on that today?

When we add to this massive uncertainty the significant cuts that local authorities have faced in recent years, we have a recipe for complete high street annihilation. That environment, and the lack of support that many businesses

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

face, was made very clear in the shambolic handling of last year's business rates revaluation, in which many businesses faced an unmanageable overnight hike in their rates. I am pleased that the Government have brought forward CPI indexation, but I urge them to go further by immediately introducing statutory annual revaluations, guaranteeing a fair and transparent appeals process and excluding new investment in plant and machinery from future business rates valuations. They must urgently evaluate and reform the whole system to make it fit for purpose and capable of addressing the changes that we are seeing in the sector.

Businesses were failed not only in regard to business rates; we also saw a failure to handle the scourge of late payments, which can lead to businesses struggling to cover costs or to invest, and sometimes going bust. We saw the effects of this recently in the collapse of Carillion, when huge swathes of supply chain companies faced a cliff edge due to late payments, often of up to 120 days. Many of those businesses will never see their money again. I urge the Government to adopt Labour's position by ensuring that anyone bidding for a Government contract is mandated to pay their own suppliers within 30 days and by developing a robust system of binding arbitration and fines for persistent late payers.

As the retail sector struggles, how to boost productivity remains a major challenge. There are at least two schools of thought on this. The first concentrates on improving technology and ultimately automating many jobs. That involves automating warehousing, sales, deliveries and so on, and job losses could result. That was the view of Deloitte, which suggested that 60% of jobs could be lost. The jobs that would remain would require a range of skills such as operating advanced machinery, software and robotics. They are likely to be higher paid and involve higher skills.

The second model involves redesigning how business operates to boost productivity growth. Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that many capable employees in the retail sector are reluctant to move up the rungs of the management ladder, as that involves greater responsibilities without much of an increase in pay. Jobs need to be redesigned so that an individual performs a range of different tasks that straddle the staff-management boundary and pay is increased. In that way, talented individuals could be engaged in the management side, raising performance and productivity. Either of those models—or a hybrid of the two, whichever the Government chose to take forward—would require dedicated Government investment in skills training for employees, to enable them to navigate the changes.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I agree with a lot of the challenges that the hon. Lady is outlining. My son works in the retail sector, and he has recently had a promotion to management level. He is only 18, so I give full credit to Zara for encouraging his talents. Does she agree, however, that the Government's approach in bringing in T-levels has played an important part in tackling those challenges and that they are working with industrial partners to bring those changes forward?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Please will she congratulate her son on his recent promotion? Some of the Government's commitments

are welcome, including the national retraining scheme and the T-levels that she has just mentioned, but sadly they are meaningless in the context of the cuts that we have faced over recent years. For example, £64 million was announced for the national retraining scheme, but £1.15 billion was cut from the adult skills budget between 2010 and 2015. I hope that the Secretary of State will put forward proposals today to increase investment in skills, because if we do not invest in skills, we will not be able to take our employees on the journey that they need to make.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The hon. Lady has been speaking for some time now, giving her analysis and talking about what the Government should do, but in her position as the shadow Secretary of State for Business, does she have any pearls of wisdom to give to retailers on what they should do to attract people into their retail outlets?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, and I do apologise for speaking for some time. If he listens, perhaps he will get some of those pearls of wisdom in due course. The point I am making is that the Government need to recognise that businesses need support. Businesses themselves need to innovate and to ensure that they drive productivity increases in-house, but the Government need to show dedication to providing the tools required to increase fertility in the business environment. Frankly, that is not happening at the moment.

An essential element in improving retail productivity is innovation, which is the best means of raising wages and boosting the competitiveness of British industry. Innovation is required by businesses themselves, as I have just pointed out to the hon. Gentleman, but the Government must commit more money to research and development spending. They referred in their White Paper to increasing that spending to 2.4% of GDP, which is welcome, but if they are really going to support low productivity sectors such as retail and ensure that we can compete on the world stage, they need to increase it to at least 3%, as other world leaders such as South Korea and Japan have done.

I also welcome the Government's recent establishment of a Retail Sector Council, but I have heard very little information about it since its establishment. Will the Secretary of State update the House on how often the council has met so far and whether there have been any discussions with the Government about what role the Government can play in boosting innovation in the sector? Labour has pledged to establish a catapult centre in relation to retail, to lead on technological, managerial and employee innovation. This is important because the Fabian Society recently reported that increasing managerial innovation and sharing best practice in retail can drive productivity by improving quality, as well as sale and business growth, and I call on the Government to examine Labour's catapult centre proposals.

Infrastructure investment is also a critical part of boosting productivity in the sector. We must recognise that the future of our high streets depends on quality infrastructure, transport links, parking amenities and high-speed broadband, as well as on the local anchor institutions that draw people in, such as entertainment and leisure facilities and libraries. The sums announced

in the White Paper are sadly negligible, and the TUC has stated that public investment will be increased to just 2.9% of GDP, while the average invested by other leading industrial nations in the OECD is 3.5%. Again, I hope that the Secretary of State has some earth-shattering updates for me today, to restore our faith in what the Economic Justice Commission recently dubbed “the most regionally unequal country in the whole of Europe” in terms of investment in our regions.

This brings me to the subject of retail workers, who are vital to the success of the sector. They provide positive customer experiences, and a lack of staff can have an adverse impact on customer service levels. The impact of job losses in retail should therefore not be understated. They have a profound impact on families and communities right across Britain. Retail has traditionally provided entry-level, part-time and flexible jobs for millions across the UK, and it has often provided livelihoods for people who have had to leave declining industries in particular regions.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): One of my constituents who is directly affected by this has written to me. Her husband works in retail, and she is appalled by the contract changes being forced on people working in the sector, particularly in Sainsbury’s, where 9,000 long-standing and loyal staff will suffer a significant pay cut of up to £3,000 and see their paid breaks and premium pay scrapped.

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend makes a vital point, and I shall come on to that shortly.

For some people, working in retail may be their only viable employment option. If a chain goes under and the local store closes or relocates out of the area, they will either have to travel further afield to find work or decide that the journey is simply not cost-effective and be forced to give up work altogether. According to a recent report by the Fabian Society, forecasts for the reduction in employment in the industry suggest that women, who make up the majority of the retail workforce, will sadly be the hardest hit. Workers in the retail sector are vulnerable, as my hon. Friend has just said. When costs need to be cut, workers are usually the first to face the squeeze. Only recently, Sainsbury’s announced sweeping changes to contracts for up to 130,000 staff in stores across the UK.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the likes of Lidl, which has its senior management at Manor Park in Runcorn, should allow access to the trade union USDAW, because a healthy workforce is a productive workforce?

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend makes an important point about another key factor in improving productivity. This is about not just improving skill levels, but engaging with the workforce proactively and collaboratively. That is best done through trade union membership and allowing trade unions access to workplaces, so issues on the shop floor can be identified and dealt with quickly, increasing productivity overall.

Kate Green: I am a proud USDAW member, and will my hon. Friend join me in commending its “Freedom From Fear” campaign, which seeks to ensure that shop

workers are safe at work, travelling to work and leaving work? Too many of them still risk abuse and unpleasantness from customers in the workplace.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend and support what she says.

Going back to Sainsbury’s, staff will no longer get paid breaks or higher rates of pay for working on a Sunday under the new terms. Premium rates for night-shift work will be restricted to between midnight and 5 am, and shop floor staff will no longer be able to earn bonuses. It is interesting, however, that the freeze on bonuses is allegedly not likely to impact senior managers or the CEO, who will still receive their bumper bonus packages. There are also worrying reports that staff may be forced to resign if they refuse to sign these new contracts.

Sainsbury’s is not alone in this trend towards fluctuating terms and conditions and insecurity. As USDAW recently reported, a number of clear trends within the sector have led to the workforce feeling increased pressure. Many retailers, seeking to maximise flexibility to deal with fluctuations in customer demand, have introduced flexible, short-hours contracts. As a result, two thirds of USDAW members are regularly working additional hours above those that they are contracted to work, yet they have no guarantee that those hours and the associated income will be available to them in the future. The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union reports similar trends, with McDonald’s workers recently striking in a dispute over zero-hours contracts and working conditions.

The Government’s recent response to the Taylor review included a right to request more stable hours, which I referred to when the Secretary of State made his statement on the review, but how does that actually differ from the current position? Without an obligation on the employer to accept, it is meaningless and I urge him to reconsider.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Coming from a family of shopkeepers and as a former co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on retail, I have been listened very carefully, but the shadow Business Secretary has made hardly any mention of Amazon and the onslaught of online trading that has decimated footfall on the high street. The vast majority of her speech has been gibberish to people in retail, with no practical suggestions. I hope that there will be something in her conclusion.

Rebecca Long Bailey: With the hon. Gentleman’s knowledge of the sector, I am surprised that he says that, given that business rates are one of the critical issues affecting the high street. Retailers often tell me about the unfairness of businesses such as Amazon receiving skewed business rates valuations due to the size of their operations, so I have dealt with that point.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I have listened carefully to the hon. Lady, who has accused British retailers of lacking innovation. However, the UK is the third largest e-commerce market in the world. Digital taxation needs to be done on a cross-border basis, so will she join me in congratulating our Chancellor on getting 100 countries across the world to look at implementing a digital tax to allow us to address the level playing field between online and offline?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I have not in any way, shape or form suggested that any business lacks the capacity or drive to innovate—quite the contrary—but they do lack Government support to drive that innovation. As for making tax digital, I ask the hon. Lady to read some of the Library research. While the sentiment is credible, the implementation has been far from it, with numerous businesses reporting problems from start to finish, and that needs to be addressed urgently.

Rachael Maskell: Does my hon. Friend recognise that the retail sector suffers from offshore landlords charging exorbitant prices for property, forcing businesses off our high streets?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I referred earlier to the commercial retail property market, and the Government must recognise that they have to work collaboratively across the sector and with landlords to enable tenants to secure fair tenancies. In the current climate, many tenancies are unfair to retailers, forcing many of them over the edge. Offshore landlords are a significant issue that we have discussed at length in this Parliament.

That completes my whistle-stop tour of many of the issues the sector faces, and I hope that my comments have been helpful to the Business Secretary. He knows that retail is our largest industrial sector. It has the power not only to transform our economy, but to transform our communities, providing high streets and towns with the services and consumer choice that Britain deserves.

When I was little, my Uncle Ray was a butcher. He was proud of having his own business and the family were proud of him. However, he was not just proud of being an entrepreneur; he was proud of the services that he provided to his local community and to the people who came into his shop every single day. In all my life, I have never seen such profound change in the retail sector, and the alarm bells are ringing loud and clear. How many more Uncle Raymonds are there who want to start their own business but are frightened to do so in the current climate? How many more Uncle Raymonds are out there who are in business but are frightened of going bust due to the hostile environment they face? Once our high street is gone, it will be gone forever, and the basic lifeblood of an entrepreneurial nation from high street grocers and hairdressers all the way through to department stores will be in tatters. I urge the Business Secretary to act now before it is too late.

1.37 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): To answer the question from the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) about people emulating her Uncle Ray, 1,100 new businesses are being created in this country every day of the year—record levels. We are seeing a resurgence of entrepreneurship right across the country, which she will welcome.

I am delighted that we have the chance to talk about the retail sector, which, as the hon. Lady recognised, is vital to every one of our constituencies. The character and identity of all the towns, villages and cities that we represent are defined by the shops, stores, cafés, restaurants and pubs, which make up the most important places in our settlements. Whether independently owned or part

of a chain, and whether large or small, they play a vital role. As constituency MPs, we all do everything we can to promote and boost them. Things such as Small Business Saturday engage all Members on both sides of the House to promote the importance of retail.

More people are employed in retailing than in any other single industry in the country. Britain has long had a deserved reputation for being a retail environment of intense competition and innovation and for outstripping other countries in terms of the keenness of prices, the choice and range of products, and the pace of new offerings to consumers to meet their changing needs.

Any of us who has visited other countries, whether in continental Europe or the US, to take a couple of examples, will have noticed how comparatively advanced and well served our consumers are in this country. Already in this debate we have heard from many people who grew up with a retail background, which is not surprising given the sector's importance. I make my own disclosure that my father was a retail milkman. My first job was delivering milk in the mornings as part of a small family business. My mother worked at the local Sainsbury's. Such backgrounds are common among Members on both sides of the House. We all have friends, family and many constituents who owe their life and lifeblood to the retail sector.

The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles accurately describes the period of change the retail sector is experiencing. She is right to do so. As she says, in recent years, several familiar household names have disappeared from our high streets: Woolworths in 2009 and, more recently, Toys R Us and Maplin. Each and every case is a blow to the staff who work in those stores and, of course, to the customers. But we all know this is by no means new in British retailing. Each of the names I have mentioned was a disrupter and an insurgent in its day. Woolworths, for example, came as an American giant offering open shelves for consumers to serve themselves, rather than having to wait behind a counter, which was revolutionary and a major challenge to the prevailing model.

British Home Stores, much in the news in recent years, provided a one-stop shop containing everything under one roof, from light fittings to clothing and food. Again, that was a big disruption to the norm. The hon. Lady mentions Toys R Us. I am old enough to remember the dismay experienced by some traditional high street toy stores when out-of-town warehouses, including Toys R Us, entered the market. Those warehouses became familiar and many of us have bought toys for our children there. There is a story of constant change in the retail sector.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The retail sector in the centre of Sheffield has been greatly strengthened by the establishment of a business improvement district. The Secretary of State will know that, outside London, the only model for business improvement districts is an occupier or a ratepayer BID, whereas London can have property owner BIDs. After lengthy consultation by the Government, there were proposals in last year's Local Government Finance Bill to roll out the opportunity of property owner BIDs across the country, which was widely welcomed in the north of England. The Bill was lost in the wash-up. Do the Government have any plans to renew that proposal to enable property owner BIDs across the UK?

Greg Clark: I agree with the hon. Gentleman on the positive effect of BIDs. When I was a local councillor in London, I saw the benefits of the business improvement districts in the capital. The Local Government Finance Bill was a victim of the wash-up and I will raise the point with my colleagues to see where we are on further plans.

We have experienced constant change in the retail sector and, of course, at the moment we are experiencing an online revolution. We previously experienced the supermarket revolution and, again, I remember well my father's milk rounds shrinking as supermarkets routinely began to sell fresh milk at a fraction of what the roundsmen charged.

There was never a time when the high street did not change and did not see the disappearance of brands that were regarded as anchors at the time. The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles is remiss in not stating the context of constant change. We all remember many examples of presences on the high street, going back many years, that are no longer there.

The evidence shows that British retail is transforming but is still vigorous. Following the hon. Lady's speech, Members would be forgiven for imagining that retail employment is in a state of meltdown.

Justin Tomlinson: I echo my right hon. Friend because the hostility shown by the shadow Minister towards retail does not reflect the reality. Productivity grew by 4% in 2017, as reported by the British Retail Consortium. That is the reality.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right. We all want to celebrate the success of retail in Britain and we all want to do what we can to further advantage it. In fact, the number of people employed in retail in the UK has grown substantially over the past 20 years, from around 2.8 million in 1996 to 3.1 million in the last full year for which figures are available, an increase of nearly 300,000 jobs.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): When I went to talk to my local jobcentre, it complained about the way the supermarkets treat their workers. My local jobcentre says it is grossly unfair and unreasonable to give people short 12-hour or eight-hour contracts. Is the Secretary of State confident that the increase in the number of jobs is an increase in full-time equivalent jobs, or is it just chopping up jobs that would previously have had a reasonable number of hours?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady raises an interesting question. She will be interested to know that the trend over the period is towards more full-time jobs taking the strain from part-time jobs. The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles mentioned that part-time employment is valued by many people in the retail sector, but a higher proportion of jobs in the retail sector are now full time than in 1996.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Would the Secretary of State care to comment on a practice I see weekly at my advice surgery? Large numbers of my constituents, particularly among the Tamil community, are working 18 hours a week at Tesco precisely so that Tesco does not have to pay employer's national insurance contributions.

Greg Clark: I was not aware of that, and my colleagues and I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss her example.

It is not the case that in recent years we have experienced a collapse in employment—rather the reverse. The trend has been towards increasing and, more recently, more stable employment. We are seeing more full-time work, rather than part-time work, in the mix. Nor is it the case that more retailers are failing. The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles correctly mentioned some recent examples of retailers that have gone out of business, but it has always been the case that some retailers have failed and been replaced by others.

Rachel Maclean: Of course I regret that Marks & Spencer is pulling out of Redditch, but is it not the case that the consumer is the ultimate beneficiary when we see change in the sector? Consumers get new products, better prices and different things and new experiences they would not necessarily have had previously. That is what an entrepreneurial economy supported by this Government does.

Greg Clark: I agree. We want to make sure that our retail sector is dynamic and provides value and choice for consumers, as well as good career opportunities for members of staff.

Melanie Onn: The Secretary of State says that retailers are not failing, but the empty shops in Grimsby town centre tell my constituents something very different. Will he comment on that?

Greg Clark: Across the country, from time to time, businesses will close. I am familiar with Grimsby, as the hon. Lady knows, and one of the actions we are taking, which I know she will support, is to have a town deal with Grimsby to make sure that we maximise the advantages locally. Freeman Street in Grimsby shows this phenomenon has been happening not just over the past 12 or 24 months; there has been a long-term change. Local dedication, based on knowledge of the local environment, is required to have the best prospects for a revival.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Secretary of State rightly refers to the fact that towns have to look at change. Does he agree that in many cases it will be for local authorities to examine what the needs of a modern town centre are as a destination, rather than at what its needs were in the 1950s and 1960s, in a very different retail era?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is exactly right about that. Of course many of our towns acquired shopping centres and shopping malls to make them more attractive at that time, which again was a big change. There is constant change in what the offer and draw of town centres is, and local authorities are very active in thinking about how they can make their places as attractive as they can.

According to the latest market data for the last five years, covering the period from 2013 to the end of 2017, 191 retailers in this country have gone into administration. That compares with the 202 that did so in the five years before, so we have not had the sudden collapse that the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles was hinting at.

[Greg Clark]

During the last five years, the number of stores affected by those failures was 7,429, compared with 19,639 in the previous five years. So it is very important that we do not paint a picture of British retail undergoing some sort of experience that has never happened before; we need to make sure that its dynamism results in positive outcomes and not regard this as completely out of the ordinary.

The hon. Lady cited examples of closures and, as I said, they are hugely hurtful and worrying for everyone caught up in them. However, she conspicuously failed to mention the other side of the equation. If she reads *Retail Week* in any given week, she will see example after example of stores that are opening and of companies that are expanding. She could have mentioned that just in January the Co-op committed that it will open 100 new stores during 2018, creating 1,600 jobs. Lidl is investing £1.45 billion in expanding its UK presence, and Aldi is now the fifth biggest retailer in the UK and it aims to have 1,000 stores by 2020. Lest anyone think that discount retail means discount wages, Aldi has pledged to become the UK's highest-paying supermarket by 2020.

Our tastes and habits are changing. Home delivery from stores was once considered a relic of pre-war and immediately post-war times, but now it is increasingly standard for all the big supermarkets; Ocado has recently joined the FTSE 100 on the back of its growth. We have more and better choice through online retail than ever before, as colleagues have said. ASOS is now the UK's largest clothing retailer by market valuation, and this week the British Retail Consortium showed that total retail sales increased substantially in May. The hon. Lady does the retail sector and the country a disservice by claiming that we are seeing an annihilation of the high street. We need to be much more practical and positive about the prospects.

However, our habits are changing. We are buying more and more each year—retail sales are buoyant—but we are choosing to buy more of that online, which of course provides a challenge. In 2007, 3% of total retail sales were bought online, yet in little more than a decade—by May this year—that had grown to 16.9%. That is a revolution in a short space of time. In the past 12 months alone, online sales rose by 11.9%, and clothing and footwear sales online rose by 24.1%. The consultants Oliver Wyman forecast that 40% of non-food retail sales will be online by 2030. That is how people are choosing to buy so, just as happened when supermarkets challenged individual shops, retail will look very different in the future. If we choose to buy 40% of goods online, not all the shops we have been used to will exist as they do today. As the British Retail Consortium says:

“We have too much retail space...there will be fewer shops and their role will be different”.

It says that they will be based on convenience fulfilment or, most likely, fulfilling a desire for experience and local community concentration. Those are the changes that the sector anticipates and wants to participate in.

Kate Green: I cannot dispute what the Secretary of State says about the changing patterns of online shopping. He made a comment earlier about the quality of employment in low-cost supermarkets. Does he accept that it is also important that those online retail settings

offer excellent employment conditions? Too often we hear of exploitative practices in these warehouses and of the abusive treatment of workers, who are being denied toilet breaks and being asked to do heavy lifting without proper risk assessments having been carried out. They do that for very low wages.

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point, and this was one of the reasons we commissioned the Matthew Taylor report, to which the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles referred. Knowing that employment patterns are changing and that different types of businesses are entering the market, it is right to consider what regulatory requirements we need in this new world to maintain the high standards we have insisted on in this country. That is the type of preparation—the strategic anticipation of what is required—that we are engaged in.

I applaud the way in which, in this time of adjustment, to prepare for the future, the retail sector is coming together, with its players working jointly. It has always been a rather fragmented sector, but in recent months we have seen a real sense of purpose in its coming together to work jointly with the Government and with local councils, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) said, to address the challenges it has faced.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as well as working at a national level to recognise the changes needed in our high streets, it is important that local councils work with local businesses to put in place a plan and vision for what the town centre needs to look like in future?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right about that. The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles referred to local industrial strategies. The reason they are part of the industrial strategy is that the vision we have set out, informed by local councils, local leaders and retailers, is that that local dimension and knowledge, as I mentioned to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), is vital in ensuring we have prosperity. So the sector was a major contributor to the development of our industrial strategy.

One commitment we made was to establish the Retail Sector Council, so that firms, large and small, can work effectively with each other and policy makers, emulating the successful model that the Automotive Council UK and the Aerospace Growth Partnership have established, with which Members are familiar. The RSC is chaired jointly by the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), and Richard Pennycook, who, as many Members will know, is the former chief executive of the Co-op and one of our most respected retailers.

The RSC is bringing the sector together to work with Government and local councils, making recommendations on the areas of challenge that have come up already in today's debate. Those include business rates, where the Government have made a clear commitment to make sure that the system is up to date for a world in which people increasingly shop online. Of course, that builds on the commitment we have made to wider business rates reforms and on the relief that has been given

following the recent revaluation. That stands in stark contrast with the record of the Labour party, which doubled the average business rates bill during its time in office. We are protecting the small businesses in this country from its increase.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Secretary of State provide some more detail about how the Government are going to reform business rates, because we know the retail sector is crying out for reform of the system and he has not set out any details? I would really appreciate those now.

Greg Clark: I do not want to incur the wrath of my fierce hon. Friend, the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), by speaking for too long, but there will be opportunities to do that. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton, will be responding to the debate. The Retail Sector Council has that as part of its remit and objectives. A review is taking place with the Treasury of precisely those matters. Of course that is so because this is one of the big challenges that stores with a high street presence face. The context of competition from online retailers is fundamental to that.

A major concern of the industry, through the new sector council, and of this Government, through the industrial strategy, is to drive higher levels of productivity and earnings for workers in the sector. There are huge opportunities to do both. The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles does a disservice to this very innovative sector and the people who work in it when she portrays it as some sort of backwater of uniform low productivity—it is far from that. In fact, in the past 20 years in the retail sector, output per hour has doubled; it has increased faster than the economy as a whole. Productivity in UK retailing is one of the highest of major European nations and one of the most rapidly growing. Pay in retail is increasing, responding to the recruitment pressures that come from the fact that unemployment is now at its lowest level for 40 years. That has been bolstered by the introduction of the national living wage, which has had a particularly beneficial impact on employees in the retail sector. As I have said, we want to secure improvements in the quality of working life that employees in the sector experience, which is why the Matthew Taylor report with its emphasis on good work is of such vital relevance to this sector.

Retail is already at the cutting edge of much of the innovation and new technology that we see. Our industrial strategy, with its major investment—the biggest increase in investment in research and development that we have seen as a country—is full of opportunities for further innovation. Through our industrial strategy challenge fund and grand challenges such as on artificial intelligence, this is a sector that will play a big part in that. Part of the reason for the creation of the Retail Sector Council is to enable the sector to do so.

The British retail sector is renowned as one of the most competitive and innovative in the world. It employs millions of people, and will continue to do so, in good jobs in every part of the United Kingdom. We recognise and embrace the challenge of responding to the changes that are taking place in retailing not just in this country, but across the world. We are investing in technology, investing in skills, ensuring that people can have satisfying

and prosperous careers to look forward to in retail, and responding to the consequences of changing consumer preferences and the implications that that has for the future of the high street.

Those are the areas on which we will work in close partnership with the sector. Together we will ensure that, more than ever, retailing is something that is, in its quality, in the price that it offers to consumers and in the choice and innovation that it brings in, one of our world-leading sectors of the economy.

2.2 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is always a genuine pleasure to follow the shadow Secretary of State and, indeed, the Secretary of State in these debates, particularly when they are on very important subjects such as retail that go right to the heart of our towns, cities and communities. As a former retailer myself, I should like to start by paying tribute to those sore-footed legions who go home every night having served us in their shops and stores. They perform an absolutely vital function, and that should not go without being underlined today and I mean to do that during my contribution.

Retailers always try to create the conditions to attract customers. The environment that they work in and that they present to consumers is extremely important for them. They will spend a long time working out whether they should concentrate on high-density product placement, low-density product placement, special offers and the placing of those offers. They know that the environment in which people shop is extraordinarily important to them. They approach that in a range of different ways. I do not want to major on the actual high street itself, but I do want to focus on it, because it is something that was perhaps glossed over by the Secretary of State today.

The success of retail depends on the wider economic environment—or the context, as the Secretary of State called it earlier. That is why the unrelenting situation that we have over austerity causes so much difficulty for high street retailers, and retailers in general. Store closures, such as the ones announced by Marks & Spencer, are just another indictment of what happens when these policies are brought forward, and they drive consumers away from the high streets. If people do not have a disposable income, they are not able to go and spend in the shops.

The Scottish Government continue to support the Scottish retail business, especially the crucial small business retail sector, with initiatives such as the small business bonus, and I will return to that matter shortly.

Ged Killen: The hon. Gentleman is talking about the Scottish Government's assistance for small businesses. In my area, three businesses have had to close as a result of the treatment they have received from landlords, the most recent being The Big Coffee Cup. Does he not think that it is regrettable in Scotland that there is no statutory or common law right for a commercial lease to be renewed? These businesses were told that they had to close because their lease was not going to be renewed.

Drew Hendry: I would love to give the hon. Gentleman a direct answer, but I have not come across that situation myself. I will happily look into it. I will not come here and make up something that I do not know anything about, so I will look into the lease issue for him.

I will come back to what the Scottish Government are doing in Scotland later in my speech. In tough times, the last thing that retailers need is for costs to rise. When prices go up, the number of customers goes down. It is a natural cause and effect. The biggest current risk to the Scottish economy and the retail sector comes from the hard Brexit that is on the table now from this Tory Government. We still do not know what the Labour position is. *[Interruption.]* Well, we still do not know what the Labour position is on a hard Brexit. Hopefully, we will find out soon.

Stephen Kerr *rose—*

Drew Hendry: Oh, Madam Deputy Speaker, have I ever refused the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr)?

Stephen Kerr: And the hon. Gentleman maintains his record of giving way, so I thank him. He says that the biggest threat to the retail sector in Scotland is a hard Brexit, which is, I am afraid to say, all too predictable from the Scottish National party spokesman. That is not what the director of the Scottish Retail Consortium, David Lonsdale, says. He says that the devolved Administration's increase in surcharges and business rates inflexibility have served to make it more expensive to operate shops in our town centres. We cannot go to a higher authority than the Scottish Retail Consortium to describe what is wrong with Scottish retail.

Drew Hendry: Of course, if the hon. Gentleman wants to trade in higher authorities, let us see if we can find one. Let us go to the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, who says that a hard Brexit will cost each family £900 per year—a reduction in income that people simply cannot afford and that will not aid anyone, especially retailers. Let us go to the Office for Budget Responsibility, which says that lower economic growth is predicted in each of the next five years—lower than the 1.7% in 2017.

The single market and the customs union remain vital for Scotland's economy. It is a Herculean task to find a business person or a business organisation in Scotland that does not agree with that. Hard Brexit not only threatens the cost outlined by Mark Carney and others, but, according to the SPIE 2 report, means that costs will reach £2,300 per person per year compared with remaining in the EU. Report after report highlights the economic folly of the hard Brexit approach. All of that sucks up disposable income—the lifeblood of the high streets.

Let me return now to austerity and its effect on retail. Austerity is a choice. Dealing with a deficit can be done by encouraging growth, not by austerity. Between now and 2022-23, the Scottish Government modelling suggests that the Chancellor could provide an additional investment in Scotland of around £5 billion while still meeting the UK Government's targets on structural deficit and debt reduction. These policies disproportionately affect the

least well off—the very people who spend more of their income in local shops. On welfare cuts, the Resolution Foundation states:

“The coming year (2018-19) is set to be the second biggest single year of welfare cuts...(after 2012-13) at £2.5bn.”

Having been in a pilot area for universal credit for more than five years now, I can testify to the effects that it has had on the local economy by draining the ability for people to spend in their local shops. The people of Inverness in my constituency are all too aware of these consequences.

Of course, there is another effect that is likely to cause great problems and to be a damaging issue for retail. Retail needs people—to buy and to sell. The unique selling point of being in retail, particularly high street retail, is that customers can speak to staff and staff can show customers products. The Government's proposed approach to immigration could mean that real-terms GDP in Scotland is 9.3% lower by 2040. That affects tax and employment not just for shops and businesses, but also for public services.

Over the decade to 2019-20, Scottish Government funding has been cut by £2.7 billion, which is 8.4% in real terms. The Scottish Government will only receive 2.5% or £37 million of the £1.5 billion funding for Brexit preparations allocated in 2018, so when we look at support for business, it is against a background of lower funding. The Scottish Government's recent budget set out how reforms of the business rates, for example, will ensure that Scotland provides the best possible environment for business. Rates relief for small business in Scotland is more competitive than in England. We provide the most competitive reliefs package in the UK, worth a record £720 million—up from £660 million in 2017-18. From 2018, we will introduce a business growth accelerator that will see no bill rise for 12 months as a result of improvements or expansion of existing business property. It will also ensure that no rates are paid on new builds for a year when they are entered into the valuation roll.

Earlier I mentioned the small business bonus scheme, which was protected in the 2018-19 Scottish Government budget and has saved businesses almost £1.5 billion cumulatively since it was introduced in 2008. The scheme has provided record relief to almost 104,000 recipients over the past year. The estimated total relief under the scheme, which removes or reduces rates bills, rose to £230 million—an increase of £43 million from £187 million last year. This amounts to an average saving per property of £2,000. The maximum savings that a business can achieve through the scheme will increase next year from £6,990 to £7,200 a year. That is a record level of small business support. Andy Willox, the Scottish policy convener for the Federation of Small Businesses, said:

“Without this rates help, Scottish firms tell us they would scale back investment, and their plans for growth. This vital scheme forms the centrepiece of the Scottish Government's package of help for smaller firms.”

The Secretary of State rightly talked about the need to diversify in retail, and we have to ensure that we take that factor into account. As he rightly said, most successful businesses are able to adapt and change with the circumstances they face and the opportunities that arise. Many successful retailers—small and large—have adopted online platforms alongside their traditional face-to-face retail. In fact, they are finding that a double benefit: not

only can people find and access their products, but they also know somewhere where they can go and get direct advice about those products. It is of course important to set the environment to ensure that that can work properly.

Although the Scottish Government have committed to extending superfast broadband access of 30 megabits per second to Scotland by the end of 2021, the UK Government really have to up their act and understand that 10 megabits is not good enough for the rural parts of Britain that are not covered by the Scottish Government's actions. The UK Government appear intent on cutting Scottish consumers out of the broadband universal service obligation completely, despite the fact that they are being asked to pay for it alongside consumers in other parts of the UK. In Scotland, we are investing £600 million through the first phase of our Reaching 100%, or R100, programme to achieve our goal of superfast broadband access for all. Procurement is under way and deployment will begin during 2019. Even though telecoms is reserved to Westminster, the UK Government's contribution to R100 is just £21 million—only 3% of the total.

Figures provided by thinkbroadband show that the UK Government have met their target of 95% superfast broadband coverage, at the UK definition of 24 megabits and above. But, in fact, using the same data used by the UK Government and our own internal data, we have confirmed that we exceeded our target of 95% fibre broadband coverage across Scotland by the end of 2017. Our Scottish 4G infill programme aims to push 4G coverage beyond commercial roll-out by investing up to £25 million of public funding to deliver future-proofed 4G mobile infrastructure to help selected mobile notspots.

I agree with the Secretary of State that the quality of people's working lives must be enhanced, and I join him in paying tribute to Aldi for making a commitment to being the highest paying supermarket. For too long retail sector wages have been too low for too many people. As I said in my opening remarks, working in retail is a rewarding job, but it is also challenging at times. Retail's future workforce and customers are obviously going to come from the ranks of young people, so I will make the kind request that has been made eloquently in this Chamber by many other Members, for the UK Government to start to understand that they need to reward young workers, not punish them.

Research from the Scottish Parliament's information centre shows that workers under the age of 18 would earn roughly £6,500 less than people who are over 25. The research further highlighted that 18 to 20-year-olds would find themselves £3,705 worse off—and apprentices £7,605 worse off—compared to workers over the age of 25. If the UK Government seriously want to reward hard workers, as they so frequently say they do, will they listen to the SNP's demand and retract this deeply discriminatory decision that punishes workers solely for being young? It is a missed opportunity to provide economic empowerment to young people from lower socioeconomic demographics.

The SNP would encourage every employer to reward their staff fairly and, where possible, to pay the real living wage. Many of the most successful retailers, such as Aldi, are already committed to doing the best for their staff, and that is the right thing to do. The new national living wage rate of £7.83 an hour for over-25s

came into effect on 1 April 2018, but the national living wage refers to average earnings, not living costs, and is therefore not a real living wage. The living wage differs in that it is calculated according to the basic cost of living, and therefore takes account of the adequacy of household incomes for achieving an acceptable minimum living standard. Incidentally, the Scottish Government were the first Government in the UK to become an accredited real living wage employer. Our young workforce and consumers—the very people who need to get into the habit of using retail and finding ways to stimulate the economy, and the people who will be paying taxes to support pensions into the future—must be included in a fair strategy.

To conclude, I ask Ministers—*[Interruption.]* I am getting some warm applause from the Tory Benches. How delighted I am to always find a few extra words to thank them for their attention during these exchanges! Will Ministers copy what has been working in Scotland with the small business bonus? Will they look at adjusting the rates system in that way? Will they finally listen to the endless stream of businesses and business organisations that have come forward to point out the perils of a hard Brexit direction? Will they listen to the people affected by the universal credit roll-out? This all cumulatively affects the future of retail and the ability of people to operate on the high street. It is time to help the whole of the economy. Listening to these points would definitely hit that mark. It is well past time to ditch the dogmatic approach to austerity.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I hope that in a good-natured debate of this kind, we can get through the afternoon without a formal time limit. This is always an experiment, but I am going to ask hon. Members please not to exceed seven minutes in their speeches. If they do, then all they are doing is squeezing the time for someone else to take part in the debate. Of course I appreciate that some Members do not want other Members to have a say, but I want everyone to have an equal go at their arguments. Therefore, if seven minutes is exceeded, I will have to put on a formal time limit. I call Derek Thomas.

2.21 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will reduce my speech to 40 pages now that you have said that.

In counties such as Cornwall, the retail sector is a significant contributor to the local economy, so I welcome the opportunity to discuss it. I am glad that the Secretary of State is still in his place, as it is really good to be able to speak directly to him. Most employees in Cornwall work in small and medium-sized businesses. A significant number of those are in retail, and many are on our high streets. High streets are the lifeblood of our communities in Cornwall—particularly west Cornwall and the constituency I represent.

The health of the high street is dependent on those small, independent retail outlets. They are made up of entrepreneurs who have often taken a risk in sinking their life savings into them, and who get up day after day to keep up an offer both to residents and visitors. Despite all their hard work and good efforts, they find staying open very difficult. They have had to contend

[Derek Thomas]

with the living wage. I welcome, and they welcome, the living wage, but it is a significant challenge to them. Many have reduced their opening hours just to keep control of their staff costs. There is also auto-enrolment.

We have seen a significant rise in online shopping and a dramatic growth in out-of-town stores. In Penzance, just before Christmas, a new out-of-town store opened. I have spoken to businesses there who have seen a 40% drop in their business just since Christmas. There have been huge hikes in car-parking charges. Furthermore, I do not want to discourage Members from coming to Cornwall, but the roads are under par at the moment. We are working hard to improve connectivity on the roads. The weather can have an impact on whether people choose to go to the beach or to shop. These entrepreneurs, who are doing all they can, face all sorts of challenges that they have no control over. Those challenges are well documented and well rehearsed. I recognise that many of them, particularly planning and car parking, are matters for the local authority. We are working hard to see it rise to the challenge and to give opportunity rather than restrictions to our local businesses.

However, what the Government can and must do is address the issue of business rates. I recognise that for some time, even before I was elected, various measures have been introduced to address the difficulties that small businesses face with regard to business rates. I believe that nowadays business rates are indefensible. It is an outdated tax that reflects a business building rather than the business itself and causes significant harm, particularly to the high street. In my constituency, for lots of small businesses out of town in rural areas, business rate relief and various exemptions have been fantastic, and that is welcome. However, some businesses in the high street have seen extraordinary increases, particularly since 2016, and that has been extremely painful and uncomfortable for them.

In the three main towns in my constituency—Helston, St Ives and Penzance—I have been working with a number of businesses that tell me they will go out of business if we do not do something quickly. An independent business owner in Helston moved across the road in order to increase the size of her business, but even though her shop is smaller than her next-door neighbour's and smaller than the shops opposite, which are both multiples, the business rates she pays are significantly higher. In Penzance, we have a new retailer who started his business after Christmas. He had no business rates charged whatsoever and was not expecting a charge, but in April he was stung with a new bill of thousands of pounds a year, unexpected and unplanned for. We are currently trying to discover why this has been the case.

In St Ives, we have seen the rate re-evaluation, high rents often charged by absent landlords, and a quick rotation of businesses that come into town thinking that St Ives is the place to be in business and will pay whatever rent is asked for. For several stores, that has led to year-on-year increases since 2016. Despite the voluntary support available from the local authority, they have not benefited. We have done all we can. We have had meetings with the Valuation Office Agency. We have done the checking challenge. We have met Treasury Ministers several times and raised individual cases. However, while Ministers are still engaged and helpful, at the moment we see no way forward.

For businesses under such pressure, the various things that the Government have done are helpful. However, I compare the situation with that of someone who has their hand in a bench vice. It is not helpful for the Government to say to them, "We will slow down the number of turns and how quickly we turn the bench vice so that the pain is not so great. We will just do half a turn a day, maybe." What we actually need the Government to do is to remove the hand from the bench vice altogether.

I have three urgent requests—and they are really urgent. First, we must halt the increases above the consumer prices index that businesses in my constituency are facing. These increases are significant. They are introduced every year because of the re-evaluation. They are harmful and unacceptable, and I would like them to be frozen.

Secondly, I would like a discussion on—with perhaps legislation moved forward quickly—a measure to allow town councils to retain just 1% or 2% of the business rates collected in their area to support the high streets and build healthy and vibrant town centres. People would be able to go into town, park more cheaply and enjoy the public dwelling space, because the town council would have resources to invest in the town. As devolution has come to Cornwall Council, the money has stopped there. Devolution of sorts has gone down to town and parish councils, but money has not followed, and so they are continually strapped for cash and unable to help with the problems on the high streets. We do not have business improvement districts in any of the towns I am talking about. Helston would be a great place for a pilot scheme for the town council to keep 1% or 2% of business rates. That would give it a couple of hundred thousand pounds a year to really turn around the town centre, which has been under pressure for many years. Given the population around Helston—42,000 people—we could turn the town around. I am working with it do what I can.

Finally, I would like the Government—if they did this, they would earn themselves enormous brownie points within small businesses up and down the country—to commit to scrapping business rates altogether. I know that they need to continue to raise the £24 billion they collect from property-based taxes. However, that money could be collected through some form of transaction tax that would be based on the activity of the business rather than the location and size of the building it occupies. It would also be a fair tax, because it would tax equally high street businesses, out-of-town stores and online businesses simply on the business they do, not on the building they occupy.

2.29 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I am really pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate on the retail sector because it is hugely important to my constituency, where 23%—nearly a quarter—of jobs are in retail. That is 8,000 jobs and the highest percentage of retail jobs in any constituency across Great Britain. It is vital for my constituency and many others that we have a thriving retail sector, from the small high street traders such as Les Thompson, who sells loose fresh fruit and vegetables—not wrapped in plastic, I note—on the main road in my hometown of Ryton, to major retail centres such as the intu Metrocentre, which is still the largest retail shopping centre and houses national chains as well as smaller retailers.

Blaydon is made up of many small towns such as Birtley in the east, through to Whickham, Winlaton, Dunston Hill, Crawcrook, Chopwell, Rowlands Gill, Ryton and of course the town of Blaydon itself, where the shopping centre has recently been reinvigorated. All those centres provide valuable jobs and facilities and help to make our local communities vibrant places where people want to live and can access the essentials, and sometimes the extras, of life. The challenges that they face vary. Les and many other small shopkeepers like him face the problem of our small towns emptying during the day, as people commute to work and shop elsewhere. They need support to ensure that our small towns retain a vibrant high street and local facilities, especially since many of our banks have closed local branches and there is a reduced footfall. The large retail centres like the Metrocentre, where many of the retail sector jobs are located, face different challenges.

I want to support our retailers right across Blaydon. I am doing what I can locally, working with them and Gateshead Council, but we need a bigger plan and a strategy for supporting the retail sector across the UK. Retail is our largest industrial sector, but the Government's industrial strategy hardly touches on how we can develop and support that sector in what is currently a very challenging environment for most of them.

Let me turn to those challenges. Many retailers tell me that the business rates system, which has been mentioned, is a massive challenge. All but the smallest, like Les, who are below the small business threshold, are facing big increases in business rates. The revised valuations for many mean a big increase at the same time as they face challenges from online retailers, which do not have the same shop fronts and so face much lower business rates. Of course, the huge growth in internet shopping is one of the other challenges, with many of us even looking at goods in store but then shopping online to find the best price. I am as guilty of that as anyone else, but we need to think about the implications.

Like many other industrial sectors, the uncertainty and fears about Brexit and the impact on trading and bringing in overseas retailers to our towns and shopping centres are having a huge impact on the retail sector. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) referred to evidence from research conducted on behalf of intu on that very issue.

We know that there have already been many job losses in the retail sector. In April, the Press Association revealed that 21,413 retail staff had already been made redundant or had their role threatened, the bulk of them at established high street chains, in just the first three months of 2018. Many of those retailers are present in my constituency. Last month I visited staff at Toys R Us at the Metro retail park. I met some staff who had been working there for more than 20 years. They felt that they had been left adrift without information about what would happen to them and their entitlements and what they should do as their shop and the business closed down. Their shop was performing well, but as in so many cases, big finance issues and management decisions far away—literally—from the shop floor led to them losing their jobs. I am pleased to say that the local retail community pulled together, and many of them were able to find new jobs, but it did not do away with that sense of uncertainty and neglect.

In the House, we often rightly highlight high-profile manufacturing job losses, but it is just as important for us to note the loss of jobs in the retail sector and to remember that these too are people and our constituents who need our support and help. We need to pay our retail sector much more attention than it currently receives, as it is a vital sector for our economy.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): I appreciate and understand the point that the hon. Lady is making, but does she also acknowledge that there has been significant job growth in the last few years, particularly in areas such as logistics, handling and shipping, which should be celebrated?

Liz Twist: I recognise what the hon. Gentleman says. There are jobs in different areas, but that does not take away from the fact that we need these jobs as well as all those others in the sector.

As I said, the Government's industrial strategy barely mentions the retail sector, with only three mentions in 256 pages of our largest industrial sector, which provides 15% of our jobs nationally and 23% of jobs in my constituency. The Government need to pay much more attention to this issue. They need to bring forward a sector deal for retail to ensure that it is given the emphasis it needs, and they must look again at the business rates system.

In raising these issues, I do not excuse the parts of the retail sector that have failed to manage their own affairs and businesses well. It is vital that the sector looks to act responsibly and manage its finances in a way that allows businesses to meet the challenges and to avoid more situations such as the recent collapse of BHS, Toys R Us and others, where financial issues seem more important than selling goods well. The sector has a responsibility to its staff and to our constituents who work hard in these stores but pay the price in job losses.

I cannot end this speech without mentioning the staff who work in our shops across the retail sector. Many of the 8,000 retail workers in my constituency face low pay and zero or uncertain hours, and many of them are women. If we want to strengthen productivity in the retail sector, we must address the question of low pay. Frankly, it is no good Ministers patting themselves on the back for jobs created when those jobs still leave people needing support from benefits, especially given all the problems with the universal credit roll-out in my constituency. That is a real problem. Any look at this sector must include a plan to put this situation right and to recognise the work that these people do and their need to live with decent wages and in decent conditions.

Since we are all making disclosures about our involvement in retail, I will put mine forward. My mum worked much of her working life in local shops, and my first involvement in representing people was in referring her and her colleagues' case to the Wages Council, as it was then, because they were being underpaid. I am glad to say that we reached a satisfactory conclusion. That is my history in retail. Retail deserves our support and needs it now, so I urge the Government to take action immediately to strengthen the retail sector.

2.38 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). As we are all sharing our retail experiences, I should declare my interest, as a former store assistant at Aldi—a fine and enjoyable job it was too.

[Ben Bradley]

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the retail sector and what the Government are doing to support business. Some interesting points have been raised in the debate. The discussion about the future of business rates when these activities are increasingly online is particularly important. I want to focus on town centres and high streets, as many Members have.

Like most towns across the country, Mansfield's and Warsop's marketplaces and high streets have suffered from retail closures. That is happening right across the country, with the structural change in how people are shopping and what our town centres look like. Many people are shopping online or visiting out-of-town retail parks rather than visiting their local town centres. Mansfield has some great shops on the high street, from big names to cafés, bakeries, barbers and hairdressers, clothes shops and a fantastic vinyl record store that drags people in from miles around, but there are many empty units too. On Church Street, where my office is based, and around the corner on to White Hart Street, there are more empty properties than occupied ones, and there is clearly work to be done to deal with that.

Locally, I have been looking at ways to encourage consumers back into the town centre. One example is my recent campaign for two hours' free parking in the town centre. Last month I submitted a petition signed by more than 2,000 local residents to Mansfield District Council. When parking is both an expense and a hassle, it puts people off visiting their high street, particularly when they can visit nearby retail outlets such as McArthurGlen or Meadowhall—they are very close by—where parking is free and things are more convenient. Having handed in the petition, I hope that the council will look at this closely. Whether it is about cost, accessibility, clearer signposting for parking or other aspects, this is an important factor.

It is unfair to criticise the Government for inaction or for not supporting the retail sector. In fact, if any party in this place is the champion of businesses and works hard to support small businesses, it is clearly the Conservative party. As the Secretary of State said, record numbers of new businesses are being created under this Government. We have all talked about the challenges for town centres, but we have talked less about the growth in retail more generally, including the jobs—my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) pointed out that there are jobs in logistics—that are linked to online retail and to this sector.

Earlier this year, the Government launched the first industry-led retail sector council, which will meet regularly to discuss the challenges facing this sector. It will review how retailers might adapt to changing consumer behaviour, and look at how we might embrace technology to improve customer service and productivity. Town teams are a great initiative, and as a local MP I am looking at how we might replicate and organise ourselves in such a way to boost our town centre.

In April, the Government switched business rates from RPI to CPI, a change which is worth £2.3 billion over the next five years in reduced business rates, including of course for many retailers. They have also committed to supporting business improvement districts. Locally, the Mansfield BID is working hard to support retail by

bringing retailers together and discussing how the town should look, and to encourage people into the town centre. Mansfield BID is ably led by the fantastic Mr John Sankey and his fantastic team.

There are things that local MPs can do. I have already mentioned the free parking campaign and the locally organised town centre team, which includes local business. I am also working with Lloyds to support small and medium-sized businesses and charities by giving them digital skills to help with online marketing and boosting the customer base of high street shops. SMEs are at the heart of Mansfield's local economy. Data from the last census shows that over 9,000 people in Mansfield work in wholesale and retail, making it a huge source of employment. It is the largest industrial sector both locally and across the country.

Although there are lots of scare stories about automation and technological change, it is important that we acknowledge the changing face of retail. We need to embrace this technology and look to the future in relation to how it can improve productivity and lead to upskilling jobs. The fourth industrial revolution, as it is often called, can be harnessed as a positive thing for retail. Technology can improve payment systems and provide support for businesses behind the scenes, such as in accountancy and payroll, thereby reducing the costs that are causing some of the challenges. Internet selling and online marketing can of course boost retailers and ensure that they can reach markets right across the UK and even further afield. Post-Brexit, the ability to do so in new and emerging markets around the world will be a real opportunity not just for high streets, but for the retail sector more generally.

As high streets and town centres evolve, it is important that the planning system develops to support the changing face of retail. This needs local councils to step up with a clear vision and plan for their high streets, and to use the tools at their disposal to deliver on it, while bringing retail and business into the discussion in order to drive footfall through our town centre. In the modern age, having a dentist or a solicitor's office on the high street, along with cafes and restaurants, is as valuable as pure retail in that it drives footfall, fills empty shops and makes our towns into places to which people want to come. Those are businesses whose output cannot be put online—people must always physically visit them—but when we go to the dentist in the town centre, we might stop and have lunch or peruse the shops, boosting the town more generally.

I encourage the Government to consider the ways in which they can further help local councils with such plans to improve town centres. Regeneration is an important factor for the retail sector as a whole, and there are changes that could help, such as a local vision for delivering a change of use for properties. My most regular question in conversations with Mansfield District Council is: "What is your vision for the town centre? Where are we going to be in 10, 15 or 20 years?" I am not sure that we are yet clear about what exactly its plan is. On delivering such a vision, I have some idea of what I want it to look like. One of the challenges we face is adapting the physical space of town centres to fit this new market. We cannot rely on retail to fill every space in the way we once could; we need the flexibility to change things. Along with a local vision and local leadership, such flexibility needs some support.

One particular avenue that might be helpful—I hope this is a useful suggestion—is to consider the ways in which we could support local councils in relation to the compulsory purchase of buildings in town centres, where a positive plan has local approval. In Mansfield, a number of retail units on the edge of town are empty or dilapidated. I mentioned my office on Church Street, which is on the very edge of the town centre, and most of that area is made up of empty shops. The property values of these retail buildings have fallen, so many owners will not sell them or invest in them. They sit empty for years and years, but these sites are often ideal for development. They could be brought into use as new commercial or residential spaces, providing the small and more affordable properties that we need for local residents anyway. This would also move people into the town centre and boost footfall for other shops.

If the council was able to purchase such buildings and change their use, it would regenerate the edges of the town and help to fill units in the town centre. It would also bring properties that are often going to rack and ruin back into use, making the whole place more attractive and vibrant, and making it more of a place where people might be likely to come to and spend time. More and more, town centres should be a destination that we want to visit, as well as places for shopping.

For the many reasons I have laid out, I think the Government are working hard to support business generally and the retail sector, and it is important to note in all our comments that the retail sector is growing. The Conservative party is and always will be the champion for business, which drives our economy and creates jobs for my constituents. I hope Ministers will continue to be innovative and look across the board, including at my suggestion about compulsory purchase, at the ways in which we can continue to support local authorities and our small businesses in order to encourage the regeneration of our town centres.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman did very well in keeping to his seven minutes, but I am now imposing a formal limit of seven minutes to make sure that everyone's time is protected.

2.46 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I will aim not to disappoint, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As the name of my constituency suggests, there are two main towns, Ellesmere Port and Neston, both of which have a retail offer that is dramatically less than it was five years ago. However, we still have over 6,000 people employed in the retail industry in the constituency. The reason for that is the very successful Cheshire Oaks centre within our bounds. It was an answer that the local authority came up with in response to the ravages of the 1980s, when we lost so much manufacturing industry and there was a real recognition that we needed to broaden our employment base. The leaders of the council, Fred Venables and Reg Chrimes, both saw this as an opportunity, and it has transformed our area to the extent that we get 9 million or 10 million visitors a year, many from overseas. It is an expanding area, and it would be remiss of me not to mention that that has created a lot of employment in the constituency.

At the same time, however, we have had real challenges in our towns of Ellesmere Port and Neston. They are different in many ways—they have different demographics, transport links and ownership issues—but both have suffered in recent years from the changes in the retail market that we have heard about today. Neston, in particular, has now lost all its banks. That has undoubtedly had an effect on the high street not just for customers, but for other businesses that use local banks. I must say that the banks that have shut down have paid only lip service to improving services. They have made some very bizarre suggestions about people going to banks in other towns to which there are no public transport connections, and they have since talked about shutting down those branches as well.

We have also had transport issues, with real cuts to public bus services in recent times, which makes it difficult for people to get into the town. One particular example is of a shop owner working in Neston who is really concerned about the future of his business because he will not be able to get there if the bus service running from Ellesmere Port to Neston is stopped.

There have been some positives. In the Brook Street area, virtually all the shops were empty, but an organisation called Brightlife, which is funded through the lottery, managed to get a number of charities and good causes into those shops and brought back a bit of life to the area, which has made a real difference. Particularly innovative was the idea of moving the Little Actors into the jobcentre, which was an impressive way of finding a new use for an old building. That is all temporary, however, because it is all based on lottery funding and is not a permanent solution.

In Ellesmere Port, we have a bigger challenge because it is a bigger area to deal with. A lot more retail units are in private ownership, and many of them are too large for what retailers are looking for now. A lot of the big names have gone, and they just have not been replaced. As the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) has said, we need to look at different ways to promote interest in town centre food and leisure and the night-time economy, but the question is: how do we do that? I am concerned that local authorities do not have the capacity they once had to meet those challenges. My local council is looking at the One Public Estate programme, which will bring together different parts of the public sector, which will hopefully consolidate some jobs in the town. However, in terms of ownership, capital and vision, we are some way behind on delivering a new town centre for the future, and the Government's industrial strategy is lacking in that regard.

If we do not take much more seriously the regeneration of our town centres, the inequalities and imbalance between towns and cities over recent years will continue to accelerate, and the feeling that a lot of people in towns have of not being as important as other parts of the country will continue to solidify.

As has been said, online sales put pressure on the retail sector, and about 21,000 jobs have been lost in the sector already this year. I also think that automation plays a part in that. Personally, I will not use an automated checkout; I think that every time we do that, we push shop people's jobs a little bit closer to the exit door. I have read that £3 billion a year is being lost to retailers through theft as a result of abuse of those machines, which makes me wonder about the incentive for companies

[Justin Madders]

to install them. They cost retailers money, result in job losses and frustrate a lot of consumers. On a number of occasions, I have seen people having to call an assistant to get the machines to work properly. Perhaps it is the fact that the machines cannot join trade unions that makes them so attractive to companies.

Of course, I accept that companies have to do something to streamline their costs, because it is not a level playing field, as we have heard. Online retailers seem to have considerable advantages, not just in the way in which they are able to treat their staff but in how the business rates system works. I agree with the Secretary of State that town centres are an essential part of our character and identity. It is really important that we recognise that and that retail is only a part of it.

Certainly I have shown my commitment to my town centre in Ellesmere Port by placing my office there. The building had not been used for many years, but we got a grant to regenerate it and it is a signal of intent. That also shows that we have to look beyond the traditional retail offer to get life back into our high street. It has been under threat for many years, for myriad reasons. Retailers need to be given a fighting chance, but we cannot ignore the direction of travel in which online sales are leading us. We certainly cannot place all our eggs in the retail basket, so we have to reimagine and revitalise the town centre by offering something different and new to encourage people into it, not just to buy things but to experience things and to get back that sense of community for which I think most people yearn. In order to do that, we need to give local authorities the capacity, resources and authority to deliver, because austerity has put the skids under what they can do.

2.53 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you for the welcome opportunity to contribute to this important debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I also welcome the Opposition using their time to discuss these ideas, although obviously I do not agree with a number of things in their motion.

As many Members on both sides of the House have said, the fundamental point is that the high street and the retail sector are changing. Things are being done differently. We have to recognise that that is not something that we in this place can or should control to the extent suggested by some during the debate. The market is ultimately a market of people. It is a market of our electorate. It is our children, parents, friends and next-door neighbours. When we depersonalise these discussions, suggesting that things are being done to businesses, we miss the point that fundamental changes are taking place on the high street.

Every single job loss is a tragedy. I understand the concerns about, and the challenges created by, people having to do things that they were not previously required to do. Ultimately, however, we have to recognise that big trends and big changes are taking place. Ten years ago, 2% of our purchases were online; that figure is now 18% and it is only going to get bigger. As I said when the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) kindly allowed me to intervene on her, although challenges are created by jobs lost as a result of changes to the high street, many jobs are being created in other industries.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). He is a doughty campaigner and he made his point loudly and clearly, but there was an inherent, slight conservatism—he will not like me saying that—to some of his comments. I understand his point about automation, but so far it has created many more jobs than it has caused to be lost. I accept that his principles are valid and commend him for them—he said that he does not use the automated checkout—but if we were to resolutely adopt them, some would argue that we should not have come here by tube today or by train last week because they put people who kept horses 300 years ago out of business.

I do not seek to take the argument to the extreme, but the point is that we cannot stop progress. It is the responsibility of places such as this to discuss how we make sure that our constituencies are safeguarded to the best possible extent, but we must also recognise that there are trends happening that we should not stop or want to stop, because this is about how people want to live their lives, shop and interact with their local community, which is more important than we may think.

Like a number of Members who have spoken, I have a retail background. My father, just like the Secretary of State's father, was a milkman. I spent most of my teenage years helping my parents on that milk round, often doing more early mornings than I particularly wanted to as a 15 and 16-year-old. I remember the town centre in my part of the world in Chesterfield when I was growing up. I delivered to shops such as Radio Rentals, which is no longer there because we no longer rent radios or need to do so. High streets have got to change. They have always developed. There is always a requirement to be careful about it, but we have to accept that change is inevitable.

That said, we also have to accept that we have to be cognisant of certain things. I completely agree with the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston about banks. I formerly worked in a bank. I understand their issues about making branches work, but they are adopting a short-sighted and wrong strategy regarding the removal of vital banking facilities from parts of the country. I have never understood why banks do not come together and share space so that everybody still has that vital link, with a desk for Santander and another for Barclays and any other bank that wants to join. We cannot simply channel everything through the post office, because that ends up with the ridiculous situation whereby it is always massively busy with far too few people to physically man it. We have discussed similar problems elsewhere on the high street as a result of an insufficient number of people.

I commend the Government's work, particularly on town teams. I have some great town teams in my part of the world. Eckington town team spends an incredible amount of time organising events at Christmas and over summer to bring people into Eckington, where my office is located, and to encourage them to help and to see their local town centre and local village centre. Clay Cross town centre is doing the same thing. Clay Cross is the birthplace of the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), who is not in his seat. The area is now represented by a Conservative MP—[*Interruption.*] I had to get that one in. The town team has introduced initiatives such as “Clay Cross on the beach”. I would never have thought—and I am sure the hon. Gentleman

would never have thought—that on a bank holiday weekend a load of sand would be put in the middle of Clay Cross, to encourage people to come. Such initiatives will make people choose that destination and show them the opportunities provided by their towns, including the shops and other possibilities. We in this place have to recognise that great work is going on elsewhere.

I do not want to suggest that there are no challenges. Local authorities in particular have a responsibility to do more. The local authority in my part of the world is completely shirking its responsibility to regenerate our town centre. A number of discussions are taking place, particularly in Dronfield. The town council is doing lots, and businesses want to do lots, but the district council is doing almost nothing and it should be called out for that.

There are challenges and difficulties, but we have to recognise that change is going to happen. We need to guide people through that, but we should not be afraid of those changes. The high street is going to change. It has always changed and it will change in the future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I am afraid I must now reduce the time limit to six minutes.

2.59 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Some 21,000 jobs in the retail sector were lost in the first three months of 2018 alone. In that time, we have seen Marks & Spencer announce plans to close 100 stores by 2020 and all 100 Toys R Us stores shut their doors. Just last month, we even heard that Poundworld will lose more than 100 stores, putting 1,500 jobs at risk.

The retailer that I wish to bring to the House's attention today is Sainsbury's. Since 1869, Sainsbury's has been a pillar of the great British high street. Over 148 years, it has established a reputation as a leading retailer that looks after and out for its colleagues and customers. That is why the proposal by Sainsbury's to force unscrupulous contract changes on its staff is so appalling. The organisation is hiding the scandalous terms of its new contracts under the guise of a supposed increase in basic pay and an artificial investment in its staff workforce, but here is the reality: 9,000 of Sainsbury's most loyal and long-standing staff are set to lose up to £3,000 a year. How? Because Sainsbury's is abolishing paid breaks, scrapping the Sunday premium pay, shortening the nightshift and even removing the employee bonus scheme. But that is only for shop-floor staff, of course: the executives will still receive their lucrative end-of-year bonuses. That does not sound like an investment in the staff workforce to me. Against all Sainsbury's values, it sounds as if it is forcing thousands of dedicated staff to "work well for less". Worst of all, those staff who refuse to sign the new contracts in September will be forced to resign.

Take Jayne, a night-shift worker at Sainsbury's for more than 30 years. She is set to lose £2,000 a year. She loves her job and desperately wants to stay, but does not think she can afford to. She describes morale in her store as "at rock bottom" and tells me that she is beyond frustrated that her decades of loyal service appear to count for nothing. Or take Joe and Sam,

husband and wife, who have shared three decades of service at Sainsbury's. They rely on working the night shift and on Sundays, but anticipate that they will lose almost £6,000 a year under the proposals. That is a slap in the face for their loyalty and self-reliance, and for just about managing, as their work will simply no longer pay.

Finally, take Kate, who works in one of 150 branches of Argos that are now located inside Sainsbury's stores. Unlike Sainsbury's staff, Kate and her Argos colleagues will not receive an increase in their basic salary, and she can expect her hourly pay to be £1.20 less than that of her Sainsbury's colleagues, despite working in the same store.

I took those cases, and dozens of others, to two meetings with Simon Roberts, retail and operations director at Sainsbury's. He confirmed that thousands upon thousands of staff will lose out under the proposals, and described the most extreme cases as "anomalies". I do not see them as anomalies; I see them as loyal, long-standing and hard-working employees who have dedicated decades of their lives to his organisation. How can a company that made a pre-tax profit of £589 million last year, with a CEO who receives £930,000 before bonuses, think it is right to force a pay cut on its most long-standing members of staff? Can the House imagine how furious those staff must have been to see their CEO, Mike Coupe, singing "We're in the Money" on "ITV News"? He should be summoned urgently to justify his proposals before the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

I draw the House's attention to a staff-led petition on change.org, through which 122,000 colleagues and customers have called on Sainsbury's to show some loyalty. The staff consultation is approaching its final stages and the voices of discontent are growing and amplifying. It is not too late for Sainsbury's to rectify its increasingly damaged brand, for which its most loyal staff are made to "work well for less".

3.4 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a delight to speak in this debate. Ironically, if I was not here, I would be back in Torbay, helping to present the "Love Your High Street" awards. One recipient was the Kind Grind in Lucius Street in Torquay and another was a bar called Peaky Blinders in Winner Street in Paignton; both areas are famous for independent shops. This is a welcome opportunity to debate retail, particularly given its importance for many communities up and down the country. Given some of the campaign leaflets that I see in my constituency, it is rather odd that no Liberal Democrat Members were present for the first two hours of the debate, but I shall move on.

Let me start with our town centres, and particularly the internet's impact on them. No one is going to be able to roll back the digital tide. Most of us have in our pockets a phone with which we could order the entire contents of a department store, a do-it-yourself store and a supermarket literally while we are sat here, if we so wished. The internet has also brought services and products into areas that in the past would have found it difficult to access them. That does, though, present a challenge to our high streets. There is no longer a need to go to the town centre and in future people will mostly

[Kevin Foster]

go there out of choice, particularly as technology becomes more and more simple. We can heckle and make party political points, but that will not affect the change. It is therefore even more important that we look into what we can do not only to make town centres attractive places for those who still depend on them for their goods, but places to which people would go out of choice to go into a local shop and have an experience.

One thing that came out of the Tesco burger scandal was that a lot of people reconnected with the desire to know where their food comes from and what it is. A lot of local butchers had a boost that they had not had for a long time as people realised that there was something about going to a shop and speaking to a local business that could tell them almost from which cow the joint or product they were buying came.

There is a real need to look into what we can do to shape town centres as places. Rates can be a double-edged sword. They clearly have impacts on businesses, and there is a debate for the long run about how sustainable the existing business-rates model is, given that it is based on an era in which that corner on the high street was the best place to be—hence the location of a lot of Victorian buildings that became banks—and a crinkly shed on the edge of town was not very profitable at all—

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Foster: No, I will not, because the hon. Lady was not present for almost the first two hours of the debate.

The business rates system is now not all that appropriate, even though it was appropriate for the shopping patterns of the 1950s. Of course, if we look at it the other way around, by retaining business rates and taking the growth in them, councils can fund exactly the kind of regeneration that is needed in our town centres. So there is a double-edged sword for local authorities in respect of how business rates can be used in future. The existing structure is certainly not all there.

I could not agree more with my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) about the need to tackle long-term derelict properties in town centres. I think particularly of one in Paignton called Crossways, which is a pretty poor example of a 1960s shopping centre. It keeps going only because of the car park there, the mobile masts on top of it and a lease that was particularly badly negotiated by one retailer, which is still paying even though it shut its shop in the centre some years ago.

The problem with the existing compulsory purchase rules is that yes, in theory a council can get hold of a property like that to push forward regeneration, but the rules are cumbersome. I fully accept that there needs to be protection for people's private property, particularly their homes, but if commercial properties—no one's home—have been empty for many years, there comes a point at which it would make sense to make it much simpler for councils to compulsorily purchase properties in order to deal with eyesores. That simplification could be subject to protections based on how long a property

has been empty, rather than on values and costs. Some owners almost rely on the fact that their property is such an eyesore that one day someone—I am thinking particularly the taxpayer—might pay a significant amount to have it dealt with.

It is right that local authorities play their part. Torbay Council is starting to look at the future of planning for our town centres, particularly in respect of Torquay, where there is a debate about its size and what we can do to revitalise it by bringing in residences and expanding student accommodation, particularly around the language colleges. That could bring a second wave of life to the town centre. We also need to deal with older, poor-quality office accommodation which, if replaced by new accommodation, could bring jobs and employment back into the town centre and provide the stimulus of people who work in the town centre then shopping, eating and drinking in the town centre after work or on their lunch break.

There is a positive story to be told about the future of our town centres, but they will be very different from what we have seen in the past. People will not use them out of necessity, so they will need to be encouraged to use them out of choice. There will still need to be essential services, such as local post offices and a network of local banks, but we need to be conscious that just standing in the way of technological progress is a strategy that will be as successful as it was for the Luddites who tried to argue against industrialisation 200 years ago. The Government can make a difference through their business rate policy, by giving local authorities more powers and by making it clear that there is still a retail success story in the future.

3.10 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am very pleased to be able to speak in this debate, because 4,000 of my constituents work in retail. There are now more shop workers in my constituency than there were miners 50 years ago, although I have some questions about the quality of some of those jobs: the short hours, the low pay, and the constantly changing shifts that are forced on people. I found it very ugly to hear that people were given short shifts to, as their managers said, keep them hungry for extra hours. The problem is that in my constituency people are going to food banks—they are literally being kept hungry.

We need to look at bank holidays. It would be really good if Boxing day was a bank holiday, alongside Christmas day. Christmas day is often ruined for many shop workers, because they have to get up so early on Boxing day to rush in and reorder stores in time for the sales. [Interruption.] It is not a statutory bank holiday for people who work in shops.

High streets are very important and they can have a very significant impact on people's wellbeing. In my constituency, a large number of people are working in a new out-of-town development in Tindale Crescent. The truth is that Sildon, Bishop Auckland and Spennymoor are all seeing a fading away of their town centres. There are good butchers and good bakers, but the overall picture is one of decline. There were a lot of closures after the post-crash recession, but we thought that things would come back. They have not come back and they continue to decline. If I may say so, I thought the

Secretary of State's opening speech was verging on the complacent. The question is: why are these shops closing and what is to be done about it?

The first issue is the shift to online sales. The Government have failed completely to set a level playing field on tax. John Lewis raised this problem at least three years ago. There should be a turnover tax for Amazon, Google and other big online retailers. I agree with the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) that we should move to that urgently.

The second problem is the very significant fall in wages across the British economy between 2007 and 2015—a 7% drop in real terms. We are not going to get back to pre-crash levels until 2024 and earnings are down £1,400 per person. That is bound to have an effect on what people can spend. In my constituency in County Durham, cuts to child benefit, tax credits, employment and support allowance, jobseeker's allowance and disability allowances are all having a very serious impact on my constituents' incomes. Obviously, they have less money in their pockets to spend. Moreover, the Government keep telling us that employment is rising. In my constituency, the increase in unemployment in the past 12 months has been 29%. We are not being compensated for all those wage cuts with extra jobs.

A third issue affecting the modern high street was raised by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry): the unequal roll-out of broadband and the lack of access to wi-fi. This is a problem for the shops themselves and it makes town centres particularly unattractive to young people who like to be able to communicate using social media when they go out and about. The Government's ineptitude in rolling out broadband equally, without notspots, across the country is a real problem in Shildon, Spennymoor and Bishop Auckland.

The fourth problem is cuts to public services. My constituency has seen the loss of a driving test centre, a magistrates court and a tax office—all from Bishop Auckland town centre. The next thing to go is the registry where you can get married. The swimming pool in Shildon has gone. A sixth form is going in Spennymoor, which means young people after school will spend their time and money in Durham city instead. We need a conscious strategy for these towns. When public services are always centralised in cities, it denudes small towns of the life that then has a positive, second-round effect on shops and retail. When the footfall to other public services drops, fewer people are there to go shopping.

The private sector is no better. Many hon. Members have complained about bank closures. We had another depressing meeting yesterday with RBS. Barclays is closing a branch in Spennymoor. HSBC closed the last branch in Shildon. That is bad for shops and bad for small businesses. I would like Ministers to look at changing competition rules, so that banks can share branches in small towns. At the moment, the banks want to be able to run on their current branding. Ministers rely on competition. There is a market failure and we need to put the public interest first. I would like to see a change in the competition rules.

Many hon. Members have spoken about the problem of business rates. Beales in my constituency closed for precisely this reason. Hon. Members have spoken about the importance of compulsory purchase. I agree completely.

We could have had a much speedier redevelopment in Spennymoor had the council been able to compulsorily purchase the private Festival Walk in Spennymoor town centre.

I do not want to leave hon. Members with the idea that good things are not going on in the towns in my constituency. Auckland Castle in Bishop will be a fantastic tourist opportunity and the 1825 celebrations in Shildon of the Stockton to Darlington line will enable us to make the most of the heritage action zone. There are pluses as well as minuses.

3.18 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): On the high street, there are very few things sadder than a boarded up storefront. It is the sign of a dream denied, a lost opportunity and of course lost jobs. I will not deny that in Stirling city centre we are finding it tough. On Friday afternoon, I spent some time with Lisa Sneddon, the owner of the Bluebell Teashop. I recommend it to all hon. Members—indeed, it is obligatory—when they visit Stirling. She told me of her concerns about the state of Stirling city centre. Those concerns will be all too visible to anyone who visits it.

The pressures on city centre businesses have perhaps been compounded by the temporary closure of the Kerse Road bridge crossing. The bridge is being replaced as part of the electrification of the railway. It has undoubtedly been much quieter in the city centre of late, and there has been a discernible drop in footfall. King Street is a particularly sad sight. This is the street that leads up to the castle. Stirling Castle is one of the most popular tourist attractions in the entire country, and it should be a lively thoroughfare, but since the loss of McAree's department store, which had been on that site for 123 years, there has been a definite drop in footfall on the street and in the number of businesses taking up the slack. Among its reasons for closing, McAree's cited the Scottish Government's rates system and specifically mentioned the large business supplement—not really a large business supplement, but a large property supplement. In one year, its large business tax rose to £27,000, and that was the straw that broke the camel's back.

In the last two weeks alone, at least six other stores have closed in the city centre, including Toys R Us, which has been mentioned; Maplin; The Boozy Cow; The Fat Cyclist—interesting names betraying the fact that these were individually owned and independent businesses; and Mr. Simm's Olde Sweet Shoppe. All have closed their doors for good, and I cannot deny that I am concerned. It came to light yesterday in a report entitled "Retail and Leisure Trends Report", from the Local Data Company, that 520 units on the high streets in Scotland had closed in the previous year—more than anywhere else in the UK, including Greater London. I have already mentioned what David Lonsdale, director of the Scottish Retail Consortium, had to say about those numbers.

There is undoubtedly a way to save our city centres. They can have a bright future, Stirling city centre can have a bright future, but the city centre needs to be skilful and repurposed. I will work with anyone who can help bring it back to its former glory. The landscape is changing, and bricks and mortar retailers must move

[Stephen Kerr]

with that change. People are buying online, and that is not only about choice; it is also about the convenience of shopping when and where the consumer chooses; it is a simple and relatively hassle-free experience.

Leigh Sparks, professor of retail studies at the University of Stirling, has called on retailers to demonstrate a more imaginative approach to customer experience, to create new concepts of retailing that stimulate consumers and to make their stores must-visit attractions in their own right. He has talked about retailers that have not done a particularly good job, among them Toys R Us. He said that

“when Toys R Us came to Britain, it was innovative and new. Yet the Toys R Us you see today is pretty much...the same as it was when it first opened—it hasn't grown or offered the consumer anything new. The current pressure on retailing is weeding out the poorer retailers. We will undoubtedly be left with a smaller landscape. If it is smaller and becomes concentrated so it provides spaces that people want to use, then it will be a better landscape.”

I concur.

We need to see our city centres differently. We need to do much more to bring people to them, and that means that businesses need to work together in the business improvement districts already mentioned—we have one in Stirling city centre—to make the city centre a compelling and irresistible proposition, a positive destination. That means creating an experience that supersedes the perceived benefits—convenience and price—of shopping online. The high street needs to be more about retail experiences—entertainment, food, independent stores—that people want to have.

We cannot have more of what the Americans call “cookie cutter” department stores—where someone can close their eyes and spin around and find it difficult to identify which town they are in. We need more variety and to entice people not only to visit city centres, such as Stirling city centre, but to live in them. We need to make that possible. People living in the city centre will bring life and vibrancy to an important civic space, and public policies that create the right conditions for the revival and prosperity of the high street are now overdue.

3.24 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I confess I had not intended to speak in this debate, but I realised that week in, week out my constituents consistently talk about the state of Grimsby town centre. It is an issue on the doorstep and in my surgery. They all want something done about it. People in Grimsby are incredibly passionate about their town, are filled with pride for it, but they are losing hope that things are on the up. I agree with some of the comments from the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr): the impression they get reflects on how they feel not only about their town but about themselves, and seeing things in a state of decline and disrepair has a negative impact on the sense of community.

The town centre is where most people from out of town get dropped off on the bus or the train—obviously, there are car-parking facilities as well—and serves the needs of a much wider population than that of the immediate Grimsby town. Lots of people from lots of neighbouring villages visit for a variety of reasons, whether to meet their health needs, to shop, to use the libraries, or whatever. The first thing they see, however, when they get off their bus or train is boarded-up shops.

I intervened on the Secretary of State when he said that retailers were not failing. If closed shops are a sign of success, God only knows what failure looks like! It cannot be right that there are so many vacant properties across town and city centres that seem to have no planned future use.

People understand that their consumer habits have changed—as they wait for their deliveries from online retailers, or in a queue to collect them because they were not at home—and that this has had an impact on the high street. Grimsby has a big shopping centre, Freshney Place, and its manager, Amanda Austin, has done a huge amount to attract new retailers, but it feels like she is fighting a losing battle.

We have lost, not just from Freshney Place but more broadly across the town: Mothercare; Maplin; BHS—of course; GAME; Trade Nation; Starbucks—it came back again, but it left for a while; Radio Humberside—it had a property from which it ran the local radio service, meaning the town felt connected to the BBC and the local news service, and it felt like there was some investment from the outside; and the Co-op bank—interesting that it is opening up new supermarkets, but its banking facility has gone; while the RBS will be closing soon. I wrote to RBS about a continuing service, and it was very regretful, but it does not seem to take seriously the impact it will have more broadly not only on its business but on the whole town and area. We have also lost Homebase, Muffin Break and Cycle Mode—a lovely independent high-end cycle retailer. These shops all seem to have been replaced by vape shops, money lenders, charity shops and hairdressers—Members probably could not tell looking at my roots. [Interruption.] I have not quite managed to find the time yet.

However, we are not doing nothing. There are some brave independents that have set out to establish new businesses, but that tends to happen in the café market. As with supermarkets, we are surely at saturation point. There will come a time when we do not need any more cafés—when we do not need to eat any more cakes or drink any more tea, lovely as that is and excellent as those providers are. The future of our town centres cannot be entirely based on that. I mentioned saturation point. We have two Tesco Extras, a Sainsbury's, two Lidl's, two Aldis, and a Morrisons—whose move to a continental shift pattern is having a huge impact on individual members of staff—but those are not the high street, and relying on them for the future of our town economies seems utterly ludicrous to me.

In Grimsby, 4,500 people are employed in retail: about 11% of the working sector. Let me use my final seconds to say to the Minister—unsurprisingly—that we are trying to pioneer a town deal that will bring together all the elements that were mentioned by the hon. Member for Stirling. We are talking about repurposing the whole town centre: introducing entertainment to create a new night-time economy, adapting buildings for housing, and creating a heritage action zone that will feed into the centre. We are not sitting idly by and hoping that things will get better. We are trying to future-proof our town centre, but we are asking for help from the Government, and we are not being shy about it. We need some money—and can we have it soon, please?

3.30 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow all the other Members who have spoken.

May I take you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on a journey to Redditch? I do not know whether you have ever been there—

Helen Goodman: Of course she has. It is a marginal. [*Laughter.*]

Rachel Maclean: I am sure that you went there back in 2010, Madam Deputy Speaker. Those were happy days, with former colleagues. You will have seen the wonderful traffic-free roads that lead to Redditch. It is a new town, which was built in a moment of hope to accommodate people who were moving out of Birmingham and from elsewhere in the country. They wanted to come to Redditch to build a home. You will drive smoothly to the town centre, because there is no traffic holding you up: you can go straight past the islands. When you reach the town centre, you will park your car at the Kingfisher shopping centre. You will walk through that wonderful shopping centre, which is privately owned and very well run, and is doing a lot of work to attract new retailers. It is an example of excellence in our town centre.

Unfortunately, however, when you leave the Kingfisher shopping centre, Madam Deputy Speaker, you will go out into the old part of the town, where you will observe a scene almost identical to the one described by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). You will see boarded-up shops and graffiti—not the trendy kind for which people pay good money, but the kind that we really do not want. You will see underpasses leading nowhere, the sort that you do not want to go through. That is a great shame, and it affects people's impression of the town. They are passionate about Redditch, they love it with all their heart, but they want it to compete on a level playing field with other shopping centres that are only 10 or 15 minutes' drive away, in Solihull and Birmingham.

At present our town centre is struggling, partly because, unfortunately, the leaders of Redditch Borough Council—sadly run by Labour, until the local elections last month—have not grasped the many opportunities that are at their fingertips to improve things for local residents. The Conservative-run county council went to Redditch and asked its council, “What is your vision for your town?” A number of successful, thriving towns in the rest of Worcestershire are using Government funds to make improvements. One example is Hereford, with its university of technology, its specialist area. Another is Kidderminster, with its incredibly successful ReWyre partnership which is driving investment in the town. Before that, it was haemorrhaging people because no carpets are made there any more.

Redditch used to be a centre of needle manufacturing, but what did the local Labour leadership come up with? I am sorry to say that the best it could come up with was the £800,000 that it spent on paving a yellow brick road on the high street. What good does that do in the face of all the challenges so eloquently outlined by Members in all parts of the House? What does it do to drive investment into our town centre? What does it say to the new business investors, the entrepreneurs who are putting their life savings at risk? There is, for example, Rees Café, which serves the most amazing vegan brownies. There is Heaphys Menswear, one of the oldest independent retailers in Redditch. There is Sew Fab, which purveys wonderful sewing kits—not that I have time to sew.

What does that say to them? It does not give them a vision of hope for a town centre. It is just blocks on a road. It is absolutely useless.

That is the tragedy of the Labour council, but now we are turning over a new leaf. People really want to see Redditch thriving. Our whole message to the people of Redditch is that we need to—and can—unlock Redditch. It will take time—we appreciate that, but we need to work together. We need to create an environment where local leadership is welcoming people into the town and encouraging entrepreneurs to thrive. That is what we need in Redditch, and not this approach from Labour with a lack of imagination and no vision for our town.

This has been a great opportunity to have this debate and to make points to the Minister. On business rates, in common with others, I really welcome the work that he has done, which I believe will see £2.3 billion of business rates being saved by our local businesses, but please can we keep that work up? Businesses up and down the country are going to welcome that.

3.35 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): The motion before us today is somewhat rambling, dare I say. It has three parts. It is about squeezing wage growth, the condition of the retail sector, and there is a bit of Brexit put in as well—but we will have 12 hours next week to discuss that. Generally, however, what the Opposition are putting forward is that the Government should do more. They should spend more, subvert reality and revert this country to a command and control economy.

Let us look at wage growth, because we have had so much misdirection and ignorance of the truth regarding that. I think that the Opposition hope that if they say it often enough, people might believe it, but I recommend that they look at the facts. Let us look at a hypothetical, lower-paid employee. In 2010, the national minimum wage for those over 21 was just £5.80. Today, in 2018, it is £7.83; that is a 35% rise. Let us look at the income tax personal allowance. When we came into Government in 2010—we were left to pick up a lot of mess by Labour—the tax-free allowance was just £6,475. Today, in 2018-19, it is £11,850; that is an 83% rise in the tax-free band. Let us put those together. A 35-hour-a-week lower-paid employee at minimum wage in 2010 would have had take-home pay, after tax, of just £9,740, but today, the minimum wage and that huge increase in the tax-free allowance means that their take-home pay is £13,768. That is over £4,000 in real cash in the pockets of the lower paid under this Government. That represents a 41.4% increase in take-home pay.

Wera Hobhouse: It is, however, about the balance between the two. In relatively successful towns or very successful cities such as Bath, which I represent, shops are still doing fine but life is more expensive, so the balance of what people take home as pay and what they have to spend to live in an expensive city is much higher, too. The balance of the two, even in good, successful town centres such as Bath—and it is not that successful—is not right.

Craig Mackinlay: I thank the hon. Lady. Today's debate is about the retail sector and wages. I was going to say that 41.4% over eight years is 5% a year, which is greater than any measure of inflation, no matter which

[Craig Mackinlay]

one people care to mention, so there has been a real cash increase to all those working. We have the lowest unemployment since the 1970s and more people in work today than we have ever had in the history of this nation. I am afraid that we must stop listening to the misinformation from the Opposition. Their statements are simply not true. Real wages are rising.

In the retail sector, as we have heard, we have had business rates relief and changes from RPI to CPI, which will mean a reduction of over £2 billion to those who have retail stores. During this Parliament over 600,000 businesses will pay no business rates whatsoever, and in the first half of 2017, more retail units were opened than closed. There are 300,000 more in employment in the retail sector than in 2016.

That does not mean that everything is rosy on the high street, but when we consider what the Government did in 2008, when they took this country into probably the worst recession that it has ever known, in the third quarter of 2008 alone, there was a 4.2% decrease compared with the year before. That happened in just one quarter under Labour; that is what they condemned this country to.

The real debate here is the changing face of retail, and the internet is the reason for that. With spending now at £1.2 billion per week, 17% of all spending is now on internet purchases, and that is a 12% year-on-year increase. That is not unique to Britain, but is happening across the entire world.

That is the reality of life, and we are all guilty of fuelling it. If I want a shirt like the one I am wearing but in blue with a 34 inch arm and a 15½ inch collar and I want it delivered tomorrow, ordering that will take me three minutes, and it will be delivered. We are all purchasing in that way now; unfortunately, we are all fuelling the changes to the high street.

We have had debates about banking in the House, and I have taken part. Our banking landscape is changing, sadly, because we are all being encouraged on to mobile apps and mobile banking. Also, when did anyone in this House last book their flights in a high street travel agent?

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I used a travel agent in the centre of Grimsby in April.

Craig Mackinlay: Well done to my hon. Friend; I am afraid I am not as reliable in buying my travel tickets on the high street as he obviously is.

When did Members last browse property prices on the internet? We do not do that so much in a high street shop any longer; it is likely to be on the internet now. The reality is that in current retail there is a far higher spend per staff member on new internet retailing such as Amazon than on the high street. It is also likely that there are higher costs on high street stores per square foot than on warehouse-style retailing.

Things are changing. We have a 20th-century tax system that looks at bricks and mortar and taxing things. Part of the formula for addressing this issue must be that we tax more appropriately the abstract activities of internet retailers and warehousing. When I go on the high street in Ramsgate the retailers say they do not feel that the big online retailers are paying their fair share.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Craig Mackinlay: No, as we are nearly at the end of the debate.

The high street simply needs to redefine itself. High streets need to create themselves as places to go for a pleasurable afternoon—to do some browsing and shopping, but to enjoy the experience as well. That means there is a duty on councils and the retailers themselves to make the high streets clean, attractive and somewhere good to go.

My answers to this conundrum are that we should revise taxation of retail more towards the internet and warehousing-style operations, focus on making high streets places to go for an experience, and in many cases, such as in Ramsgate, high streets are too spread out and too big, and they need to be smaller to become the vibrant heart of the town. We all need to shop locally, too; that will help.

3.43 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The retail sector faces a challenging and testing environment. The high cost of business rates alongside the challenge of online retailing for high street shops, the long-term squeeze on household incomes, the squeeze on pay and loss of retail jobs, and the failure to provide clarity to business on the future of our relationships with the outside world: these are all key factors where the Government should have something to say, but also where the Government could and should take action. They are all areas, however, where this Government have been found wanting.

I thank colleagues on the Opposition Benches for their contributions. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on the high number of her constituents employed in retail—a quarter of the jobs in her constituency. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) on the importance of balancing the high-quality, out-of-town shopping centre at Cheshire Oaks with the high street, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), to whom I pay tribute for the fine work she has done in standing up for workers at Sainsbury's. We also heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), who both spoke of the difficult challenges being faced in our high streets. One of the themes that has come out of this debate is the difficulty created by a two-tier economy, not least in retail, between our cities and our towns, particularly the smaller ones.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Would my hon. Friend accept that one of the problems in market towns is that the ownership is often with distant landowners who are more interested in speculative development than in improving retail opportunities?

Bill Esterson: That is a very good point, and it has also been made by other Members today. Where is the strategy, not only for retail but for our towns, and for our high streets in particular?

Helen Goodman: There isn't one!

Bill Esterson: Indeed; as my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland also said in the debate, there is no such strategy.

In the response to the urgent question on Marks & Spencer on 24 May, the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), said that the Government had set up a new Retail Sector Council, but why has that taken so long? Why did it take eight years to create that council? What is needed now is action. Business rates are a huge fixed cost for businesses in our high streets, and that is a disadvantage that their larger online-only rivals do not have to contend with. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), will no doubt say that there have been changes to business rates, but those changes have made matters worse for many businesses, particularly smaller ones. Last year's revaluation resulted in an average rates increase for smaller shops of £3,363 over the next five years.

The Government commissioned Mary Portas—to remember her?—to tell them how to re-energise high streets. How is that going? Not so well. Her report recommended cuts to business rates, not the massive hikes that so many are experiencing. Meanwhile, ASOS reports its profits going up 26% while its rates bill fell by £30,000. Rates rises for our brilliant independent retailers alongside rates cuts for the multinational online retailers are hardly the stuff of fair competition or a level playing field. There was very little in the Secretary of State's opening speech about independent retailers, yet smaller firms in all sectors, including retail, are crucial to the future economic success of this country. The Association of Convenience Stores has stated that “the cost of business rates remains too high”.

And what about the fact that investors in retail are put off by the high cost of business rates? The Government should be doing so much more to ensure the right balance between high street, online and out-of-town retail, and we need to see that happening in the sector deal when it comes forward.

That brings me to the retail workforce. There are 2.9 million people working in retail and the sector is worth £94.6 billion to the economy. It is where many people develop their first experience of the world of work, and it is often the source of good-quality employment in businesses large and small, but the pressures on retailers are starting to show. We have seen job losses at Toys R Us, Maplin, M&S, Conviviality and maybe now House of Fraser, and CVAs and profit warnings at many others. We have seen 21,000 jobs go in the first three months of this year alone, and cuts in pay and conditions at companies such as Sainsbury's, which has ended paid breaks and premium pay. Yes, there has been a rise in the hourly rate, but it has been offset by cuts in workers' rights, adding up to a pay cut for too many people.

Ministers could and should be working closely with campaigning unions such as USDAW, GMB and Unite, which are doing such a good job on behalf of workers' rights and on campaigns such as Freedom from Fear. It is in the interests of responsible retailers and of the whole economy for the Government to play their part in ensuring that workers are treated fairly. A high-pay economy is good for workers, but it is also good for business because workers are also consumers who buy

goods and services from retailers. It makes economic sense to prevent the exploitation of workers, not least in the large distribution centres. It was simple complacency for the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth to imply in her answer to the urgent question on 24 May that M&S staff could just go and work at Amazon, complete with its airport-style security and unpaid toilet breaks.

I am afraid that it was also simple complacency for the Secretary of State to say earlier that retail employment was going up. There are 2,500 fewer retail stores than there were three years ago. According to the Office for National Statistics, 40,000 fewer staff were working in retail in 2016 compared with 2015. The British Retail Consortium says that its figures show from 2015 to 2017 the number of jobs fell by 73,000. Meanwhile, the average hours worked in January to March 2018 were 30.2 a week, which is a fall of 30 minutes on the previous year.

Those figures are a cause for concern, not complacency, and are indicative of an overall decline in retail employment. The Government should be doing so much more to improve productivity. As in other sectors, it is true in retail that skills and investment in infrastructure and new technology are the keys to better productivity, and that needs to lead to better-paid jobs as well as more profitable businesses. My hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) set out some ideas for how to boost pay. The British Retail Consortium has its “better jobs” agenda, and I refer the Business Secretary and the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to its excellent report. Productivity gains from cuts to workers' pay and conditions or to the prices paid to suppliers are short term and characterise the lack of economic progress under the Government, not least in retail.

That brings me to our relationship with the outside world. Frictionless trade is vital for the import of perishable goods. It is vital for the supply chain in the car industry, where components cross the border multiple times. Car retailers need certainty, as do our supermarkets, because 79% of food is imported by retailers. Certainty is needed for retailers to plan for the trading arrangements post Brexit. Arrangements at the Port of Dover, Holyhead, Liverpool and across the country will play a huge role not only in business life, but in daily life, and retail is one of the sectors that most affects daily life.

Warnings of empty shelves need to be heeded. Consumer choice will be badly affected—dramatically so—if border arrangements are adversely affected. The Government's failure to confirm their preferred negotiating position with our European partners is causing real problems. Many retailers rely on foreign workers. It is not just the highest-qualified EU workers who need assurances that they are welcome in this country. Workers in lower-paid sectors, including retail, need the same assurances and so do businesses. Some 22% of retailers report that foreign workers have left since the referendum. It is time for clarity.

Drew Hendry: Will the shadow Minister give way?

Bill Esterson: No.

The Government need to make up their mind, stop negotiating with themselves and start negotiating with the EU for a deal that puts jobs and the economy first and that is not just in the interests of a handful of

[Bill Esterson]

extreme Brexiters in the Conservative party. Let us have a proper sector deal that sees action, not just words. Let us see the Government make a proper commitment to retail. Three mentions of the sector in a White Paper do not inspire confidence in the Government's commitment to retail businesses or workers.

Let us have a deal with thriving town centres, not crippled communities, and one that addresses the concerns of the British Retail Consortium, which describes a sector in stasis, where vacancies are going up. Let us see a deal that reverses the long-term decline. Let us see proper business rate reforms that include the switch to CPI-measured inflation, encouraging innovation and growth, that exempt new investment in machinery from valuations and that ensure businesses can access a proper, comprehensive appeals process. We need a deal that has smaller independent retailers at its heart and one that supports retail by investing in skills, in education and in an immigration system that brings in the skills this country needs. We want a deal that takes on board Labour's plans for a catapult centre for retail, that listens to the views of employers and unions and that promotes the best outcomes for workers, communities, consumers and businesses.

3.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): It is a delight to get to the Dispatch Box at last, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I hope that you will indulge me and allow me to answer some of the important points that have been made in this excellent debate. I thank the Opposition for bringing it forward. It is clear that there is strong agreement across the House that the retail sector is vital to our economy, our local communities and the many thousands of constituents who rightly rely on the sector for their livelihoods.

I will quickly address some of the points raised by right hon. and hon. Members in this debate. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), in an interesting speech that particularly focused on Brexit for a change, raised the issue of austerity but forgot to remind the House that, as a result of changes to lift the lowest paid in society out of paying tax and as a result of the biggest increase in the national minimum wage and the national living wage for 10 years, those on the lowest pay are now £3,800 a year better off—that is thanks to the policies of this Government.

The hon. Gentleman understandably raised an important point about the pay of the youngest in society. I share his desire to ensure that young people are fairly paid, but he forgot to mention that unemployment among 16 to 24-year-olds is persistently higher than among those aged 25 and over—12.1% compared with 3.1% across the country. The unemployment rate for 16 to 17-year-olds is 26.9%. Increasing pay would make it more difficult for young workers, whose priority is to get their first years on the job ladder, to secure work.

Drew Hendry: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Griffiths: I know the points the hon. Gentleman will make, so I hope he will forgive me if I do not allow him to intervene. Time is pressing.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) made an interesting speech in which he talked particularly about the loss of banks. Although I share his concern, he will know the Government have invested some £370 million in the post office network, which now provides both business and retail banking. I am sure he values the contribution that that is making to the important post office network across our communities.

The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) had a shopping list of questions, which is apt in a debate on retail, but, as with all shopping lists from the Labour party, it had a huge price tag attached. She asked for Boxing day to be a bank holiday for retail workers, but she forgot to mention that that would cost employers an extra £1.2 billion.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of competition policy and the banks being able to share premises. As I understand it, there is no competition policy issue that would prevent banks from sharing premises—they would obviously have to be careful about sharing data and personal information. If she has other concerns, I will be delighted to talk to her. Perhaps she could drop me a little note on her concerns.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) made an interesting speech, particularly on “Love Your High Street,” which he is championing. I hope he will be getting free beer at the Peaky Blinders bar after he mentioned it. He made a particular point on the need to revitalise our high streets and change the way they are purposed, and I absolutely agree.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) raised the sad loss of The Boozy Cow and The Fat Cyclist Café, which are a great loss to us all. He also raised the important issue of the need for innovation in our town and city centres.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) again raised the Grimsby town deal, about which she cares passionately. She also raised the issue of coffee shops and said that surely we cannot eat any more cake—there are hon. Members present who might disagree. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) made some particularly important points, for which I am grateful.

Let us reflect on the recent structural changes in the sector and on the announcements we have had of late. There has been a shift in consumer behaviour, and we need to be aware of that shift. The move towards new technology is a great innovator and it provides great opportunities, but it also provides great challenges. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) for his campaign for free parking, which is an excellent proposal. He is standing up for his local residents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) mentioned Labour's yellow brick road, and on the folly of the Labour party, I point to the problems of Cannock Chase District Council, which is now trying to charge hard-working independent retailers £85 just for having an A-board to advertise their shops. That is the Labour party getting in the way of private business, as usual.

Many Members mentioned the key issue of business rates. The Government are aware of the wider business rates concerns and are looking to address them. We undertook

the last fundamental review of business rates in 2016, announcing reforms worth £9 billion. A further £4.3 billion package was announced at the spring Budget in 2017, including £110 million to support 16,000 small businesses. I hope that Members from across this House will join me in celebrating Small Business Saturday later this year to try to support small high street retailers.

The Secretary of State mentioned the Retail Sector Council, which I am chairing, and the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) asked whether we were working with USDAW. I should point out to him that USDAW sits on the RSC and is making a great contribution, and we are grateful for its support. The RSC will look at the issue of business rates, as per our manifesto commitment.

We all recognise the importance of retail and the contribution it makes, not just to the UK economy, but to our communities up and down the country, and the people it employs. I reassure the House that we will continue to work with the unions, the retail sector, local government and everyone else concerned to make sure that the retail industry across the UK has a bright future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that 21,000 jobs were lost in the retail sector in the first three months of 2018 due to store closures and company administrations, with more announced since; further notes that the retail sector is one of the largest employers in the UK and contributed £94.6 billion to the UK economy in 2016; regrets that the Government's industrial strategy contains only three references to the retail sector; further regrets that the Government has presided over the biggest squeeze in wage growth in a generation, is failing to provide certainty around future trading arrangements after Brexit and has failed to ensure a fair business rates system; and calls on the Government to urgently publish a strategy for the retail sector.

Rural Crime and Public Services

4.2 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned that the level of rural crime remains high; notes research by the National Farmers' Union that rural crime cost the UK economy £42.5 million in 2015; recognises that delivering public services across large, sparsely populated geographical areas can be more costly and challenging than in urban areas; agrees with the National Rural Crime Network that it is vital that the voice of the countryside is heard; calls on the Government to ensure that the personal, social and economic costs of crime and anti-social behaviour in rural areas are fully understood and acted upon; and further calls on the Government to ensure that rural communities are not disadvantaged in the delivery or quality of public services.

In the public imagination and in international reputation, rural Britain is a place of near meadows, still streams and sleepy villages, but the challenges facing it and its police forces are significant and unique. Although media coverage and our political attention this year has, understandably, focused on metropolitan areas, particularly London, given the horrifying spate of serious violence and of growing crimes associated with mopeds, that is not to say that the crimes experienced by victims in our rural communities do not matter. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges our policing model faces is its ability to provide a consistent service to every victim, and indeed offender, regardless of where they live.

There is perhaps a sense that has crept in, as budget cuts bite, that rural crime is more trivial, but as we will hear today from many Members representing rural constituencies, not only do we face the traditional types of rural crime, but crime is mutating and rural communities are no longer immune to serious crime. In the most recent year for which figures are available, more than 88,000 farm animals were snatched by thieves, amounting to more than £6 million in lost stock to farmers, with the consequential impacts on our rural economy. Last year, Humberside police spent 1,200 hours battling hare coursing, with more than 500 reports of the crime in the 2017-18 season. The pursuit has been illegal since the Hunting Act 2004 and it involves "sighthounds" such as lurchers, greyhounds or salukis being set on hares, often with large sums bet on the outcome. Dealing with this is resource intensive for rural forces but it is necessary to respond, as the practice intimidates local communities and has significant criminal and antisocial behaviours associated with it.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important speech. County Durham is a large rural area—my constituency comprises 300 square miles—yet our police have been cut by 25%. Is she satisfied that the formula for policing adequately takes account of the difficulties of pursuing policing in a rural area?

Louise Haigh: It may not surprise my hon. Friend to know that I am deeply unsatisfied with the resources available for policing and with the funding formula on which we base our police funding at the moment. She makes an important point. On recent visits to forces in the south-west, I was particularly struck by the challenges facing police in huge rural areas, such as those in her constituency.

[Louise Haigh]

In the Devon and Cornwall force, not only is the chief constable responsible for an area of almost 4,000 square miles, but he—and in this case it is a he—is also responsible for 500 miles of coastline and for 10 miles out to sea. That is an incredible challenge when we consider that my old force, the Met, has 44 officers per square mile, while Devon and Cornwall has 0.7 officers per square mile. In that context, it is useful to discuss the proposed merger of Devon and Cornwall with Dorset police force and the strong belief of both forces that the move would produce better working, better connectivity and a better presence in communities and that neighbourhood policing would become more of a priority.

I have had similar conversations in Warwickshire and West Mercia. Given how significantly crime is changing, perhaps it is time to look at the structure of policing in this country, particularly at how we can ensure a consistent approach across the country. It has been fantastic to see innovations in forces such as those around drones, the development of tech solutions in forces such as Avon and Somerset, and the use of tri-service officers—officers who are trained as police community support officers, fire officers and paramedics all in one. However, we must ensure that where best practice is evidence-based and effective, it can be rolled out across the country, so that we are not reinventing the wheel time and again.

At the heart of our policing model is, and must always be, community policing, but that is what has been most affected by eight years of austerity. Those rural community policing beats are essential in preventing, detecting and tackling crime in rural areas. Community officers are treasured in all our communities, and yet, in many rural forces, neighbourhood teams have been completely abolished or merged with response teams, which effectively means the same thing.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I am delighted that my hon. Friend is making a really, really powerful speech that will resonate in many of our rural communities. I know that she will want to pay tribute to the great work of organisations such as Farm Watch. Those of us in rural areas are not scared of voluntary action working alongside statutory services, but where we do get angry is when there is not enough neighbourhood policing.

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. True community policing and neighbourhood policing work very effectively with Farm Watch, Neighbourhood Watch and other voluntary organisations in our communities. We are not just talking about a police officer walking down the street with his hands in his pockets. True neighbourhood policing requires officers to engage and build relationships with communities and to grow trust in the police. Having grown up in South Yorkshire, I know that the policing of so many communities, particularly the hardest-to-reach communities, requires that approach in order to be able to police by consent. On top of all that, we have seen numerous rural police stations close—the symbol of a rural community's relationship with its local police service and a symbol of the police's commitment to those communities. There is strong evidence that they have contributed to the legitimacy of the police in the eyes of the public. Little wonder

then that the National Farmers Union has found two worrying trends: first, that four in 10 people in rural areas fear crime, double that of individuals in urban areas; and secondly, that two thirds think that the local police fail to deal with the problems that matter to them—twice as many as the national average. Those figures show that the ability of the police to interpret and respond to the needs of rural communities is fading away, leaving those communities isolated.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): As always, my hon. Friend is giving a very well-informed and impassioned speech. On this point about rural communities, does she agree that it is also very important that we think of rural communities not just as places such as Somerset, Devon or Cornwall, but as seats such as mine, former heavy industrial areas? For example, the Ogmore and Garw valleys in my constituency no longer have police stations, but what they do have now is high levels of rural crime. They are isolated and cut off because of deindustrialisation. That must be put into the mix of how we see rural crime moving forward.

Louise Haigh: I could not agree more. It is exactly the same in my own home force of South Yorkshire. The pernicious and long-term effects of deindustrialisation in communities are often the same issues that other rural forces and areas experience and are affected by.

The feelings of isolation can be strong and overwhelming, particularly for vulnerable individuals in rural areas such as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). If police do not have the ability to reach out, they will feel ever more vulnerable. The Conservative party used to be clear on this. A leaked internal communiqué said that

“police-stations are important to local communities and the sheer number of closures is worrying.”

But since that communiqué, closures have rocketed. Nearly 400 police stations have closed in England and Wales, with the number of front counters open to the public falling from over 900 in 2010 to just over 500 today. It is harder to ignore the knock-on effects that sales of police stations and closures of custody suites have had on policing. Particularly in large rural areas, officers now have to drive for long distances to take offenders into custody, taking them off the streets for a considerable period of time.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Is the hon. Lady actually saying that she would reopen those police stations?

Louise Haigh: No. I am saying that we would properly resource the police to be able to do their job, unlike the Conservative party. In reducing the police, as the Conservatives have done, to nothing more than a flashing blue light that only arrives when the absolute worst has happened, not only have they destroyed the police's ability to prevent crime from happening in the first place; they have rolled back all the progress of the previous generation in building trust with the police in the hardest-to-reach communities. That is the danger of the loss of community officers from rural police forces.

The devastating assault on the strength of our police service as a result of decisions taken by the Conservatives has undermined the fundamental foundations on which

policing in this country has been based. Chief among these is the notion that every community matters and every community deserves a police service that is able to respond to the challenges that it deems important. Although the challenges and risks for each community may vary, each is deserving of a community police service, and the priorities of local communities are of equal merit.

The independent inspectorate of constabulary laid bare the breathtaking pressure that the police are now under thanks to the financial constraints imposed on them by the Government and by rising demand. Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary said that

“policing is under significant stress. On occasions, that stress stretches some forces to such an extent that they risk being unable to keep people safe in some very important areas of policing.”

Not only have we lost more than 21,000 police officers; thousands of emergency calls are waiting in queues with not enough officers to respond. Some victims facing an emergency get no response at all. The police have yet to assess risk posed by more than 3,000 individuals on the sex offenders register. We do not know whether those individuals are a threat to the public. There is a shortage of more than 5,000 detectives, as unsolved crime rose to 2.1 million crimes last year.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I do not want my hon. Friend to move on from this incredibly important point. It is not only the cuts to resources and the loss of police stations that are important issues that have had a terrible and adverse impact on rural crime; she is also absolutely right to point out the changing nature of the demands made on policing, including trafficking, modern slavery and some of the sex offenders to which she refers. That makes it even more important that police forces across the country are properly resourced.

Louise Haigh: I could not agree more. The police have been cut to a level at which they are unable to prevent and respond to crime, and the demand on them is completely unprecedented, not only from new crimes, but as a result of other services being cut.

The police are now unable to respond to the basic task that we ask of them and that the Prime Minister asked them to do at the Police Federation conference eight years ago, which is to prevent and respond to crime—nothing more, nothing less. Police chiefs have warned the Government about the issue time and again. They have warned that local policing is under such strain that the legitimacy of policing is at risk, as the relationship with communities is fading to a point at which prevention, early intervention and core engagement are ineffective. This is a stark warning. Never before have police chiefs, usually incredibly reticent to enter political debate, spoken out so plainly about the risks facing public safety. Only yesterday, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, told the Home Affairs Committee that it would be “naive” to dissociate police cuts from rising levels of crime.

While the lack of resources has hampered the police, there is no doubt that crime itself, and the demand on rural police forces, is changing. County lines is a clear and growing threat for rural forces. It has been partly responsible for a serious increase in violent crime in areas that do not traditionally suffer from it. County lines dealers from the cities are exploiting hidden poverty

and a cohort of vulnerable youngsters in rural areas. With the numbers of looked-after children and homeless children rising, this is of significant concern. The exploitation of young and vulnerable persons is a common feature in the facilitation of county lines drugs supply, whether for the storage or supply of drugs, the movement of cash, or to secure the use of dwellings held by vulnerable people—commonly referred to as cuckooing.

As the Home Office's own analysis of the rise in serious violence states, childhood risk factors, including economic stress, mean that interventions with vulnerable young people such as those excluded from school and looked-after children would be successful in reducing violence and drug demand. The Government are aware of this, but so far their response has been muted, and their continued refusal to fund the police properly is felt across the country.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Does the hon. Lady not agree that it is our job as constituency MPs to stay in touch with our local police forces and to address their concerns? That is what I did, and that is how I managed to raise the precept in our local area and increase the police force there.

Louise Haigh: Raising the precept in the way that the Government have done is a fundamentally unfair way to fund police forces across this country. [*Interruption.*] I am sorry—I do not know which police force area the hon. Gentleman represents, but I am almost positive that raising the precept by 2% will result in significantly more in his force area than in my area of South Yorkshire, or in Northumbria, Cleveland, or many metropolitan areas that have significant demand.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): In my own police area of Derbyshire, we have seen a drop of over 400 police officers. Yes, we have raised the police precept, with £12 a year from every resident on top of the 5% increase in council tax for social care, but that will fund 25 officers, while we have lost over 400. There is absolutely no comparison in terms of what can be achieved.

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend puts it much better than I did. Last year, the precept was able to raise £270 million. That is a drop in the ocean given that this Government have taken £2.7 billion out of policing over the past eight years. The force in the area of the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) may have been able to increase numbers from their existing point, but I am sure that they will not have been driven up to the levels that we saw in 2010, and will certainly not account for the level of demand or the cuts that we have experienced.

There are other demands on rural forces—if not unique to them, then certainly more pronounced. From cyber-crime to hate crime, from domestic violence to historical child sexual exploitation, the Government keep stating that crime is falling, but the experience of the police on the ground could not be more different. Nowhere is that more obvious than in non-crime demand that falls on the police. Non-crime demand makes up about 83% of calls to command and control centres, and in rural forces that is likely to be higher. Over the past eight years, because of the sparsity of social, mental health and more general health services, rural police forces have taken on an increased role as an auxiliary social and emergency service. I know of one

[*Louise Haigh*]

rural county in northern England which, at the weekend, has one social worker on duty for the entirety of its social services, including for children with learning difficulties and those living with dementia. From 5 o'clock on a Friday, the police are the only service available to fill the gap.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there has been a massive increase in the number of calls to 101 that now go unanswered? That just proves how stretched our police forces are.

Louise Haigh: There has been the same level of demand from 101 and 999 as, just a few years ago, the police would have experienced only on new year's eve. As I say, that is coming not only from traditional crime but from the demand on other public services.

This is not only wrong for the police, who are not trained or equipped to deal with the responsibilities of other public services, but, most importantly, wrong for the people struggling with their health needs, who are met with a criminal justice response rather than a health one because the proper provision simply is not available.

The result of all this is that criminals have recognised that our rural communities do not have the protection they need, and they are exploiting that. One reason why we are now hearing calls for all rural police officers to be armed is that the response time is unacceptably high for police and armed officers in significant swathes of the country, but arming all officers fundamentally undermines the principle of policing in this country: to police in communities and by consent.

While all forces experience seasonal variations, the minimum relative to maximum variation, especially for daily crime and antisocial behaviour, is far greater in rural forces with national parks and coastal areas attracting tourism. The seasonality of demand must be recognised, to ensure not only geographic equity but that minimum levels of service can be maintained throughout the year.

Clearly the police funding formula needs to take into account the real picture of demand and pressure facing every police force. We know that the current funding formula is broken. It uses age-old data and does not reflect the needs, demands and pressures on forces, nor the modern demands of policing.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; I am listening to her with great interest. One of the worst aspects of the centralisation of police services in England and Wales over the last few years has been the centralisation of air support services and the creation of the National Police Air Service. That has removed dedicated helicopters from Dyfed-Powys, for instance, which covers two thirds of Wales. Would it be the Labour party's policy to scrap NPAS or to keep it?

Louise Haigh: The issue with the centralisation of services such as NPAS is that those decisions have been made for all the wrong reasons. They have been made to drive cuts, rather than being genuinely about where provision should be. We would certainly keep NPAS and other services like it under review, but those decisions

need to be made on the basis of the efficiency and effectiveness of that service, not solely to drive cuts for ideology's sake.

The police funding formula cannot be reformed from a position of ever decreasing budgets. We saw what happened when they tried to do that with schools; it just shifted the pain elsewhere. It has to depend on need and take into account all demands for policing services. Though crime levels are important, we know that some rural forces face other unique challenges, such as the cost of policing a huge area, modern slavery and seasonal influxes of tourists. That has to be reflected in the funding formula.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It felt like the hon. Lady was describing Lincolnshire—a huge, sparsely populated rural area with a huge coastal influx. Given what she says, why did Labour vote against a fairer funding formula that would have benefited Lincolnshire and against £450 million extra for the police? I am still waiting for the bit in her speech where she pays impassioned tribute to the hugely brave work that police officers in Lincolnshire do, in difficult circumstances, when they are battling all the issues that she has raised.

Louise Haigh: If the hon. Gentleman had not chosen to interrupt me at that stage of my speech, I would have got on to the bit where I praise police officers. I am a former police officer, as he may well know. We voted against the Government's unfair funding formula because it did not deliver the funding that our police services so desperately need. As I have already explained, funding our police through the precept is unfair and distributes funding disproportionately away from the areas that need it most.

I would like to close by thanking the NFU for its support in preparing for today's debate and, of course, the tens of thousands of police officers and staff across our country who work tirelessly to keep us all safe. Our conversations so often in this place cover the pressing challenges of our urban centres, but we can demonstrate how to deliver a consistent policing service for everyone, no matter who they are or where they live. The Government's reckless and ideological approach to policing has not only left our inner cities rocked by serious violence but has left every single one of our communities exposed to crime. Only a Labour Government will keep the public safe and give the police the resources they need. I commend the motion to the House.

4.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): May I thank the Opposition for securing this very important debate? I answer, of course, as a Minister, but I hope you will forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I occasionally speak from the heart, as a constituency MP who represents one of the largest rural constituencies in England—a mere 531 square miles. I have the pleasure of serving my county alongside my hon. Friends the Members for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) and for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson). So, with respect to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), she does not need to tell us about the challenges of policing rural areas. In Louth

and Horncastle, we have beautiful countryside—not just some of the richest farming countryside in the country, but the rolling hills of the Lincolnshire wolds and some of the most undeveloped, natural coastline in the country.

It is with that experience that I respond to the motion with interest. If I may say so, I think the Opposition have fallen into a trap in the first line of their motion, in which they refer to “rural crime”, because there is of course no definition of rural crime. The crimes that can be found in urban areas can also be found in rural areas. Indeed, I have just come from a very interesting debate in Parliament Street, run by the all-party groups on domestic abuse and on mental health, where we discussed exactly the point that domestic abuse knows no boundaries.

We are aware—looking across the House, I see there are some experts here—that modern slavery and human trafficking know no boundaries. These crimes are found in urban areas, but also in rural areas. Indeed, I commend Lincolnshire police for their extraordinary piece of investigative work last year in bringing together the largest ever modern slavery prosecution. It brought to justice the Rooney family, and nearly 100 years’ worth of imprisonment was delivered to the disgraceful defendants in that case.

We should not labour under the misapprehension that rural crime is different from urban crime, although it may manifest itself in different ways. However, there are of course particular types of crime that may have a unique effect in rural areas.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister will know that some crimes are present only in rural areas. In my constituency, sheep worrying—dog attacks on sheep—is one example. The police do not record that centrally, in the Home Office, as a crime, and she cannot stand at the Dispatch Box and tell me the extent of sheep attacks in the United Kingdom.

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, because I was about to come on to that point. There are crimes that have a particular impact in rural areas, but I am saying that we should not confine our discussion to those crimes. Important though such crimes are, we must reflect on the fact that rural areas deserve support and attention when it comes to crimes that are also found in urban areas.

If I may, I will draw on the point about antisocial behaviour. Such behaviour might not be at the most serious end of the range, but nevertheless it may well have a hugely detrimental impact on local people. Families living in isolated homes may feel that they have been targeted precisely because they live in an isolated location. We know of examples of organised crime gangs targeting farms—for example, in my county, with fly-tipping.

Organised crime gangs are also working in consort across county boundaries to indulge in one of the cruellest crimes that can be committed against animals, which is hare coursing. I suggested that colleagues on both sides of the House may soon be addressing us on the issue of hare coursing. We know that criminal gangs are profiting from animal cruelty, with dogs that can be worth up to £50,000, depending on how large their betting rings are. This type of crime has similarities, in terms of exploitation, with types of crime in urban areas, but it has a unique impact in rural areas.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Is trespassing via organised hunts on farmers’ land and people’s private property a rural crime or an urban crime?

Victoria Atkins: I am not quite sure what the hon. Gentleman is referring to. Is he suggesting there are hunts in central London or in city centres? I do not know, but perhaps I have misunderstood his intervention.

Jonathan Edwards *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: I will move on, however, because I would love to hear from the hon. Gentleman.

Jonathan Edwards: Over the recent bank holiday weekend, an illegal rave was held in Brechfa forest in my constituency. More than 1,400 people descended on the small village of Brechfa and into the forest to hold the rave, causing huge disruption for local residents. Will the Minister look at what extra powers can be given to the police to chase the organisers of illegal raves and to act as more of a deterrent to stop such events happening in future?

Victoria Atkins: That is very interesting. I am looking at the Solicitor General. If I remember correctly, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 introduced measures to deal with organisers of illegal raves. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could write to me and I will provide an accurate response.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): On cross-border matters, does the Minister agree that sometimes the issue is not the money going to police forces, but the co-operation between them in seeing matters through? That causes great problems for constituencies such as mine, which is on the border of three or four different police forces.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, which I will move on to in due course. The shadow Minister mentioned the impact of county line criminality on rural areas, and I am pleased she did so, because we are both determined to tackle it. That is precisely why the Government have announced, through the serious violence strategy, £3.5 million of funding to bring about a national co-ordination centre to share intelligence and expertise among police forces, particularly in those areas whose experience of gangs is perhaps not to the same extent as that in urban areas, so that they learn not from scratch but from colleagues elsewhere in the country.

The theft of farm equipment can have a devastating impact on farmers. I had the pleasure recently of driving a tractor worth £350,000 in my constituency. I was slightly surprised when the farmer allowed me to reverse it, but it remains intact. What if that equipment is stolen? That small business person has made an enormous investment and may well have taken out loans to pay it off. That theft would be a crime committed against them, their family, their business and their local community. Rural constabularies are aware of such issues.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley raised the issue of police funding. We understand the wish that rural communities are not disadvantaged in the delivery or quality of public services to tackle crime. The Government are committed to providing police forces in England and Wales with the resources they need to

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do their crucial work. I must, however, set the issue in context. The hon. Lady knows that I only do this when she talks at length about funding. The reason the Government had to make such tough spending decisions after the 2010 election was the economic legacy of the previous Labour Government and the global financial crisis. If we are going to have a good, productive debate, we must remember the historical context in which we were operating.

We have absolutely recognised the resources the police need. That is precisely why in 2015 the then Home Secretary insisted in the spending review that the Government protected overall police funding in real terms, and we have done so since. We have also increased our investment to support police transformation and technology, so that our police can respond to the changing nature of crime.

Giles Watling: Will my hon. Friend celebrate the fact that we have succeeded in getting thousands of police out from doing useless paperwork in back offices and back on the frontline of policing?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. One of the challenges to the police over the past few years has been to get warranted officers, who hold positions of responsibility after we have given them their warrant and training, to use their powers and specialist skills in accordance with their warrant. I am delighted that the figures show that constabularies across the country have made extraordinary improvements in using warranted officers in frontline policing. That means more officers on the beat or investigating crime, doing the job they signed up to do, rather than sitting in human resources departments and so on.

David Hanson: Will the Minister confirm that it is not that central Government have increased police funding this year, but that local ratepayers in counties such as mine, Flintshire, and throughout rural areas in north Wales, have had their rates increased to meet central Government money that was cut?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making that point. I was just about to explain the funding settlement, but I make the point that there is no such thing as Government money: it is taxpayers' money. Whether our constituents pay it through income tax or council tax, the fact is that it is their money that we take from them to support our public services.

David Hanson *rose*—

Victoria Atkins: If the right hon. Gentleman will please allow me, I will make a little progress. I shall deal with the funding settlement in some detail in a moment.

I was talking about transformation and technology, which is a really exciting area of policing. We have seen great innovation in recent years in how police forces can use technology to serve their communities and to use their specialist skillsets in the best possible ways. If I may, I must pay credit to my local police and crime commissioner, Marc Jones, a Conservative, who has purchased a drone for Lincolnshire police which, given the size of the county, is an invaluable tool for the local constabulary. Lincolnshire police have used the drone

for a variety of reasons, including to locate missing people—one can imagine the difference that such an investment can make in a very rural area—as well as to help with hare coursing investigations, in which a drone can make such a difference.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): It is very welcome that new technology is used in that way, but does the Minister accept that some technological improvements are dependent on decent wi-fi, mobile phone and broadband connections, which in rural areas are not yet quite where they need to be?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend knows, as I do—it was my first ever campaign as a candidate—that the challenge of improving broadband in rural areas is always there. By and large, more urban areas have excellent coverage, although there are blackspots. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has announced a scheme whereby we can use some technology at parish churches, and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has a keen interest in the issue and is acting accordingly.

Let me turn to funding. We have continued to listen to the police. Last year, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service spoke to every police force in England and Wales about the changing demands on the police and how they could best be managed. We have acted on the basis of that consultation and announced an increase in overall investment in the police of £460 million from April for this financial year. That includes a £50 million increase in counter-terrorism funding, and it enables police and crime commissioners to raise up to £280 million of local funding through council tax, protecting the police grant in cash terms and increasing funding for national priorities by £130 million. I am delighted that most police and crime commissioners have accepted the Government's challenge to make that change to their policing precept and are consequently able to decide for themselves how that money is best spent in their local area.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): My hon. Friend is right to make the point that there is no such thing as Government money, only taxpayers' money, but my constituents in Lincolnshire, and hers, think that although it is okay to talk in these overall terms, there is a fundamental unfairness against council tax payers in rural areas, in terms of the services that we receive—our policing, NHS and broadband. We pay far more in council tax and get infinitely less than people get in urban areas. The Government have to grasp the nettle and get fairer funding for rural areas.

Victoria Atkins: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for raising that point. I extend that challenge to Opposition Members. If they are able to find themselves in a position where they can look at fairer funding and how it may have an impact on rural areas, I am sure that is something we would be content to consider.

Taken together, public investment in policing has grown from £11.9 billion in 2015-16 to £13 billion in this financial year.

Ruth George: The Minister was making the point that this is taxpayers' money. It absolutely is, but the decimation of police forces like mine in Derbyshire, which has seen 26% cuts to its funding over seven years, has meant that it does not have the capacity to prevent county lines crimes and the sort of retail crime that saw small shops in my constituency lose £100,000 last year from their tills. That is hitting them in their pockets. My taxpayers say they would rather pay a little bit extra tax, get a decent police force and not lose out through crime.

Victoria Atkins: I wonder, then, if the hon. Lady could help with the fact that her constabulary, as of March last year, had reserves of £32.2 million—20% of funding. It may be that the police and crime commissioner has plans for how those reserves are to be spent, but that is a decision for the PCC. We need to be careful. The whole point of police and crime commissioners is that they are democratically accountable to local people. They are elected by local people to set policing priorities. Decisions on how money is spent must be made by local police and crime commissioners. We gave those powers to police and crime commissioners precisely because we thought it was better for local people to make those decisions, working together with chief constables, rather than bureaucrats in Whitehall trying to decide policing priorities across the country.

As I said, taken together, public investment in policing has grown from £11.9 billion in 2015-16 to £13 billion in this financial year. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made it clear that he will prioritise police funding at the next spending review, again demonstrating this Government's commitment to providing the police with the resources they need.

Community policing is obviously very important in our rural areas.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): There is a lot of talk about rural areas. Geographically, over half of my constituency is rural and we have rural crime, such as fly-tipping and the theft of agricultural equipment. The West Yorkshire police and crime commissioner is perceived as being an urban PCC. Does the Minister accept that even in supposedly urban areas there are large numbers of rural crimes?

Victoria Atkins: Absolutely. I do not claim there are boundaries when it comes to criminal behaviour. Indeed, we have heard from across the House how some criminals deliberately exploit county and constabulary boundaries, because they hope that that will cause investigations and so on to be more difficult for the police. We are very clear that we need the police to work together better. In fairness, I think they are doing that. There have been huge changes in the way police forces talk to each other and share information. On county lines for example, there is a great deal of work going on to co-ordinate and share intelligence, and we see this with the regional organised crime units.

The reformed policing landscape and the introduction of police and crime commissioners by the Government has supported community policing. We have enabled police and crime commissioners to work with local people to set priorities for their areas. They are the ones best placed to make decisions with their communities, rural or urban, based on their local knowledge and expertise.

The National Police Chiefs' Council is also transforming its role and presence in dealing with rural crime. The NPCC recently published its rural affairs strategy, which, following a period of consultation with rural stakeholders, sets out operational and organisational policing priorities in respect of tackling crimes that particularly affect rural areas.

The strategy recognises that rural areas experience the range of crimes faced in our urban areas—the threat of modern slavery, for example—and also identifies specific rural threats, including poaching, fuel theft, theft of farm machinery and types of antisocial behaviour such as fly-tipping. We welcome that strategy.

Susan Elan Jones: Does the Minister accept that speeding on rural roads is an horrific problem? Is there anything in the strategy on that, because it really is devastating at the moment?

Victoria Atkins: That is precisely the sort of issue that we as constituency MPs can help with—by helping PCCs, police chiefs and councils to identify areas where speeding is a problem. My constituency has, I estimate, about 100 metres of dual carriageway; the rest is single carriageway across 531 square miles, so sadly we are particularly aware of the dangers of speeding on rural lanes. It is one of the challenges that the police face in the most rural areas. I encourage colleagues across the House to engage with their councils and PCCs on that issue if they feel there is a particular need in parts of their constituencies.

Home Office officials have met the national police lead and discussed with them the approach in the NPCC strategy. It is intended that the strategy will support safer rural communities and a better rural focus on policing. Yesterday, the Policing Minister met the National Farmers Union and colleagues on the all-party group on rural crime to discuss the crime affecting rural areas. We take crime in rural areas very seriously. We know that the methods used by criminals are constantly evolving and recognise the importance of staying one step ahead, which is why we are encouraging the police to innovate and transform how they investigate.

We have recently published the serious violence strategy, which targets the drivers behind the recent increases in serious violence. This might be thought a largely urban concern, but such a belief is misplaced. With county lines, we see urban gangs exploit children and young people and spread their evil business across the country, including into rural and coastal areas. It is important that rural communities understand and respond to this threat, which is precisely what we want to achieve through the new strategy.

I will conclude by returning to my constituency and perhaps inviting yet more people to visit my beautiful rural part of the country—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): Don't forget Cheshire.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend will get his chance.

As the crime Minister, I think constantly about what crime means for my constituents and the consequences and impact on them. We take rural concerns about crime and policing very seriously and understand the great importance of ensuring that rural communities

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are taken properly into account in all the action we take to tackle crime. We thank each and every police officer and police community support officer for the work they do in our rural areas.

4.48 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate. I appreciate that a lot of the things being discussed today are devolved and that therefore much of the detail is unfamiliar to me and does not apply in Scotland, but I hope that I might make one or two comments about the experience in Scotland and that Members might notice some things that are the same and some that are different and perhaps think about why they might be different.

I find it a bit surprising that we are having a three-hour debate on rural crime, when, according to the Minister, rural crime does not exist, and that we are having a debate that appears to be all about policing, despite the fact that the motion does not mention policing at all. There are lots of things about how this place operates that I never expect, or indeed hope, to be able to understand.

It is difficult to know the actual level of crime in either urban or rural areas. It is accepted, including by the police, that a lot of crime goes unreported. We reckon that in Scotland about 30% to 40% of crime is never reported or recorded; for some relatively minor crimes, the figure is much higher. The Scottish crime and justice survey, which asks a large sample of people every year what has happened to them that year, gives more reliable figures.

The survey showed that, between 2008-9 and 2016-17, the number of adults reporting that they had been victims of crime fell by more than a third. The reduction in England and Wales was about the same, although the figures are not exactly comparable. That is important because it tells us that, although the level of crime is still too high and there are still people who genuinely live with the concern and even the fear of crime, it is not as big a problem as some would have us believe.

Something that I found surprising when I was told about it—and it still keeps popping up—is that older people are much less likely to become victims of crime than younger folk. I think that there is a question to be asked about the fear of crime. There are people who make it their business to make old people scared of it, but all the evidence, both from reported crimes and from comments made by people after they have been victims of crime, suggests that they are less likely to be victims.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): In South Yorkshire, the number of insurance claims for rural crime has increased by 54% in a year, so it is clearly an issue. A number of constituents have come to my surgeries to report thefts of farm equipment and antisocial behaviour. A group of 500 Barnsley residents have come together because they are concerned about nightly antisocial behaviour. This is very much an issue for my constituents.

Peter Grant: I do not doubt that at all. Indeed, I am about to say something about crimes committed in rural areas. First, there is the problem of definition:

how do we decide what is rural and what is not? I would never consider myself to represent a rural constituency, and I would not be considered to do so in the House, but about 3,000 of my constituents undeniably live in rural areas, and probably another 5,000 live in villages and towns that are so small that, while their residents experience many of the benefits of living in small isolated communities, they also experience many of the challenges.

Sir Edward Leigh: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: May I just finish making my point? I did promise to speak for a fairly short time, but that will be difficult if I am too generous.

A finding that appears regularly in the Scottish crime and justice survey—I do not know whether it is reflected in other parts of the United Kingdom—is that people living in rural areas are less than half as likely to become victims of crime as those living in urban areas. While people living in isolated areas undoubtedly feel more vulnerable in respect of some kinds of crime that are more likely to be committed in rural areas, overall, it is the case that rural areas in Scotland—and, I imagine, rural parts of England, relatively speaking—are safer places in which to live. It is also the case, however, that for a victim of crime, the crime rate on that day is 100%.

Sir Edward Leigh: When I and my rural constituents travel to the most remote areas of Scotland, we are struck by the difference between the quality of the roads there and the quality of roads in Lincolnshire. There are no potholes, and there is wonderful broadband and wonderful public services. Is the hon. Gentleman grateful to my Lincolnshire constituents who, through the Barnett formula, are subsidising his own constituents to such an extent, and would he not be sorry to see that go after Scottish independence?

Peter Grant: What I am grateful for is the fact that the hon. Gentleman has completely contradicted his Scottish Tory pals, who seem to be away enjoying the sunshine at the moment, but who tell us almost every day of the week that the Scottish Government's performance on broadband is useless and the UK Government's is great. One of the things I have learnt today is that even Tory Back Benchers think that the Government are making a complete hash of providing broadband in rural areas. I look forward to hearing the hon. Gentleman contradict his Scottish pals the next time they raise that particular myth, both when it is relevant to the debate and, more often, when it is completely irrelevant.

Let me return to the comment made by the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock). According to the latest figures from NFU Mutual, in some parts of the United Kingdom, there have been staggering increases in rural crime levels over a fairly short period. I take that to mean that organised gangs have been targeting an area until it gets too hot for them, and then moving on. That is why co-operation and the sharing of intelligence between police forces, and between the police and other agencies, are so vital.

In 2015 the Scottish Government helped to set up the Scottish Partnership Against Rural Crime—a partnership between the Government, Police Scotland, NFU Scotland, NFU Mutual, which, obviously, provides much of the insurance cover for rural businesses, and other key

stakeholders. In its first full year of operation, recorded rural crime in Scotland fell by 21%. I said earlier that recorded crime figures came with a lot of caveats, but during roughly the same period, NFU Mutual reported a 32% reduction in a single year. This is perhaps not the place to go into detail about what might be done well in Scotland that could be copied or examined in other parts of the United Kingdom, but I simply read those figures to indicate that although people living in rural areas and rural businesses, as the Minister referred to—

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I will just finish this point. There is no doubt that, when a rural business has a piece of plant stolen that cost it a quarter of a million pounds, it is a massive blow to it, but there are ways—by sharing information and working across constabulary borders and national borders, if possible—in which, if everybody who wants to stop crime co-ordinates themselves as effectively as the criminals sometimes do, we can start to see an end to this, or at least a significant improvement in crime figures, both rural and urban.

Mr John Hayes: I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman's speech—it is like a poorly signposted ramble through the Trossachs—but if he is right that much crime is under-reported, does he acknowledge that what may be happening in rural areas is this? Because tolerance of petty disorder and petty crime has risen, many crimes take place irrespective of the effect on their victims, because the victims know that nothing will be done about them so they do not bother to report them.

Peter Grant: I cannot comment on that. Scotland is regularly surveyed on public attitudes to policing, and generally speaking, the public have a high degree of confidence in the police and their ability to deal with crime and clear it up. It is not enough—there is not 100% confidence yet, and that has to be the target. From my first days as a councillor 25 years ago, what I have always recommended to my constituents is that there is no such thing as a crime that is too minor to report, because a lot of policing is intelligence-based and trend-based. In the policing model that is used in Scotland, it may be that a similar incident that is reported five or six times will not get a heavy response, but it will eventually trigger a very significant response of the kind that puts a large police presence into the area very quickly. It would be nice if we could get a blue-light response every time somebody phones the police, but that is simply not realistic.

I want to make a few comments on some of the exchanges that I listened to with great interest about the way in which the police service in England and Wales is set up, the way it is managed nationally and locally and the way it is funded. With all due respect, it seems to me that it is a complete and utter mess. I am not convinced that people in any part of England or Wales understand what they are paying for the police force, why they are paying that amount and not a wee bit more or a wee bit less, what they do if they want to pay a bit more to get a better service, or how they can influence the provision of their service.

I cannot understand why people who are sitting in here should take the majority of decisions about how much police funding is needed in Lincolnshire, Cornwall or Lancashire. Surely the people there know their needs better than any of us down here, with the possible exceptions of the hon. Members who represent those particular counties. Since I was elected, I have been struck by the fact that, for its size and diversity, England is a ridiculously centralised place as far as government is concerned. I do not say that meaning to be offensive or to insult anybody. I simply cannot see how local services can be effectively delivered across such a big and diverse country as England when decisions are so centralised in one place. It is bound to mean that a lot of time is spent by MPs from different parts of the country fighting about who gets a bigger share of the cake, when the problem is that the cake is far too wee to begin with.

At the end of the day, it does not benefit any of us if we move some resources from one county to another and a reduction in crime in one part of England is matched by an increase in crime in another. It is much better if we can find ways to resource the police properly, if it is quite clear that they are not properly resourced, and to make sure that crime levels can be driven down across the whole country.

I found the early part of the debate very interesting. It has been an eye-opener to me to hear about the way that local services—particularly the police service—are being delivered in a country that, in so many ways, is an example to the rest of the world. Is it fit for purpose? That is not for me to say, and not because I do not believe in politicians from one country telling other people how to run their country. But I invite Members who represent constituencies in England and Wales to ask themselves the hard question: is the way the police service is set up fit for the 21st century? If not, potentially, there are difficult decisions to be taken.

I will be happy after the debate to give more details about how the police service is set up in Scotland. It is not perfect. There are problems. The new national service has some teething problems and there are things people do not like as much as what they had before, but the fact is that, by almost any measure, public confidence in the police remains high. People's feeling of being safe is as high as it has been for a great number of years. Three quarters of people in Scotland feel safe walking home alone after dark. It would be nicer if it were 100%, but I was surprised that it is as high as 75%.

There are ways that our respective national Governments can learn from each other about the way we manage and provide public services. I sincerely suggest that Members here with responsibility for policing look at some of the changes that have happened north of the border over the last few years. They were not always easy or popular, but some of what has happened there might give an indication as to changes that could be implemented for the benefit of the 50 million-plus people—there are another 3 million or 4 million people in Wales—who deserve the best police service that can possibly be provided for them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I would prefer not to impose a time limit, and if colleagues stick to about eight minutes we should be able to get everybody in without one.

5.1 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I am unaccustomed to being called this early in a debate; it is something of an inversion of the norm.

First, I want to respond to the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), as it takes a brass neck for the SNP Front-Bench spokesman to complain about the over-centralisation of this country when it is a system that massively benefits his constituents, and in particular his party as it does not have to make the tough decisions we face in other parts of the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) was absolutely right: my constituents are net contributors, whereas those of the hon. Member for Glenrothes are net recipients. That is a great unfairness, and I would prefer it if his party recognised that now and again. But I am going to move on to the subject in hand.

As an MP for a rural constituency, I am particularly concerned about this subject and I welcome the fact that Her Majesty's Opposition have tabled this motion. I last spoke on the subject in the final stages of the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill—the Bill of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—on Friday 27 April. I said that I was concerned that we seemed to be living in more violent times, and that comment then unexpectedly appeared all over the local radio and newspapers because many of my constituents share that sense.

This debate is not about the sort of stats we bandy across the House in political fashion; this is about the experience of recent months in South Suffolk, where we have unquestionably had a spate of serious incidents. In the last week in Sudbury, the main town in my constituency, there was a very violent rape, for which I am glad to say there has been an arrest of an individual today by the police in Sudbury. I pay tribute to them, because at the same time as they have been investigating that crime, police in our part of the world have been focused on a very serious murder in Ipswich, of a 17-year-old, which was raised by my constituency neighbour the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) at Prime Minister's questions today. The sense of greater violence is therefore impossible to escape, and is, I am afraid, borne out by the figures for Suffolk: there has been a 29% increase in violent crime in Suffolk in the year to September 2017.

The context of this, however, is an overall fall in recorded crime in the independent crime survey for England and Wales of 38% since 2010. That is a very large decrease in overall crime, and it has occurred at a time when, because of the funding pressures we were under—because of the deficit we inherited—we have seen significant reductions in police numbers; I would be the first to accept that.

But this is the thing: if we have seen such a fall in crime when police numbers have been falling, it cannot simply be the case that police numbers are the sole determinant of the level of crime. This spike in violence, which has been seen in other parts of the country too, is a relatively recent phenomenon, and I want us to move away from these political brickbats about how many police stations have been closed—I should point out that some 400 police stations were closed between 1997 and 2007. Instead, we should try to understand why we are seeing this change. I want to try to understand some of those causal factors in my brief remarks.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend is right to say that police numbers are not the sole determinant of a rise or fall in crime, but they must be a determinant. In Lincolnshire, fundamental flaws in the funding formula have left us short of funds, and that makes it very difficult for my excellent local police force to respond to crimes of the kind that he has just described.

James Cartlidge: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. The way I would put it—which is kind of what he is saying—is that the fall in numbers does not, of itself, drive the social behaviours that cause a change in crime, but clearly, in an ideal world, we would have more officers to deal with it. It is a question of how we respond to the situation.

In terms of the primary causal factors, lots of hon. Members have talked about the county lines crime phenomenon, which was on the front page of *The Sunday Times* as recently as 6 May. It is a real problem not only in Suffolk but right across the country. The statistics show that 85% of police forces across England and Wales are dealing with county lines, and that 80% of those cases involve children. This is a serious crime phenomenon, and the growth in county lines, which involves increasing violence, leads to the spread of drug crime, knife crime and other associated crime.

There is another factor, which I find potentially the most interesting. I was at the Suffolk show recently, and I was talking to the chief constable. I asked him why he thought there had been this change in behaviour, and he said that social media were a really important factor because the videos and other media that are shared by the young people in gangs are being used to goad them. The gangs are goading each other into more violent behaviour in a competitive fashion. That is the type of behaviour that we see in the very worst crime areas such as Mexico, which has a terrible murder rate. The reason that crime escalates in such areas is that more violence is used to mark out and defend territory. We are seeing gang violence worsening here because the gangs are becoming competitive, and social media drive that competition because the videos—which, according to my chief constable, are often of very high quality—are being used to brag and to goad.

I do not pretend to have the answer on the social media issue, but I believe that the companies providing the media—they are private companies—have a social responsibility to involve themselves in this. I fundamentally believe that the primary responsibility of the Government is the defence of the realm, at home and abroad, and if the media companies will not get involved, we will have to start talking about the defence of the virtual realm. We cannot have any no-go areas in crime; we do not want them in a physical sense, and we cannot have them in a virtual sense either. I for one would support more powers to ensure that social media companies took action on these kinds of videos to ensure that they are not shown, not displayed and do not incite greater gang violence.

I also want to talk about funding. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) said, police numbers may not directly cause the changes in crime rates, but we need the officers in place if we are to resource our forces to deal with the changing patterns of crime. There are two elements involved: national funding and local funding. On national

funding, I recently tabled a written question to the Home Secretary asking him what assessment he had made of the different costs involved in policing rural and urban areas. The answer from the Home Office was that it had made no such study and that there was no such information. I believe that rural MPs should be engaging with local stakeholders such as the National Farmers Union and possibly the Country Land and Business Association to look into the hard stats and the evidence. If we want to go to a Government Department and ask for a change in the spending formula to favour our local area—or rural areas more broadly—we have to have the evidence to show that we need that extra funding. A study of the cost of rurality in policing would be very welcome, and I would certainly support one.

My last key point is about local funding. I disagree with Opposition Members on this point. I strongly support the use of the precept to fund the police, for the simple reason that it is a guarantee that the money will be spent in our county. If we increase the precept to fund the police in Suffolk, it might cost more than an increase in central taxation that people would not necessarily notice, but every pound will be spent in the county on the Suffolk constabulary. I want to see more of that, and I would go further. I would like to see more of what I call parish policing, where parishes—or perhaps groups of parishes in electoral wards—would have the opportunity to fund their own police community support officers. This is where we must be realistic about rural crime. When the police in Suffolk deal with a major incident, such as the stabbing we had in Ipswich, or when we have the threat of terrorism, it is unrealistic to expect the force to prioritise shed theft or the theft of tractors at the same time, no matter how many officers we have. If our villages and rural communities want the added value of an extra visible police presence, they should be prepared to see something on top of the precept and get direct policing as a result—[*Interruption.*] If the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) wants to intervene—she is obviously very interested in what I am saying—I will be more than happy to take an intervention, because she completely failed to answer the question about police stations earlier. In fact, when I asked her whether she would reopen closed police stations, she confirmed that Labour would not, and I do not understand why on earth an Opposition would criticise something that they are not going to reverse.

Ruth George: I am sitting here fairly flabbergasted listening to the hon. Gentleman making the case for some of his poorest constituents paying the price of delivering the sort of law and order that he says is the Government's responsibility—the first responsibility of the state is to keep its population safe. People are already paying an extra £12 a year in Derbyshire, so how much more does he want his constituents to have to pay to get back to proper levels of policing?

James Cartlidge: I would be more than happy for them to pay more. Is the idea that the poorest cannot afford 50p extra a month on their precept to get a police officer? The point is that it would be a choice for the community. Many communities would not choose to have parish policing or direct policing, but it is a new option for them.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con) *rose*—

James Cartlidge: I will take one last intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker, because you will be pleased to know that I will then be concluding.

Mrs Badenoch: Does my hon. Friend agree that many of our constituents have requested the ability to pay more specifically for local policing? Constituents have written to me to say that if the Treasury could not fund it, they would happily pay extra.

James Cartlidge: Absolutely. I will finish by saying that the local funding formula means that funding is transparent—people will know that the money will be spent in their county. We should still look at the national formula, but the model of elected police and crime commissioners being responsible for the money raised locally in a clear and transparent fashion is the right one, and we should use it to get more officers on the beat, providing greater security and comfort to our constituents.

5.11 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): Despite having two towns, the majority of my beautiful constituency is rural, meaning that my constituents are increasingly on the receiving end of rural crime. Nationally, fly-tipping has increased by 7%, becoming something of an epidemic in rural areas. In 2016, agricultural vehicle theft cost farmers and others working in rural industry £5.4 million. It is likely that that increased in 2017 and in the first quarter of this year, which is simply unacceptable. How long will the Government stand by, slashing our police force funding and leaving my constituents to pick up the pieces and pay themselves for the damage caused to their livelihoods?

My constituency is in Kent, which is the fifth-worst affected area for rural crime. Sadly, that is not a surprise. The Government have cut 532 police officers and 104 police community support officers in Kent, while simultaneously ever promising us that they will be tough on crime. To be honest, the myth of the Tories being tough on crime has been long since busted, and probably no one living in Kent believes it to be true anymore. These days, “tough on crime” is just about as untrue a Conservative adage as “strong and stable”.

The truth is that due to the shocking austerity measures imposed on Kent's police since 2010 not only are our towns and high streets more vulnerable, but so are our rural lanes, our quiet villages and our previously idyllic hamlets. All those places have seen a huge rise in fly-tipping, littering and nuisance crime. Kent police has launched the Country Eye app, through which members of rural communities can share information on crime and suspicious behaviour. While I of course commend the effort and thought behind the initiative, it is a sad indictment of the state of police funding that communities are expected to shoulder the responsibility to deal with problems themselves. An app and volunteers should supplement adequately resourced police forces, not simply replace them.

I recently had another meeting with the National Farmers Union, an organisation comprising over 55,000 members, and it shares my constituent farmers' concerns about livelihood-destroying crime. Farmers are paying for the damage to their equipment; they are rebuying livestock; they are paying to clear waste that

[Rosie Duffield]

has been dumped on their land; and they are paying for installing expensive CCTV camera systems. They cannot afford it.

I am standing up for Canterbury and for Kent by saying that enough is enough. When will this Government start taking seriously the concerns of farmers and those who live in rural areas? More than 9 million people live in rural areas, and agriculture contributes around £24 billion to the UK economy, yet rural crime continues to be ignored and the issue has been sidelined again and again. Why? The Government admit there is a problem, so they therefore admit the entire austerity agenda is flawed.

Although we need to be clear that rural crime predominantly affects farmers and agricultural workers, it is also a question of animal rights. This country has a moral duty to uphold high animal welfare standards. From foxhunting to badger baiting, we are neglecting our responsibility to protect our animals and wildlife. Although foxhunting remains illegal and polling suggests that 85% of the British people are opposed to making it legal again, we know foxhunting is still widely practised in Kent and other areas.

Just last year, shocking online footage showed two fox cubs being taken into a kennel and being brought out dead. This so-called “sport” is a savage exercise in bloodlust, and it must be properly policed. Equally, we see badgers being sold on the black market by criminal groups for as much as £700, often for badger baiting. The chief inspector of the RSPCA special operations unit recently spoke about the effect of this exercise on dogs:

“Because the criminals can’t go to a vet, they self-medicate: they patch the dogs up with drugs bought from the internet. Eventually the flesh of the jaw may fall away. We’ve seen dogs with their faces destroyed by these fights.”

It is clear that badger baiting is not only cruel to the badgers themselves but is detrimental to dogs’ health and wellbeing. Despite the clear brutality, the Government fail to act or police it properly.

Instead of listening to those with expertise in animal welfare and providing funding for police forces to enforce existing laws, the Government lazily abdicate their responsibilities. I suggest they look at Labour’s plan for animal welfare, which pledges to strengthen the Hunting Act 2004 and to look at ways to close existing loopholes that allow for cruel illegal hunting to take place in rural areas.

Rural crime is not just an economic issue of people’s livelihoods; it is a moral issue. I am sure the Government will agree that more action needs to be taken to ensure that rural communities are protected and our animals are not subjected to such terrible cruelty.

5.17 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) for introducing this debate, the subject of which is important to me and my constituents. In fact, I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on rural crime. Coincidentally, we had a meeting last night at which we discussed a number of topics, such as the theft of heating oil and diesel, the benefit of drones—drones have already saved lives in Lincolnshire

and elsewhere—the use of WhatsApp groups in policing rural areas, the theft of rural machinery, the fear of isolation among those living in isolated areas, and the National Police Chiefs Council rural and wildlife crime strategies, as described by the Minister. I invite Opposition Members, as well as any more Conservative Members who wish to join, to come along and join our APPG so we can tackle rural crime together.

One of the main areas of discussion yesterday evening was hare coursing, a cruel crime in which lurcher-style dogs chase after a hare. Often there are bets on which dog will catch the hare first, as part of which gangs of mostly men in 4x4s and other heavy vehicles traipse across farmers’ land in pursuit of the animals to make sure they see which dog catches the hare in order to secure the bet.

Hare coursing is a disgusting crime, and it has a huge impact on farmers that is not well understood. Some who see the tyre tracks going across fields and the torn up crops might not think it important, but it is important. The farmer has invested in those crops, which they have nurtured to provide that year’s income for their family. The crime is essentially the same as going into John Lewis, or a similar store, on Oxford Street and destroying every item of merchandise, and then preventing the shop from restocking for the next 12 months. This is a serious crime, which has a huge impact economically and on a farmer’s lifestyle. I should mention at this point that although I have not been a victim of hare coursing crime, my husband is a farmer.

Hare coursing is not just a criminal pastime, but a pastime of criminals. One thing Lincolnshire’s police and crime commissioner has made clear to me is that the vast majority of the people the police catch for this crime come not from Lincolnshire, but from elsewhere. They have come across county lines to commit crime in Lincolnshire, perhaps because they feel it gives them the best chance of not being caught. It is fear of being caught that will stop them doing these things.

Sir Edward Leigh: There is hope, because our PCC is making huge strides by using drones. It is important in these debates that we are not miserable the whole time. There are technological ways in which we can combat crime with great success.

Dr Johnson: My hon. Friend is right, and I shall come on to discuss that shortly.

The crime of hare coursing also involves a fear of violence, because when farmers catch these people many of them threaten the farmer with violence then and there. Sometimes when the crime is reported to the police the farmer is threatened with having their sheds burned down. In some cases pets or livestock have been injured deliberately to try to frighten farmers into not reporting the crime or not pursuing a prosecution for it. Once prosecution occurs, we encounter an issue with sentencing, as it does not reflect the severity of this crime, with an average fine of £250.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend is making a vigorous and effective case on hare coursing in Lincolnshire. She knows that our PCC, Marc Jones, and our chief constable, Will Skelly, have done pioneering work to counter this activity, with good effect. Will she join me in asking those on the Treasury Bench to examine the whole matter of sentencing, as there is a good case for having

a specific offence related to hare coursing, so that once the police do their job, the courts will back them up and encourage them to do still more?

Dr Johnson: I thank my right hon. Friend for that important intervention. He rightly says that the fines are not proportionate, and indeed our next all-party group meeting will be with the Solicitor General to discuss the impacts of sentencing on rural crime. The dogs themselves can be worth very much more than £250 and some of the bets are for £10,000 or more. My right hon. Friend makes reference to Operation Galileo, a Lincolnshire police initiative masterminded by Bill Skelly and Marc Jones, our Conservative PCC. It has had great success in Lincolnshire, with the number of incidents having gone down from 2,000 to 1,400. The police credit that 600 fall to two initiatives, the first of which is the institution of criminal behaviour orders, whereby people convicted of hare coursing are no longer allowed to be in a vehicle and in possession of a lurcher-style dog, or in the company of others with such an animal, in Lincolnshire. However, Lincolnshire police can catch these people but they can then go to Cambridgeshire or North Yorkshire to do the same thing. I therefore ask the Minister to consider the possibility of allowing courts to impose such an order covering a wider geographical area, so that the Cambridgeshire police do not then have to catch these people, then the North Yorkshire police have to do the same, and so on. These orders could apply in other areas as soon as someone has been caught once.

The main initiative that has brought about the success is the seizing of dogs, because, as I say, the dog is what is valuable to these criminals. Taking the dog from them means they are not able to pursue their crime; these dogs are trained to do what they are doing. Tackling the crime is expensive; we have seen the crime fall in Lincolnshire, but I understand from our PCC that dog kennelling fees have cost £46,000 this year. There is currently no provision in law to reclaim that money from the criminal once they have been prosecuted, so I ask the Minister to consider whether he can add a clause into law that would allow the kennelling fees to be reclaimed from the criminal after their conviction. That would be only fair and reasonable.

In her opening speech, the Minister mentioned that there was no definition of rural crime, but police tell me that intelligence and evidence-based policing is hampered by the fact that they do not have some of the data that they need. I therefore ask her to consider better and more detailed recording of crime—heating oil theft and hare coursing are not always specifically recorded—so that we can identify where these crimes are taking place and target them much more effectively.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) mentioned fear. Nobody should experience fear in their own home. People have a right to feel safe as well as to be safe. In an isolated setting, however, it is perhaps understandable that people do not always feel that way. If a person is attacked in their flat, or if someone comes into their home, or they feel unsafe, they can scream, run outside and seek help relatively quickly. If someone is in an isolated rural farmhouse, more than a mile from the nearest property, it is understandable that the response time from the police and from any member of the public will be much slower. That would leave them feeling much more isolated.

I have great admiration for the work of Lincolnshire police, especially the way that they police a large geographical area, with 6,000 miles of road and a widely dispersed population. It is a credit to them that our crime level is among the lowest in the entire country, but money is an issue. Lincolnshire police has one of the lowest levels of funding in the country. I understand the point that there is only so much money and that it has to be shared out somehow, but we receive the least amount of funding for a service that is more difficult and more expensive to deliver because of the area that the police have to cover. Moreover, a particularly high proportion of our money is funded locally. I agree with my hon. Friends who have said that it is reasonable for some of the money to come from local sources as it is directed back locally, and for some of it to come from central Government grant. However, at the moment, there are areas of the country, particularly urban areas, where the local population is being asked to contribute around 25% of the money that is used for the overall policing budget in their area, and yet in Lincolnshire, it is 43%, and I understand that in North Yorkshire it is closer to 50%. We need greater fairness. I welcome the fact that the Government are looking into how we can make police funding much fairer in the future, and I will be happy to support them in doing so.

5.27 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the very thoughtful speech of the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and the other very thoughtful speeches in this debate. I very much welcome the fact that our Opposition Front-Bench team has chosen to hold this debate on rural crime and public services. Those of us who represent rural constituencies welcome the fact that many people view our communities in very glowing terms. We all know about the green and pleasant land, the apple tree in Linden Lea and so on, and our communities are all of those things—plus we also have a good few mountains in North Wales for good measure—but, like every other community, they have problems. They also have problems that are unique because of their rurality.

I was pleased to hear the emphasis in this debate on criminality pure and simple when it comes to animal abuse. These cases are truly horrific—whether it is hare coursing or badger baiting. Let us be absolutely clear on this: this is not some gentle historical relic of the past of some rural sport and the like; it is criminal behaviour pure and simple. The people who perpetuate these evil practices deserve to have the strong arm of the law used against them.

Giles Watling: Would the hon. Lady not include in that abandoning horses in fields to starve? That happens in my area. It is not only criminality, but sheer ignorance as well.

Susan Elan Jones: Yes, I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman; it is animal abuse, it is cruelty and it needs to be stamped out. The punishment needs to fit the crime in those areas.

A couple of years ago I held an Adjournment debate in this House on rural crime, in which I highlighted the work of a local initiative—a rural crime mapping scheme—in the wards of Esclusham and Ponciau in my

[Susan Elan Jones]

own constituency. The Minister then praised the local endeavour in our area, as well as the work of Farm Watch, the intriguingly named OWL—Online Watch Link—and of course the excellent work of the rural crime team of North Wales police, to which I also pay tribute today.

Many Members have spoken about the impact of police cuts. I must report on the situation in north Wales, using January Home Office figures. Five years ago, North Wales police employed 160 officers for neighbourhood policing and 254 police community support officers. Last year that figure fell to 90 police officers and just 148 police community support officers. That is a worry. Now, we know that there is technology and we welcome new technology—none of us is advocating the return to a sort of era of “Dixon of Dock Green”—but we do recognise that neighbourhood policing is vital if we are serious about tackling crime in our rural communities.

There are many aspects to rural crime, but today I will stick to just one: the issue of speeding on our rural roads, which I asked the Minister about earlier. Many of us are very concerned about the extent of speeding now. We need a major clampdown on speeding and, yes, a justice system that is prepared to be serious in its use of driving bans—something that is not happening to the right degree today.

Ruth George: Does my hon. Friend agree that the lack of funding for safety measures on our roads is contributing to the increase in speeding? In Derbyshire, for example, an area has to have seen seven personal injury accidents within three years before the authority will even look at considering safety improvements on the road. Does she agree that that is contributing to the problem?

Susan Elan Jones: I agree with every word my hon. Friend said.

Let me give a couple of examples. In north Wales, a biker was recently clocked doing 138 mph on the single-lane carriageway A5. For that he got fines, plus a grand total of a 90-day ban. Chillingly, a newspaper report spoke of photographs of the defendant riding towards a triangular sign warning of a pedestrian crossing 250 yards ahead of him. That is terrifying. In another example on the A5 in north Wales, a so-called supercar—I believe it cost around £70,000 and it could obviously go extremely fast—was clocked doing 122 mph. That is double the speed limit. The driver in that case got fines, which were clearly worth nothing to the tune of his £70,000 car, plus a grand total of a 56-day driving ban.

The Institute of Advanced Motorists has shown that there have been speeds of up to 140 mph on our roads in the last couple of years, so it is small wonder that it has called for an increase in visible policing as an active deterrent to speeding. It has also called for advanced driving and riding tuition, and the continuous development of skills. As a spokesperson from the organisation put it:

“Those guilty of this level of excessive speeding are clearly not being deterred by a short ban or fine. Their minds need to be concentrated to appreciate that they are putting other road users at significant danger by acting in this way.”

We need to be aware that car occupants and motorcyclists are twice as likely to die on a rural road as on an urban one. For cyclists, it is three times as much. The road safety charity Brake found, in a Brake and Digby Brown survey, that 33% of drivers admit to driving too fast on country roads, 19% admit breaking speed limits on country roads, 37% have had a near miss on country roads and 72% support lower speed limits.

I would like to end with a specific plea. More motorcyclists have died in north Wales so far this year—eight people—than in all of 2017. This is a sad feature not just of north Wales but of some other rural areas too. This week, North Wales police released details of an anonymous call where a man’s partner called them and begged them to arrest her speeding biker boyfriend over fears that he would die on the roads. North Wales police released the transcript of this anonymous call. The woman told them:

“My partner is a biker and is visiting north Wales this weekend and already boasting that he will be doing over a ton whenever he can. I know where they are starting from. Please, please try and find and stop them. We have children and I would rather him banned or in jail than dead. I am sorry to put this on you as I know you are already overworked.”

It is time we brought in proper speeding bans, time we funded more police to watch over our rural roads, and time we took the issue of speeding seriously. I really hope that this will become a much bigger issue in years to come and that the Government will act.

5.35 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It is vital, as we have heard from colleagues across the House, that we tackle the challenge of crime in rural communities. My constituency is unusual on Teesside in that it is the only one with a significant rural element, in the shape of rural East Cleveland. At my rural club, I have heard eloquent testimony from local farmers and people who run rural businesses on issues such as hare coursing, theft, trespass, and the production of drugs on isolated patches of farmland. There is a very serious problem. Perhaps it does not attract some of the media attention that urban crime, particularly crime in the capital, receives, but that does not mean that it is not very serious.

For example, in the coastal town of Saltburn at Easter, there was a real wave of antisocial behaviour. The Coco & Rum restaurant was attacked. A gang of youths was gathering around the local Sainsbury’s, drawn there by the wi-fi signal. Saltburn may not be a rural community, but it is a coastal community, so it falls into the category of somewhere that is quite difficult to police.

Good local policing makes a huge difference in cracking down on all these problems. I pay great tribute to the work of the Guisborough neighbourhood policing team, who are the main focus of policing in East Cleveland. Led by Inspector Fay Cole, they do a really fantastic job. They do not have large numbers of people. They have a very large area to police—it profiles as somewhere with many of the features of an urban community, just spread out in a more disparate fashion. They do a brilliant job. At the Skelton McDonald’s during the recess, I heard directly from the people there how grateful they were for the work of the local constabulary in cracking down on problems

they had had with antisocial behaviour. So it can be done. Considering the resources that are available, the team do an outstanding job.

That brings me to the issue of resources. I will concede that there is funding pressure on our police. That would be my No. 1 priority for additional investment as our national finances stabilise, and I welcome the comments made by the Home Secretary in his Andrew Marr interview at the weekend. However, I find it well-nigh unbelievable that Labour Members show such collective amnesia as to why we are in the current situation regarding our public finances. The ruinous state that we inherited in 2010, which they—*[Interruption.]* They look down. They look at their phones. They look anywhere other than at the truth of the matter, which is—*[Interruption.]* The truth of the matter is that it was a shambolic situation, and we are still paying the price for it now. Were they to have the opportunity to put into practice some of the policies that they boast about now, we would very quickly return to that state of affairs.

Dr Caroline Johnson: My hon. Friend is giving an important speech and making his point very well. Is it not right that the cost of the interest we are paying on the debt created by the Labour Government is roughly equivalent to the current policing budget? Had they not created such huge levels of debt, would we not be able to provide a much better service?

Mr Clarke: My hon. Friend is completely right. The Opposition may deny it because it is fundamentally inconvenient to them.

Ruth George: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Clarke: I will happily give way.

Ruth George: I thank the hon. Gentleman. To put the record straight, the debt of which he speaks was less than £1 trillion in 2010. It is now practically £2 trillion. That is where the interest on the debt is coming from. Not only have this Government doubled the country's debt, but they have decimated our police forces to the lowest level ever and are letting criminals back into our rural communities to run riot.

Mr Clarke: That is the height of economic illiteracy. It fails to distinguish between the debt and the deficit. We inherited an enormous deficit, so of course the debt continued to grow while there was a deficit. We have now virtually closed that deficit on current spending, and all that we now borrow is for investment. That is an absolute calumny in terms of economics, and it is frightening that the hon. Lady believes it.

Mr John Hayes: With respect to my hon. Friend, to return to the issue of policing, it is also true that the problem with the funding of rural policing goes back a long way. I first campaigned on this when Tony Blair was Prime Minister, I took a petition on it to Downing Street when Gordon Brown was Prime Minister and I continued to campaign on it during the coalition Government. We have a fundamental problem across politics of getting the funding for rural policing right, and now we have the opportunity to do so.

Mr Clarke: I agree. How we slice the cake is certainly a topic to which we can return. I find myself in an interesting situation, because part of Cleveland is an urban community and part of it is a rural community. It is certainly important, as a matter of principle, that we have a funding settlement that is fair to all parts of our society.

I want to look at the positive things that are going on, and there are some very positive things going on in Cleveland. I want to congratulate Cleveland police today on opening its recruitment drive. It aims to significantly increase the number of special constables from the current number of about 50 to more than 200. That is a great tribute to our new chief constable, Mike Veale, but it is also a tribute to the police and crime commissioner for allowing it to happen; I welcome, on a cross-party basis, his decision to do so.

I think that lots of people in East Cleveland will want to take up the opportunity to serve as a special constable. I have heard lots of enthusiasm from people who want to serve their communities and who know them well, which means they can establish a bond and will be likely to be able to identify problems before they arise and tackle them decisively. I hope that any constituents listening to the debate will proceed to the Cleveland police website and look at the recruitment process.

A huge amount can also be done through sensible reform. I have met our new chief constable, and he has talked about things such as greater use of technology, so that officers are not obligated to return to station every time there has been an incident and write it up, but can do so while out on the beat, and flattening the force structure. The chief constable has been talking about removing certain ranks from the force structure, to free up more funding for constables who will be out on the beat. It is the sergeants and constables who so often make a real difference on the ground by extending availability of cover. That is an extremely healthy mindset and something that I hope we will see progress on in the years ahead.

There is an opportunity to restore confidence to communities such as Loftus and Brotton. I am holding a series of meetings in those two villages this Friday with the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner precisely to try to identify how, while recognising the financial realities, we can deliver a better balance of policing between the urban and rural areas of Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland.

5.43 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

I represent a constituency in north Wales, which has a number of urban areas but is also significantly rural, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) said. We have something like 700,000 people in north Wales, spread over 6,000-plus sq km. It is a drive of 82 miles from one end of north Wales to the other, and it would take me 20 miles by 10 miles to cover my constituency. It is a big rural area represented by Members of Parliament in the House today. We have six counties in the North Wales police force area, and we have two languages—Welsh and English—because of the area's history.

[David Hanson]

We have an influx of tourists each year, which doubles the population in the key summer months. That brings its own challenges, as my hon. Friend said, such as increased traffic problems, more deaths on roads and an increase in the number of events that need policing. We have individuals who occasionally drink too much on holiday and cause difficulties, and we have increased crime in the summer months. Those challenges are by no means and by no stretch of the imagination the ones facing central London or the inner cities, but they are interesting challenges that need to be addressed by the Government as part of the rural crime debate. We border the two metropolitan areas of Merseyside and Manchester, which have significant crime challenges, such as the promotion of drug and other criminal activity, which are very often transferred to areas of north Wales. We have to be aware of all those issues.

I approach this debate in the light of those challenges for north Wales. We are an area of moderate or reasonably low crime, but I bring to the House the fact that in the past 12 to 15 months crime has significantly increased. I listened with some interest to Members who have seen crime fall in their area. We must remember that this is against a backdrop of having 20,000 fewer officers across the whole of the United Kingdom since I had the honour of being the police Minister in the Home Office. There has been a 6% drop in police numbers—100 fewer officers—in my North Wales police force area, but over the past 18 months there has been a 13% increase in recorded crime in north Wales. The number of murders is at a seven-year high. Shop theft has risen, and it is estimated that its cost is over £128,000 a year in my constituency. Theft from buildings and properties has risen by 37% in the past year and violent crime is up by 21%, with domestic burglary up by 38% across the board.

I accept that this brings many challenges, and I know for a fact that North Wales police officers are doing a sterling job—they are concerned to drive crime down, and they want to do more—but the chief constable himself has said that we face a £2.1 million cut next year because of reduced funding from central Government. It is all very well to talk, as we did earlier, about taxpayers' money, but central Government money comes from everybody, with the richest and the poorest in our society paying it through direct taxation, while the rises for local rate payers, who are now the source of funding needed to maintain the police service—we have had a significant 5% rise in north Wales—come from everybody, rich and poor, in north Wales entirely on the basis of their property, even though a council tax increase raises less in our area than it would, for example, here in Westminster. There is a funding issue, and it has been well rehearsed.

I support the proposal made from the Front Bench by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) to increase police force numbers by about 10,000. That will not get us back to where we were when I did the job, but it would still be a significant increase and it would help to support the thin blue line in north Wales. There are now 1,300 police officers in north Wales, but we must remember that, although they are at work for eight hours in any one day, they are asleep for eight hours and they are off for eight hours,

while some are off sick and some are on holiday so, recognising that as a whole, it is an extremely thin blue line.

Crime in urban areas is very important, and antisocial behaviour and a range of other issues do affect my constituency, but there are specific issues of rural crime, which this debate is about, and I want to draw the Minister's attention to one in particular. I congratulate him on his elevation to the Front Bench, where I know he will do a good job. He represents a north-west constituency that has rural areas, and he comes to my constituency on occasion, so he will know it is a rural one. He has it within his gift today to take action, in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, in support of the North Wales police rural unit in tackling sheep attacks and sheep worrying.

The Minister needs to know that in north Wales, and I pay tribute to North Wales police for this, we have a specific unit to deal with rural crime. It deals not just with attacks on sheep, but with attacks on birds, badger baiting and the enforcement of the fox hunting and hare coursing legislation, as well as fly-tipping and the rural issues of metal theft, tractor theft and all such crimes. Its officers do so in a specific and targeted way, dealing with the impact of those crimes, but also working to prevent them by visiting agricultural shows, talking to farmers and coming to farmers markets. They provide information to support the prevention of crime, which is a great use of policing time, rather than just dealing with the criminal activity itself.

The head of the unit, Rob Taylor, and its officers have brought to my attention the vital issue of sheep worrying. I want to put it on the Minister's agenda because he can make a difference today by saying that he will act on it. Sheep worrying in my north Wales constituency has resulted in 648 dead animals in the past year. Farmers have shot 52 dogs because they were sheep worrying. There have been 449 livestock attacks. Damage to sheep and livestock has cost farmers thousands of pounds. Farmers in Lixwm in my constituency have experienced two attacks in 48 hours.

Why do I say that the Minister can take action? There are some clear things he can do, so let me put them on the record. I know those figures because North Wales police have kept a record of those attacks. At present, attacks on livestock in general—not just sheep—are not a recordable offence across the United Kingdom. The Home Office could make that a recordable offence so that we know how many attacks have taken place and where, and the extent of the problem.

The Government also need to address the fact that the police have no powers to seize dogs that undertake attacks. The fine for irresponsible dog owners whose dogs attack sheep is £1,000, but that does not even cover the cost of dead sheep following attacks on some of my constituents' farms, and no compensation is paid to people who lose sheep as a result of criminal activity. It is very difficult to get sheep insurance if there has already been an attack. Finally, no disqualification order is applied to the owner of a dog that attacks sheep and kills perhaps 10 or 15 of them, as has happened on some of the farms in my constituency.

It is in the gift of the Minister to address those issues. He could make it a recordable offence, increase the fine, give the police powers to seize dogs legally, and give

disqualification orders to dog owners whose dogs misbehave in a way that causes carnage, increased costs and damage.

The all-party parliamentary group on animal welfare, ably led by my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), has produced an excellent report on those issues which has been submitted to DEFRA. The Minister could indicate today that he will look at the issues. Although that would not increase police numbers or necessarily reduce crime in my urban areas, which is still a severe issue, or prevent murders linked to county line issues and other drug offences, it could help, in a small way, to support the efforts of the North Wales police rural unit to tackle sheep worrying and sheep crime. Many people think it is a frivolous crime, but it comes at a cost.

Giles Watling: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

David Hanson: I was about to finish, but I will certainly give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Giles Watling: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and I am sorry for interrupting just as he was finishing. Does he think it might be helpful to reintroduce a form of licensing or registration for dogs so that we know where they are and who owns them?

David Hanson: There are a range of issues and that could certainly be looked at. In the immediate term, however, although my force records the crimes, we do not know how many animal attacks there are against livestock in Essex, for example, because the police are not required to record them. Recording them would be a start, and increasing the fine and allowing the police to disqualify dog owners are other major proposals. Important though I think other issues are, none of those proposals would be a major expenditure item for the police or for DEFRA. I hope they would act as a deterrent and help tackle this particular crime, which has caused mayhem in my constituency. They have the support of North Wales police. If I can have extra police, I will take them, and if we can deal with urban crime, I will take that, but the Minister has it in his gift to address those issues and I hope he will seriously consider doing so today.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. If everyone takes around seven minutes, everyone who wishes to speak will have an opportunity to do so. If they do not, I will have to impose a time limit. Let us try to be co-operational.

5.54 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I might even try to take less time, in the spirit of charity.

As attested to not least by the number of Lincolnshire MPs in the Chamber today, the Lincolnshire police force is a remarkable force. Lincolnshire is a vast rural county—the second biggest in the country, after Yorkshire—yet, although the average level of funding per head in the UK is £104.50, it gets by on £77.90 per head. That is a huge difference. I say gently to the Opposition that it is surprising that their contention is

that it costs more to police a rural area than a metropolitan area in some ways. Lincolnshire does not want to take money away from metropolitan areas, but I think we all realise that a fairer share of the cake is important. In that context, though, I think we all also realise that the Metropolitan police's work on counter-terrorism has a nationwide benefit and that rural police forces benefit from the integrated way in which modern police forces work.

Mr John Hayes: Let me say two things on that matter. First, Lincolnshire is not only rural but sparse, and the sparse nature of the population creates real problems in terms of the police responding to events of the kind that have been described. Secondly, the Metropolitan police's reach, which my hon. Friend describes, does not mean that Lincolnshire police do not have to be alive to those kind of threats and trained to prepare for them, which is costly, too.

Matt Warman: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for summarising the rest of my speech. He is absolutely right that, although we of course benefit from money that goes to the Metropolitan police and to other police forces, in a county that is a vast place in terms of travelling time as much as distance, the nature of policing is fundamentally different.

We have talked about hare coursing at some length and I do not wish to add much to the excellent contributions we have heard, but let me say two things. First, this is absolutely about the sense of safety that people feel in their own homes and properties. It is a profoundly serious crime that has never had the attention that it deserves in terms of sentencing in the courts. Its victims have struggled to articulate quite how damaging and limiting for their lives it has been not to feel safe in their own homes, knowing how distant they are from anyone else. If nothing else, this debate has been an important contribution on that issue.

Secondly, when I have raised hare coursing in this House and elsewhere, one of my frustrations has been that even people in urban areas in my constituency often accuse those who seek to better fund action on rural crime and hare coursing of not focusing on what they would say are more important urban crimes. We have a job of work to do to explain the damage done by rural crime and hare coursing in particular, not only to our colleagues in the House but even to those who live in market towns just a few miles from where it happens. I absolutely commend the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and the all-party group on rural crime, particularly on hare coursing, but there is plenty more to do on that front.

Next, I wish to talk about the roads, and particularly the cost to Lincolnshire police of the investigation of accidents and collisions. According to Lincolnshire police, on average, it costs £2 million overall to investigate a collision and £1.84 million per casualty. It is of course a tragedy when anyone dies on our roads, but it is also a huge amount of money for our public services, so we are right to consider what we can do to get the incidence of road fatalities down, not solely for the sake of the families of those in our constituencies but for all taxpayers.

Thankfully, Lincolnshire has seen a significant reduction in the number of road deaths and collisions compared with 10 or 15 years ago, but there is still a huge amount of work to do. We have to bear in mind that the work of

[Matt Warman]

special constables in particular has been a very practical way for Lincolnshire to deal with the number of crimes and the number of road safety partnership schemes has increased. That should be commended and it is just one example of Lincolnshire police being creative with that £77.90 per head of population, which, as I said earlier, is some £25 per head below the average for the country.

The police force has worked with the private sector. Lincolnshire colleagues will no doubt be familiar with the imperfection of G4S, shall we say, when it comes to its relationship with the police force, but I would argue that ultimately it has done far more good than harm in terms of value for the taxpayer. When it works, it works very well, so I commend it.

I also commend the use of WhatsApp groups to deal with hare coursing, the use of drones and a whole host of schemes. I commend the work of the police with North Sea Camp prison on fly-tipping, allowing inmates to return, to some extent, to the world of work through the genuine public service of helping to deal with fly-tipping, which in our vast rural county is a real struggle and hard to deal with. It is also the right thing to do for the future life chances of criminals in a category D, so-called open, prison, where it is important they adjust to the future world of work.

I will talk briefly about the issues that have come to the urban areas of my constituency, thanks to the many benefits of being a rural area. Large numbers of people have come to Boston in particular thanks to our agricultural economy and the availability of work. That has, however, caused some social tensions and a number of issues around translation for the police, which cost a great deal of money. Dealing with new communities within a rural constituency often falls to the police. Lincolnshire police do a remarkable job in very challenging circumstances. I commend the work of Marc Jones, the police and crime commissioner, and Bill Skelly.

More than anything, what we have seen from all my Lincolnshire colleagues—and from the Minister on the Front Bench—is an argument that a fairer share of the funding cake is only right for rural constituencies. I hope that the next time we debate the police funding formula, those on the Labour Benches will acknowledge that it would be in all our interests to slice that funding cake, however big it is, more fairly than it is at the moment.

6.2 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), my constituency neighbour, on his promotion to the Front Bench. I promise to try to be a little more deferential—I can't commit to it—on the platform of Macclesfield station as we travel down together.

As the Minister will know, rural crime is the same as crime in any other area. In my very rural constituency, we have burglaries, shop thefts, car thefts, domestic abuse, antisocial behaviour, and, most recently, a serious increase in violent crime with the coming of county lines criminals to our isolated towns. The difference between rural crime and urban crime is that there is more isolation: there is more isolation among communities. There are fewer police and they are more isolated, too.

I recently met shop owners in New Mills, a small town in my constituency, who see gangs of youths committing antisocial behaviour, trying to rob stores and present fake money. Those shopkeepers are often solitary, working on their own in their shops. They tell me that they are frightened by the lack of police presence on their streets. In Chapel-en-le-Frith, the capital of the Peak, a beautiful little village nestled in the valleys just down the road from where I live, there are people posting on social media that they are too scared to set foot outside their doors because they are worried about the criminals patrolling the area looking for burglary opportunities. In Derbyshire, we have lost more than 400 police officers in the last seven years, as well as two police stations, one in New Mills and one in Chapel-en-le-Frith, and while the Minister can question the impact of those losses, people in those communities certainly feel less safe.

We have had an increase in our precept of £1 a month for every resident across Derbyshire, which will allow us another 25 officers, but that will in no way make up for the more than 400 we have lost. High Peak is an area of over 200 square miles and 91,000 people. We used to have more than 100 police officers across our four police stations; now there is just half that number. We have seen not only a 26% cut in police funding but huge extra demands on our police forces, particularly from specialist crime, cyber-crime, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse and modern slavery.

Now we have just 50 police officers across two police stations. I pay enormous tribute to Inspector Phil Booth of High Peak police and his team, who work incredibly hard over a wide area—and singlehandedly now that there are not enough of them to cover the whole area with two officers at a time. At most, we have 10 officers patrolling at once, even at the busiest times—the thin blue line is very thin! I saw this when I spent a 12-hour shift with them on a Friday night, driving huge distances, searching for missing persons, dealing with antisocial behaviour, domestic incidents and violence.

Officers often have to attend dangerous incidents singlehanded. Last month, one of our officers responded to a burglar alarm at a warehouse—a fairly common incident. He went out on his own in a police car as usual, but when he got there, three cars sped out of the warehouse straight at him and rammed his police car, deliberately injuring him. Fortunately, after that, they left, but we are seeing increased violence by offenders, because they know our police are on their own.

When I was sitting in the police station with the police officers, a young constable told me that she often had to attend on her own incidents where gangs of youths taunted her and claimed she had no back-up on the way. She has to claim she has support around the corner while knowing from her radio that she does not, that her colleagues might be miles away and that she has to hold the line on her own, and it is scary. Our police officers should not be put in those situations. It happens more in rural areas because the police are so isolated and covering such a wide area. There is a limit to what individual officers can put up with, and unfortunately more are leaving the service from stress and strain. They should not be in danger because of cuts.

On top of all this, we have recently seen county lines criminals come to our quiet area of Derbyshire, bringing violence, cuckooing, the kidnapping of vulnerable people,

hard drugs and serious weapons. They come out from Manchester, take over a house in Buxton, Chapel or New Mills and hold inhabitants captive while they supply hard drugs in the area. When our police receive intelligence that a drug supplier is present, they have to request an armed response unit from Ripley, which is over an hour away. If they do not get that intelligence and have to raid the property themselves, they can be faced with knives, guns and—in the latest incident—machetes. They are putting their own safety on the line for us.

Rural crime might be similar to that in urban areas, but rural areas have fewer resources to deal with it. We could have a debate about the reason for that, as the Minister tried to do earlier, but I would rather make some practical suggestions, and I hope that Ministers will take heed. Our local court was closed two years ago, so now offenders have to be transported over an hour away to Manchester or Chesterfield, which ties up police time and resources.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady, and we look forward to the elucidation of her arguments, but I was a tad nervous when she talked about the subjects she wanted to go on to discuss, because a number of other Members also wish to contribute, and we must get on to the winding-up speeches as well. I am sure she will treat of these matters in a legendary fashion but also very succinctly.

Ruth George: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Absolutely.

I am sure that the Home Office will be asking Justice Ministers to look into the impact of the next round of court closures on police and Home Office resources.

It takes six months for people in my area to receive drugs treatment. That means not only that those people are suffering, but that the criminals who come out for county lines have a ready-made market. Although hardened drug users are apparently begging for treatment, they cannot get it for six months, and that needs to be looked at.

Finally, our police tell me that they have a serious problem with forensic testing. It takes six months for an illegal substance to be tested. The police can hold suspects on pre-charge bail for a maximum of three months, so they have to let them go and cannot place conditions on them. Those people are then free to intimidate victims and witnesses, thus endangering their trials and the ability to commit them for sentencing.

I look forward to the Minister's addressing those issues. We all want our police to have the support they need in every area, so that they can do their job of protecting us all.

Mr Speaker: Well! That was extremely succinct. I thank the hon. Lady.

6.11 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Saffron Walden is the largest and most rural constituency in Essex, with almost 400 square miles of beautiful countryside. However, its size means that my constituents face challenges in accessing public services, and in that regard the vast majority of the correspondence that I receive relates to tackling rural crime. Rural crime needs special attention, because it is markedly different from

other offences. In some respects our area needs more, not less, policing than other areas. That is because crimes are often committed by certain groups in isolated areas where police response times are inevitably slower.

The Conservatives are the party of law and order, and the Government have done some very positive things, which I acknowledge. In April the Minister for Housing, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), announced a review of the powers to deal with unauthorised caravan sites. Similarly, after lobbying efforts by me and a number of colleagues—including my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling), who is present—the Essex police precept was increased. The increase will deliver 150 more officers.

I supported that measure wholeheartedly, but it was a short-term solution, and local people cannot always be asked to pay more. Taxpayers are already burdened with the cost of clearing up rural crime—for instance, in the village of Great Canfield, where my constituent Allison Ward wrote to me about fly-tipping, explaining that it had blocked roads and that it could take two or three days for the rubbish to be removed. I have regularly been in contact with farmers who have been threatened, businesses that have been stolen from, shop owners in the market towns who have been burgled, and the many constituents whose lives are blighted by illegal Traveller sites. My constituents Kate Mitchell and Jenny Askew wrote to let me know that, even as we speak, an illegal site is disrupting pupils in the middle of their important exams at Helena Romanes School.

I am speaking today on behalf of all those people, and asking the Government for a fresh look at rural crime with more innovative solutions. For instance, Uttlesford community safety partnership has brilliant outreach schemes. By building networks among farmers, it has enabled them to message one another when an incident requires a rapid response. The partnership is currently lobbying for automatic number plate recognition cameras along an M11 link road, the B1383, which would help to trigger alerts when suspected hare coursers enter the area. We would be pleased if that received Government support.

I spent my Easter recess gaining work experience with local police. It was an opportunity for me to engage with what they are seeing on the frontline. I was able to look more closely at how cases are handled on the Athena system and how the police work with Uttlesford Council, and to take part in local and community policing ride-alongs. One day we even had an urgent 999 call—about a naked man running around Saffron Walden. I am only half glad that we did not catch him, as he would have had to sit in the back of the patrol car with me!

What I learned from being with the police is that they feel they spend too much time driving across the area and not enough time policing. They also have concerns that population does not account for as wide an area as Braintree and Uttlesford, so we need more officers because the per capita statistics are not reflective when need is assessed. That is why constituents such as David Kerr wrote to me, quite rightly, to say that police presence is lacking and that is why some criminals feel they can act with impunity.

When I was out on a patrol with PCSO James Graham, whom I pay tribute to for his tireless community engagement, we met farmers who had been affected by

[Mrs Kemi Badenoch]

hare coursing. Their families had previously been threatened by the coursers. As law-abiding citizens, they have liberty to lose, but those who challenge them on their own land do not. My constituent Tony Rea has often written to me about ways in which the Irish model, where trespass is a criminal and not a civil offence, can be used to stop Travellers trespassing on private land.

What was striking is that due to the major roads and airport infrastructure in the constituency, we suffer from high rates of transient crime, as hare coursers come from outside the county. I have also been told of the bizarre instance of criminals from as far away as Chile coming in via Stansted airport and fleeing before their crimes could be properly investigated.

On my last day with the police, I took part in a multi-agency operation on the Felsted Traveller site to find some wanted individuals. I helped the police patrol the perimeter to ensure that suspects did not successfully flee, and joined the dog unit to microchip the Travellers' dogs. Shockingly, we uncovered a cannabis factory. This illegal activity on a sanctioned site only fuels drug use in the area and Travellers' own gambling habits for hare coursing. Despite this, I also heard stories of remarkable bravery, notably where Sergeant Geoff Edwards—only just returning to full duty—challenged seven hare coursers on his own.

I pay tribute to Essex Police and in particular Chief Constable Stephen Kavanagh, who recently announced his retirement. The police need more support from us in this House. We can help them by looking again at a strategic view of how best to fight rural crime and introducing innovations as they protect our constituents. I would be most grateful if the Minister shared with the House in this debate, or in the near future, any new proposals or innovations the Government have in this area.

6.17 pm

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): By participating in this very necessary debate today I wish to put on record my willingness to speak up for the rural communities and farm businesses that this Government have neglected.

I went to Moor farm in my constituency to meet a number of farmers and members of the National Farmers Union. Farmers in my constituency have said that they are unable to sleep peacefully and are having to constantly dig trenches, replace locks and build gates and barriers to barricade themselves in their own farms. Gangs of hare coursers have threatened their families with violence and intimidation; hare coursing itself has become an almost daily and expected occurrence and damages crops, property and the welfare of livestock.

I ask Members to imagine if the context of a criminal episode was changed and it was shown to be one of us smashing through garden fences, driving across flowerbeds, shouting and gesticulating and gesturing abuse, intimidating and threatening witnesses and even actually assaulting someone. Would we be permitted to continue in that way unimpeded time after time? I think not; we all know the answer would be no.

Those who live, work and enjoy the countryside should feel safe, but these crimes result in deep anxiety. These communities are suffering from a chronic lack of investment in public services. Last year, there were

184 incidents of hare coursing in Peterborough and rural theft cost Cambridgeshire £1,732,174. Organised crime gangs steal diesel and tractors and relentlessly target quad bikes. The theft of high-value machinery that cannot be replaced swiftly puts timely agricultural operations at risk.

My constabulary works tirelessly to prevent the intimidation of landowners, walkers and people trying to enjoy the countryside, but cuts have affected the ability of rural forces to provide time-honoured community policing. Fly-tipping and illegal waste dumping are costing farmers tens of thousands of pounds to clear up. What impact does the Minister believe these unprecedented cuts to local authorities are having on the levels of rural fly-tipping? I would be interested to know whether he recognises the connection between his Government's relentless austerity agenda and the increases in fly-tipping and littering in our countryside. As a result of these cuts to our councils, the cost of clearing fly-tips is increasingly being borne by landowners and farmers.

The situation is totally out of control, and on the rare occasions when criminals are apprehended, it is felt that their acts of criminality are not being dealt with appropriately. When I speak to farmers, they advise me that even when the police are called, they are unable to respond in a timely fashion. Also, as we have heard today, the police can be intimidated by these criminals. They often have to attend a reported crime by themselves without any support, and that has to be looked into. It is inappropriate for them to be alone without support. They need better support, and the victims of crime should not have to pay. Farms are having to become fortresses, as farmers feel as though they are under siege. There has been a blatant failure to address the real issues, and the situation has now reached breaking point. I ask the Minister to look seriously at what can be done to address the issue of rural crime, in order to make those whom we serve feel safe.

6.21 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I would like to start by commending my police and crime commissioner, Peter McCall, and the Cumbria constabulary, which has recently been graded as "good" by Her Majesty's inspectorate. My very rural constituency covers an area of around 500 square miles and has a population of 80,000 people. This brings two challenges. The huge geographical area of Cumbria, with the Lake District mountain range in the middle, means that it takes far longer than one might expect to travel the length and breadth of the county. It also means that we are less able than more densely populated rural areas to generate funds by increasing the precept.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My hon. Friend describes her rural area, and of course, west Oxfordshire is also rural. We too are afflicted by the horrors of hare coursing, as well as by rural thefts and, more recently, by some well-publicised violent ATM thefts. It occurs to me that, although this is rural crime, it may be committed by people who are coming from elsewhere and that there could therefore be an element of urban crime exporting itself to rural areas. Does she agree that we need not only to encourage police forces to work together, which they will do, but to consider these issues holistically?

Trudy Harrison: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. In that context, I also want to commend the Cumbria constabulary for its work on bringing together the Copeland hub, which is a first in the county. It is a multi-agency hub that brings together neighbourhood policing, the council and housing.

The election of police and crime commissioners has given communities, including those in rural areas, a strong voice in determining how police resources should be allocated in order to tackle the crimes that matter most to our communities. However, this is dependent on having a strong economy and a large population to contribute towards the precept. It is true that people living and working in rural areas are less likely to become victims of crime than those in urban areas, but let us not discount the fact that rural crime is estimated to have cost the UK economy more than £39 million since 2016.

The crime and community safety strategic assessment for Cumbria published in November 2017 reports that more than half the residents in Cumbria live rurally. That compares with about 18% across England and Wales. Offences typically include the theft of livestock, quad bikes, machinery and small and mid-sized tractors, as well as older tractors, which are now being stolen to feed the market for spares. Fly-tipping and illegal waste dumping cost landowners tens of thousands of pounds to clear up, and this is becoming an increasing problem for local authorities and the police, as well as for our communities, who take so much pride in where they live.

Cumbria's economy depends on tourism, which is worth around £2.5 billion. Having secured UNESCO world heritage status for our cultural heritage and stunning scenery, it is surely more important than ever to clamp down on illegal fly-tipping, to safeguard the environment and, of course, to protect farmers and landowners—the very people who created our globally celebrated landscape. Without farmers, we would have nothing. I visit a farm in my constituency each month, and I am increasingly aware of their contribution to our countryside and economy.

I commend Alan Anderson, a Cumbrian shepherd who works closely with the community and police, for raising awareness of sheep rustling, resulting in an overall reduction of 22% in that particular rural crime. I also commend the CLA action plan for combating hare coursing. Despite being illegal, hare coursing is increasing, fuelled by black market gambling. Introducing specific sentencing, ensuring adequate resources for the National Wildlife Crime Unit—I welcome the £301,000 of funding—and allowing police to reclaim the costs of kennelling dogs from offenders will all help. The confiscating of dogs has already resulted in a reduction of lamping in my area, which is of course welcome, but these horrific crimes still go on. Criminals come out at night, trespassing on landowners' fields, scanning the area with high-powered lamps, allowing their lurchers to outrun the deer and drag them down by the throat. They often return some days later to collect the fatally wounded animal, alleging that they found it. Such people are the thugs of the countryside.

NFU Mutual's claims data reports that the annual cost of rural crime to Cumbria is around £614,000. That is a decrease of 16.5% compared with the previous year, which is good news, but I urge the Government,

and the Home Office in particular, not to be blindsided by this seemingly encouraging statistic. Apathy is all too common in our communities, with too many people failing to report crime or lacking faith in the criminal justice system. The financial cost to Cumbria is less than in many other counties, but the impact on Copeland's rural communities is significant.

Only last weekend, my uncle was the victim of a rural crime, part of a spate of many vehicles being broken into through the night. The thieves got away with a Hilti hammer drill, a battery drill, a Makita planer and a Makita circular saw. That was not just a theft; it will affect his livelihood as a joiner. While the cost of those tools may run into the thousands of pounds, the impact on his business and livelihood and the subsequent delays to the projects he is working on is considerable. Highly skilled, hard-working, honest people in my community are being blighted by the crimes of low-lives, which must not go un-investigated and unprosecuted. The perpetrators of these rural crimes must be brought to justice.

I would like to draw to the attention of the House how perpetrators are going about committing such crimes. It is appalling that skeleton keys used to break into transit vans easily can still be purchased online even after a national newspaper slammed an online marketplace for selling them. I fail to see how insurers can adequately protect owners while such keys are so readily available, and I urge Government to act.

In conclusion, I am pleased that crime is on the decrease and that an extra £460 million will be invested through the police and crime commissioners' precept. The contribution of rural businesses, farmers and tourism plays an enormous role in our economy, and I hope that we ensure that they are protected.

6.29 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) in this important debate. As a district councillor and long-time resident of Tendring, I know that rural crime is all too common in the Tendring District Council area. To demonstrate that point further, only today I received a telephone call and an email from a couple of local residents who have both recently been the victims of rural crime. In the first incident, a constituent contacted me to report fly-tipping. I hear similar concerns on a weekly basis in my area, and fly-tipping is the most significant rural crime we face locally. It is estimated that my local authority spent over £74,000 last year alone on tackling this issue, which is £74,000 that should have been spent on improving public services for local taxpayers. That is an outrage: taxes should not have to be spent in this way.

Moreover, if the council is spending £74,000, unfortunate private landowners are probably spending much more. I say probably because we have no way of telling how much it costs them to clear up the mess. I am told by my local Essex police district commander, the excellent Paul Wells, that, on the whole, private landowners just get on with it and clear up the mess, so the actual cost to them and to the public is far higher than the headline figures suggest.

We must also consider the potential health risks of fly-tipping, because some people—some builders, et cetera—will just dump stuff that may contain hazardous

[Giles Watling]

waste, such as asbestos and the like. Consequently, we must continue to tackle this issue very strongly, and I agree with the Country Land and Business Association that greater penalties are needed. We need to punish offenders, and we need to make sure we use all opportunities for enforcement. Unfortunately, it appears that is not currently happening.

According to figures from the CLA, there were 1,132 incidents of fly-tipping in Tendring in 2016-17, yet no fines were given out, no vehicles were seized and nobody was prosecuted. To put it another way, 1,170 incidents were investigated, at a cost of £38,000 to the public purse, nobody was punished, and no costs were recouped.

Moving away from fly-tipping, an equally important local crime in our rural areas is dog theft, which has not been mentioned this afternoon. I am regularly contacted about this issue. I have previously raised the concerns of local residents in a Westminster Hall debate on the sale of puppies, and I would be grateful for more information from the Minister on what the Government plan to do about that issue.

According to Missing Pets Bureau, as many as 38% of all animals reported lost have been stolen, and as many as 60% of stolen dogs are tragically never recovered. I agree with the 93,557 individuals, and counting, who have signed a petition calling for the theft of a pet to be reclassified as a specific crime in its own right.

Rural crime in Tendring is not all doom and gloom. Our police are doing great work locally, and I thank our long-time rural and heritage crime officer Andy Long and all his Essex police colleagues for their hard work. Thanks to their efforts, the cost of rural crime has fallen by £10 million since 2010, meaning that the true cost of rural crime is now around £39.2 million—that is £39.2 million too much—which shows how effective our local police forces can be and demonstrates that things are moving in the right direction.

That brings me to my final point, because this debate, however focused on rural communities, comes back to a common word used in many debates in this House: enforcement. From knife crime to rural crime, we need bobbies on the beat to act, which is why I am delighted that the campaign I launched last year with fellow Essex MPs, as mentioned earlier, to get more flexibility in the police precept was successful.

Police and crime commissioners are now able to raise precept contributions by up to £1 a month. Together, this will mean force budgets can increase by up to £450 million nationally this year. There will be a welcome boost of £8.8 million across Essex to pay for around 150 new officers. These men and women, while enjoying the rural beauty of our fantastic sunshine coast of Clacton, will find their work cut out for them, yet I am pleased they will have the Government's support.

I am also pleased that we have 150 extra officers in Essex, because I have just been informed on my mobile device that the police are currently out in my area looking for an escaped ostrich.

Mr Speaker: It is always useful to have a bit of additional information. We are deeply obliged to the hon. Gentleman.

6.34 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Follow that, as they say. We have had a wide-ranging, comprehensive debate, and I wish to thank all colleagues, from both sides of the House, for taking part and bringing their helpful contributions to the Floor. I also wish to thank the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) for mentioning the all-party group on rural crime, as it is useful for colleagues to know what else is happening in the House that they can take part in when they have an interest in a particular subject. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) for raising the important issue of speeding on rural roads. Any of us in a rural community knows that it is a serious issue, particularly in some of our villages. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) drew a vivid picture of the challenges faced by the police in her constituency.

What we have heard today can leave us in no doubt that the Tory Government have simply neglected Britain's rural communities and have taken so many of our rural constituencies for granted. I represent the Cumbrian seat of Workington, and I join the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) in supporting the important work that our constabulary and PCC do. I thank her for raising that. The constituency I live in covers a huge rural area of the northern Lake district, including the national park, which is now a world heritage site, and the Solway Plain area of outstanding natural beauty. So I am acutely aware of the issues facing people in our small towns, villages and hamlets—I am one of those people.

Anyone with a rural constituency, and anyone who lives in one, knows just how difficult the delivery of high-quality public services is in our communities and how much more expensive they are to deliver. Our local authorities are under intense funding pressures. My local authority, Cumbria County Council, is set to have to make a colossal £33 million in savings over the next 12 months, because of the widespread uncertainty it is facing over its funding for the future. That is £33 million of cuts to vital public services that the authority is being forced into, and we know that that is because funding from central Government has been slashed. Expecting a county such as Cumbria to get its funding from business rates is simply not realistic, as we do not have the necessary level of business or population. It is really important that rural communities have proper funding and that the Government understand that not all formulas work for all areas.

The people set to suffer the most from the cuts to local services are our young people, our elderly, adults who are more vulnerable—those with disabilities—and the people who live in our most rural areas. That is because of the extra cost of delivering to those communities. Unfortunately, it seems that things are set to get even more difficult in Cumbria, as the council also has to find a way to save £70 million by 2022, and that is in addition to the £214 million it has reduced spending by since 2011.

In February, the Government announced an extra £150 million for adult social care, with about £1.5 million of that for Cumbria, but that was described by the council leadership as “crumbs from the table”, and they are absolutely right. As I said, councils need proper funding in place for the requirements they have to

deliver and they should not have to rely on ad-hoc tiny handouts from Whitehall to try to keep crucial social services afloat. The County Councils Network estimates that Cumbrian residents will receive £161 of core funding per head this year. As has been mentioned, rural constituents get less money per head. London residents are going to receive £459 per head, which illustrates clearly the problem that we face.

Obviously, the county council has the option to raise council tax. We have heard about precepts being raised and council tax being raised, but what that means is that people who live in rural communities end up paying more per head again and this will continue to build and build. I do not believe that any Minister would consider that this is a fair situation.

I will now turn to the issue of rural crime. It is clear that the Government are failing properly to tackle wildlife crime, rural fly-tipping, sheep worrying and rustling and farm machinery thefts. A recent NFU report, "Combatting Rural Crime", said that there is, in fact, no proper co-ordinated response from the Government. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) talked about the really serious issue of sheep worrying. Figures obtained by *Farmers Weekly* on sheep worrying attacks reveal that the problem is endemic. We know that there is a huge number of attacks on sheep and that, on average, one dog is shot every single week. The investigation suggests that there is significant under-reporting by farmers, so we know that this is likely to be just the tip of the iceberg. More dog attacks on sheep were recorded in Cumbria last year than in any other English county, so this is an issue that is acutely felt by many of my own constituents. I urge the Minister to listen to what my right hon. Friend has said and take action on this issue.

We have heard that fly-tipping is on the increase, and an increasing amount is being tipped on farmland and in woodland. Farmers are being left to clean up the mess and cover the costs. For example, a Shropshire farmer had a clean-up bill recently of £18,000. Another in Staffordshire, a bill of £6,000, and we have heard of cases where ambulances cannot get through to farms owing to blocked lanes.

On wildlife crime, the latest bird crime report from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds shows that, in 2016, there were no prosecutions at all in the UK for raptor persecution. That was for the first time in more than 30 years, despite the fact that there were 81 recorded instances of persecution. It is simply not good enough. Hen harrier populations are now down by 27%.

There is also concern that the badger cull is fuelling organised badger baiting. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) that badgers are now worth £500 to £700 on the black market. Criminal gangs sell on these badgers for fighting with dogs, an absolutely abhorrent practice that we really need to get on top of and stamp out urgently.

Despite Labour's 2004 fox hunting ban, we have heard again today about concerns that thousands of animals are being targeted and killed every year by hunts. Campaigners believe trail hunting is being used to cover up the indiscriminate killing of foxes, hares and deer. We have also heard much this afternoon about the problem of hare coursing and the need to clamp down

on it. My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) painted a particularly vivid picture of this.

The National Wildlife Crime Unit was set to be shut down by the Government in 2016, but was awarded four years' worth of funding at the last minute, and I thank them for that. However, can the Minister confirm whether the unit will continue to receive adequate funding after 2020? The removal of this funding would have serious implications for the detection and accountability of those committing wildlife crimes, such as badger baiting and raptor persecution.

A recent wildlife charity study found a "worrying lack" of prosecutions for wildlife crimes. Almost 1,300 incidents were recorded in just one year, but the records show that there were only 22 prosecutions or convictions. Worryingly, the report also says that the charities' data is believed to be more comprehensive than Home Office crime statistics, but is still likely to be only the "tip of the iceberg". It calls on the Government to follow Scotland's lead. I understand that, in Scotland, there are specific police recording codes that the police use for wildlife crime. As one Member mentioned, it needs to become a reportable offence. The problem at the moment is that if something is recorded as miscellaneous, it is very difficult to build a really clear picture of the extent of the problem. If we want to monitor the situation properly to take the correct action, this is an important step that the Government could take. I ask the Minister to commit to that; if he will not commit to it today, perhaps he could commit to look at whether this is something that could feasibly be done.

I am so pleased that this debate is on the Floor of the House because we need to talk about the real issues that affect rural communities on a daily basis. At the last general election the Conservatives offered nothing for rural voters in Britain, concentrating their efforts on reopening the debate on bringing back foxhunting, instead of improving rural transport, halting bank closures, properly funding local schools, stopping the centralisation of beds away from community hospitals that play such an important role in our communities and, as we have discussed today, resolving the problem of rural crime.

The Labour party would put proper investment into Britain's public services and infrastructure. This has never been more relevant than it is today to the millions of people living in rural communities across the country, who become so isolated when that infrastructure breaks down. In our 2017 election manifesto, Labour pledged to rural-proof all of our policies, alongside proper investment in rural housing, transport, public services and local authorities, so that they are able to deliver services in areas such as mine, where it costs so much more to do so. We also have policies such as widening of the scope of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, reinstating the seasonal agricultural workers scheme and introducing an agricultural wages board in order to boost the rural economy. The rural economy needs boosting through investment in infrastructure, transport and people such as farmers and food producers. By taking those steps, we can support that economy and, through that, support British farming.

A Labour Government will invest in rural communities and deliver prosperity for towns and villages, because they deserve and need it. Everyone who lives, works and enjoys the countryside has the right to feel safe, understood and secure.

6.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), opened the debate by talking about the beauty of the Lincolnshire Wolds. Without wanting to sound competitive in any way, I would like to remind colleagues of the wonders of the Cheshire Peak district—right next door to High Peak, of course—and Cheshire’s beautiful plain. I am grateful to Members on both sides of the House for setting out their views on rural crimes and public services, and I thank the Opposition for securing this important debate.

As the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) said, this has been a wide-ranging debate with contributions from across the United Kingdom, including from Scotland through the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), and from Wales with speeches from the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) and the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson). However, I must confess that I do believe that this debate was over-represented by Members from Lincolnshire, although we recognise that that is another great county.

The Government are committed to bringing sustainable growth to the rural economy, and to supporting and strengthening communities. We have talked a lot about crime. To reassure the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George), my DEFRA responsibilities are purely for a short-term period until my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) returns to her place.

Around 12 million people—19% of the UK population—live in rural areas. Despite some of the challenges we have talked about today, statistics show that most people feel that our rural towns and villages are great places in which to live and work. The fundamental features of rural areas—being more geographically dispersed and more sparsely populated than urban areas—are the key attractions of the UK’s rural towns and villages. We recognise, however, that distance, sparsity and demography can affect the delivery of important services. Rural areas are further away from the main economic centres and can suffer from poorer access to services and facilities that are commonplace in urban areas.

That is why the Government have made a commitment to rural-proof all policies. Much of what Government do has an impact on rural areas. We want these policies and programmes to take account of the specific challenges—and opportunities—for rural businesses and communities. To support this, DEFRA published updated rural-proofing guidance in March 2017. My ministerial colleagues, including Lord Gardiner, have represented the rural voice on taskforces on childcare, housing, and digital. The rural voice is being heard more loudly across Government, as it should be.

As I said, much of this debate has focused on rural crime. I would like to acknowledge the excellent work of our police—in particular, the North Yorkshire and Lincolnshire forces and PCCs who lead nationally on rural crime issues. That said, there have been incredible contributions from Members praising the North Wales and Derbyshire forces, for example. I would like to add my voice in paying tribute to the great work that Cheshire police do on these issues as well. DEFRA and the Home Office work closely with the National Police

Chiefs Council’s wildlife crime network and the National Rural Crime Network. I recently went on patrol with Cheshire’s rural and wildlife crime team to see their work at first hand in the Macclesfield area.

It is important to recall that, although crime has a regrettable impact on victims wherever they are based, crime rates in rural areas are generally lower than in urban areas. For example, there were 3.9 vehicle offences per 1,000 population in rural areas compared with 8.5 vehicle offences per 1,000 population in urban areas. However, as we have heard, remoteness and isolation can increase the sense of vulnerability in those rural areas. There are types of crime such as hare coursing, fly-tipping and sheep-worrying that are a particular problem for rural communities, as has been well expressed today.

I recently heard from the Macclesfield branch of the NFU in Cheshire about how distressing livestock-worrying is for farmers and animals, and about how serious the financial repercussions can be for local farmers. I thank the NFU for producing its illuminating and constructive report, “Combatting Rural Crime”. That is an important contribution to this debate, as I think we will all agree on both sides of the House. Earlier this year, DEFRA wrote to all police forces and local authorities to explain the powers and initiatives available to help to tackle irresponsible dog ownership, including in relation to attacks on livestock. This is a real concern to the right hon. Member for Delyn, who made some excellent points. I encourage him to write to me, particularly on recording crimes, and I will follow up on them. We will listen to the points that he made—absolutely.

Hare coursing was raised by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), by my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), and by many other Members. It is another issue raised by the NFU in its excellent report. The Government recognise the problems that hare coursing causes for rural communities—not just around the activity itself but, as we have heard, the associated violence, damage, and sense of intimidation. The Hunting Act 2004 bans all hare coursing in England and Wales. Anyone found guilty of hare coursing under the Act can receive an unlimited fine. My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and the hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya), among others, raised important points about what can be done further to improve the response to this heinous crime. Again, I ask Members to raise those with me in writing and we can follow them up. Whether it is about recording or other issues, we do need to address this with greater vigour.

The Government recognise the costs that landowners face in dealing with fly-tipping. The hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) made an important contribution on this, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) and the hon. Member for Peterborough. We are committed to tackling this problem. We have given local authorities the power to issue fixed penalty notices for small-scale fly-tipping and strengthened their powers to seize and crush vehicles of suspected fly-tippers. We will set out further measures to tackle all elements of fly-tipping in our strategic approach to waste crime as part of the resource and waste strategy that DEFRA will publish in the autumn.

DEFRA and the Home Office jointly fund the National Wildlife Crime Unit as part of efforts to prevent and detect wildlife crime. We have provided £301,000 of funding per annum for the next two years. That supports the unit's important work in intelligence gathering and analysis of wildlife crimes, including some of the crimes mentioned earlier, such as hare coursing, rural poaching and the illegal wildlife trade. We heard more about that important work on Second Reading of the Ivory Bill on Monday.

This debate, however, has not just been about rural crime. It has also touched on public services in rural areas, which I will come on to later, because we must not miss those issues. It is vital that we address other points raised in the debate, including antisocial behaviour in some of our smaller communities. My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) talked about antisocial behaviour in Saltburn. I promise faithfully that my family were not responsible for contributing to that when we went body-boarding there during the recess—in the North sea fog, I hasten to add.

County lines challenges were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), the right hon. Member for Delyn and my neighbour, the hon. Member for High Peak. This is a truly worrying and concerning development. The Home Secretary is co-ordinating a response to this scourge by overseeing a county lines working group with other Government Departments and law enforcement agencies to improve the response to drug dealing, the violent crime associated with it and the exploitation of vulnerable people, which includes those in a rural setting.

The hon. Member for Clwyd South and others raised concerns about speeding. It is true that we have some of the safest roads in the world, but we need to do more, and we need to innovate to find ways to reduce speed on these often very difficult roads. We found ways to do that on one of the most notorious roads, the Cat and Fiddle road going from Macclesfield to Buxton, where we significantly reduced traffic accidents as a result. We need to promote more actively the Government's important THINK! campaign, particularly among younger people.

Much has been said about police funding. That has been dealt with well by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley for the Opposition and by my hon. Friend the Minister. The 2015 spending review protected overall police funding in real terms. We recognise that we need to respond to changing demands on the police. That is why new flexibility has been given to police and crime commissioners so they can raise the income required to tackle specific local challenges. I am pleased that we have increased the overall investment in policing from £11.9 billion in 2015-16 to £13 billion in this financial year.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who is also from Lincolnshire, reminded us, we should not always be too gloomy about the challenges we face. Of course they are very real, but we need a greater understanding of and ability to respond to new technology. He talked about the use of drones. We need to be innovative in our approach. In Poynton, a village to the north of Macclesfield, we have an excellent emergency services hub where we bring together fire, ambulance and police services. We can get better at taking forward action by looking at innovation.

This is not just about the crime or policing element. We want to ensure that our public services and rural businesses thrive, to support rural communities and those who live in the countryside. We want this experience to be an opportunity, not a challenge, as we may have painted it today. Britain is blessed with beautiful and iconic countryside, which can provide a good quality of life, but we recognise too the challenges of rural life. We will look to support and encourage innovative solutions in the crime arena and also in other areas, such as community hubs in villages to host libraries, surgeries and outreach services.

DEFRA Ministers will continue to champion the interests of rural communities, working with other Departments, including the Home Office and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on issues such as broadband and mobile reception, to ensure that rural communities can thrive and realise the very real opportunities that lie ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House is concerned that the level of rural crime remains high; notes research by the National Farmers' Union that rural crime cost the UK economy £42.5 million in 2015; recognises that delivering public services across large, sparsely populated geographical areas can be more costly and challenging than in urban areas; agrees with the National Rural Crime Network that it is vital that the voice of the countryside is heard; calls on the Government to ensure that the personal, social and economic costs of crime and anti-social behaviour in rural areas are fully understood and acted upon; and further calls on the Government to ensure that rural communities are not disadvantaged in the delivery or quality of public services.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek permission to raise a matter arising from comments made by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) during Prime Minister's Question Time earlier today. I have advised the hon. Gentleman of my intention to raise a point of order this evening.

During Question Time, the hon. Gentleman stated that Scottish National party Members of the European Parliament had

"voted to back the European Parliament in an attempt...to keep the UK inside the common fisheries policy".

The records of the European Parliament Committee on Fisheries and of the plenary session show that on both occasions the SNP's representatives voted against the proposal mentioned. I also have a letter from Ian Hudghton MEP confirming that on both occasions the vote of SNP Members was contrary to the way described by the hon. Gentleman today.

I absolutely accept that the hon. Gentleman acted in good faith, but given that it is now clearly established that his comments were mistaken, I seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, about how the record may be corrected.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Chair has no responsibility for what any Member says in the Chamber. He has taken the opportunity to raise what appears to be a genuine mistake on the part of another legislature, in keeping its records, and I am glad that he has informed the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who has unwittingly made a mistake in giving a certain piece of information to the House.

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) asks me how he might put the record straight. I would say that he has been wise and clever in using the device of a point of order to make sure that those on the Treasury Bench, the *Hansard* reporters, everyone else in the Chamber and those paying attention to these proceedings are aware that an error has occurred, and he has now taken this opportunity to put the record straight.

Transport Safety: Blind and Visually Impaired People

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

7.2 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to have secured this debate in the Chamber.

Three weeks ago, I met my constituents Margaret Ambaras and Laurel Holleran on a street in my constituency, together with Linda Oliver from Guide Dogs. All three of them are blind or have a serious visual impairment. Margaret and Laurel had asked me to go and experience the difficulties that blind people face when trying to navigate our streets—difficulties that could mostly be avoided. With some trepidation, but with support, I undertook a blindfolded walk along the street near where we met.

I am sure I am not the first MP to have undertaken this challenge—the Minister may well have undertaken it herself—but what I experienced really shocked me. The street where we met is in a residential area of Dunston without much street furniture and with reasonable pavements, but I found that navigating even for a short distance was fraught with difficulties. On this particular day, the bins were still on the street and most of the cars parked on the pavement were a real problem, particularly where it was not possible to pass the cars without going on to the road. Frankly, it was pretty hairy trying to get past the cars, and to work out where the kerb was and whether any traffic was coming. For part of the walk, I had glasses on that produced the effect of having tunnel vision, really restricting my ability to read the street and the pavement.

For me, the experience may have been scary, but it was at least temporary, and Margaret and Laurel were kind and took me to a busy residential area, rather than one where there are shops and other businesses, or lots of street furniture. As we talked after the event, they explained to me that, although they both now have guide dogs and have completed training through Guide Dogs, their independence is really constrained by pavement parking. Margaret told me that she still feels unable to go to her doctor's surgery alone, because of cars parked along the narrow path she has to follow, meaning that she and her dog have to walk on a fairly narrow road, into the traffic.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): This is a timely debate, because constituents of mine, like those of a number of other MPs, are in a similar situation to that being described by my hon. Friend. They are asking for something to be done about parking on pavements, because it is a major problem for people with difficulties.

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. Many of us have been approached by constituents about the issue.

As I have said, Margaret faces difficulties going to the doctor. Laurel also told me that she is worried about going out and that she has had problems with the audio announcements on the bus, because they do not always work or are sometimes made in such a jaunty tone by a canny Geordie lass that she just cannot catch what is being said.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady has secured an Adjournment debate on an important subject. Does she agree that, with 250 people a day starting to lose their sight in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, there is a real need for an increase in the number of specialised public buses and trains for the sight impaired in both rural and urban locations, to ensure that constituents with a sight impairment are not isolated?

Liz Twist: I very much agree that it is important not only that there is specialised transport, but that all public transport is accessible to people with a visual impairment.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important speech and I thank her for doing so. A constituent of mine who is blind asked for rail assist at his local station, but their only response was to give him a leaflet, which he could not read. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is wholly inadequate for people with a visual impairment?

Liz Twist: I most certainly agree that that is a real problem. That is an absolutely impossible situation. It is not so much rail assist as not caring about what happens to people with a visual impairment and not thinking it through.

Pavement parking is not just a problem for blind and partially sighted people; it is a real problem for wheelchair users and for parents with prams, buggies or young children in tow, who are often forced on to busy main roads to pass cars. Today, however, I want to focus on Margaret and Laurel and others who are blind. They have worked so hard to gain their independence, but cars parked on the pavement, and other pavement obstructions, are making life difficult for them—and dangerous in some circumstances. As I have said, other forms of transport cause problems, too, so we need to look at bus and rail services as well.

This is not a new problem. It has been talked about many times in this Chamber, but it really is about time that we actually did something to sort it out. I read in *Hansard* that in 2015 the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) promoted a private Member's Bill on the issue, but it goes way back beyond that time. That Bill was withdrawn following the Government's commitment to hold roundtable discussions on the issue of pavement parking in particular, but there has been little or no action.

More recently, Transport Ministers have said that they will look at pavement parking in the context of traffic regulation orders. Over the short time I have been in this House, many hon. Members have questioned Transport Ministers on their plans to tackle pavement parking. The war of attrition seems to be showing modest results, as answers to the questions that I have looked at in *Hansard* have changed from, "We have no plans to do anything", to leaving it to local councils to resolve the problem, to now saying, "We will look at how we tackle pavement parking as part of the work on TROs." But we need faster action and we need more of it, please. We all know and understand the problems—we need to do something about them.

Local authorities can take some actions, such as designating specific areas and streets for no pavement parking, but, to be frank, it is a piecemeal approach to

identify streets, go through what can be a long and costly TRO process and then try to enforce TROs at a time when local authorities are very stretched after years of reductions in grant funding. My local authority, Gateshead, has been looking at what it can do to help with the problem but, along with Guide Dogs and many other charities, it has concluded that we need a system like the one that currently operates in London, which allows for a blanket prohibition of pavement parking, but with opt-outs for specific purposes. It is clear and straightforward and does not allow for confusion, but it does give some flexibility when there are genuine reasons why it should be varied.

It will come as no surprise that I have a number of asks of the Minister. I am not going to ask her to sort out the bins—I can do that locally, with the council, thanks—but I have a number of specific asks of the ministerial team. Will the Department for Transport now introduce, as a matter of urgency, a new law on pavement parking, and will it announce a date for the delayed consultation on traffic regulation orders?

Will the Department update the guidance on the use and design of shared spaces? Shared spaces sound like a great idea to get traffic and pedestrians to behave reasonably, recognise each other and consider the needs of all road users, but for blind and visually impaired people they bring real problems, with their lack of kerbs and absence of pedestrian crossings, as the Women and Equalities Committee identified in a report last year.

Will the Department issue statutory guidance to licensing authorities to require that all taxi drivers undertake disability equality training? Margaret and Laurel both told me of situations that they had experienced, one in which a taxi driver had asked for a £25 fee, on top of the fare, to valet his car after the guide dog had been in the vehicle, and others in which drivers had been reluctant to take them with their dog. I know that that is not supposed to happen, but it does.

Will the Department consult on and publish regulations on the accessible information requirement as soon as possible? A Guide Dogs report showed that over a six-month period two thirds of vision-impaired passengers had missed their stop, as Laurel and Margaret have both done. It is really distressing for them and can be dangerous, because they are not sure of where they are or the layout of the area in which they are dropped off. That is really important. The Secretary of State already has the power to make regulations to require bus operators to provide accessible information, including audible and visual information. I understand that a consultation on regulations was planned for early 2017, with a view to the publication of regulations this year, but it has now been delayed and we see no signs of it happening. Can we get that consultation going now, please, so that we can get the regulations in place?

I wish to raise one more issue, which I suspect will be much more contentious. I recently heard about some new train carriages being produced for our railways by Hitachi in Newton Aycliffe that include accessibility features for blind and visually impaired people. That is absolutely great and as it should be, but the Government's intention to take guards off some train services will compromise the safety of not only blind and partially sighted travellers but other passengers with disabilities. I urge the Government to recognise that point and change their position.

[Liz Twist]

It is well past time that we tackled the problem of pavement parking and other transport issues for blind and visually impaired people, so that I can tell my constituents Margaret and Laurel that we really are addressing their safety on our streets and on public transport.

7.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this debate on transport safety for blind and visually impaired people, and for sharing her experience of a guided walk and how Margaret and Laurel try to navigate with sight loss.

Delivering a transport system that is truly accessible to all is of great importance to me personally and to the Department for Transport. I hope that the hon. Lady will have seen the Department's draft accessibility action plan, which was published for consultation last year, as evidence of the Government's commitment to taking action to safeguard and promote the rights of all disabled passengers. Following the responses to that consultation, the Department is developing an inclusive transport strategy that will build on the draft accessibility action plan by setting out the immediate improvements that can be made to the transport system, as well as our longer-term aspirations.

Liz Twist: When are we likely to see the outcome of that consultation and when are we likely to see some real action?

Ms Ghani: The inclusive transport strategy is due to be published shortly. I am sure the hon. Lady will be very pleased when the report comes out. I cannot highlight the action points—obviously, I cannot divulge them—but she will be pleased when she sees the results considering the issues she has raised today.

The accessibility action plan will set out immediate improvements that can be made to the transport system, as well as our long-term aspirations of supporting the Government's aim for disabled passengers to have the same access to transport as everyone else, enabling them to travel easily, confidently and without extra cost. The inclusive transport strategy will be published later this year. I am sure the hon. Lady will understand that I am not able to divulge all the details, but she will be very pleased with the outcome. There are some assurances I want to give the House today that are unique for supporting blind and visually impaired people using the transport system.

I am pleased that the hon. Lady undertook the guided walk. I was the chair of the all-party group on sight loss, because my father has a visual impairment. As well as assisting him at home and on transport, I have also spent some time as his carer, so I understand at first hand the particular difficulties for people with sight loss and visual impairment. Since becoming Minister, I have met the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association and the Royal National Institute of Blind People to hear the views of people with sight loss and visual impairment who are engaging with public transport. They raised a number of issues very similar to those raised by the hon. Lady. Let me take them one by one.

The first issue is parking on pavements. My father raises this all the time. I know that the hon. Lady recently wrote on this matter to the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), the Minister with responsibility for roads. I appreciate the difficulties caused to blind and visually impaired people by drivers parking on pavements. As the hon. Lady noted in her speech, parking on pavements in London is banned by default and is allowed only in exceptional circumstances. However, it is virtually the reverse outside London, where pavement parking is allowed unless local authorities seek a legal order to prevent it within a certain area.

Jim Shannon: It is not just the parking of vehicles on pavements; shops put tables, chairs and advertising boards out, too. For those of us who have good vision and can see them that is great, but a disabled person will not know they are there at all. It is not just the vehicles; it is what shops are doing as well.

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Extra street furniture or clutter inhibits people in confidently navigating their community, especially streets that they know well. One bad experience can set them back, so we need to raise awareness, whether it is among shopkeepers, local authorities or people picking up rubbish and understanding the kind of debris they leave behind. I believe the hon. Gentleman is now the new chair of the all-party group on sight loss and visual health.

Jim Shannon *indicated assent.*

Ms Ghani: There are calls for the Government to introduce a law that bans all pavement parking across England, allowing it only in exceptional cases, thereby mirroring the case in London. The Minister with responsibility for roads is keen to make the process as simple as possible. Before seeking new primary legislation, we will evaluate the effectiveness of the current legislation that allows local authorities to take action themselves. We seek to understand the issues that are preventing them from taking action already. The Department will be taking forward that work over the coming months and will look to draw conclusions by the end of the year.

Liz Twist: I thank the Minister for that comment, but I am sure she will understand from her experience the difficulties that many local authorities have in acting on a piecemeal basis. Many are very keen on an overall approach that will make the rules much more clear and consistent. Local authorities can do things, but they are not in a position to do as much as they would like.

Ms Ghani: The hon. Lady raises a very valid point, which is why it is important that we base any legislation on evidence, to make sure that the guidance is absolutely appropriate, accurate, and level in constituencies and councils across the country. We want people to have similarly positive experiences when they navigate their local streets.

I turn now to taxi and private hire drivers who refuse to pick up people with assistance dogs or charge extra for doing so. That attitude and behaviour is just wrong. It is also unlawful. It is against the law to refuse carriage or to attempt to charge a higher fare. A small

number of taxi drivers are exempt—for example, there might be a medical reason why they cannot have an assistance dog in their vehicle—but otherwise this practice is unacceptable, and I call on local licensing authorities, including Gateshead, to take action against drivers who break the law. I expect local authorities, as does the hon. Lady no doubt, to investigate complaints fully and pursue criminal prosecutions where appropriate.

Drivers who are convicted can be fined up to £1,000. The hon. Lady mentioned the experience of Margaret and Laurel. I recently spoke to the all-party group on disability, and a lady who came to that meeting had been momentarily denied access to a cab because she had a guide dog with her. It is just wrong. Local authorities have the power to require taxi drivers to attend disability awareness training, and I strongly urge them to make use of this power, as well as the powers to remove licences, investigate cases and impose fines of up to £1,000.

Liz Twist: Margaret, Laurel and Linda told me that it appeared to be rather too easy in some cases to get an exemption. They would like the process tightened up, with properly authorised GP certificates to prove the need for an exemption.

Ms Ghani: I take the hon. Lady's point and will reflect on her concerns. An independent task and finish group is looking at taxis and private hire vehicles, and we await its report, which I hope will cover this area. I have a concern about this issue as well. There should be very few exemptions—there should be very good reasons why a driver cannot allow a passenger or guide dog into their cab—and we should be absolutely clear about what those are.

I move on now to talking buses. Audible information on buses is key to enabling disabled passengers to take journeys. Disabled people make 10 times as many journeys by bus as by rail, and it is essential that the service provided should be accessible to them. The provision of audible information on all buses will clearly make a huge difference in this regard, but some passengers have raised concerns that there is too much information on buses and that it confuses them even further, so although some bus companies have already introduced talking buses, they will not be required to do so by law until the relevant power in the Bus Services Act 2017 takes effect. We will consult later this year on the regulations that will bring these powers into force.

I accept that some early adopters of talking buses sometimes fail to provide the correct information or information at the right time to enable a blind or visually impaired person to get off at the right stop, and I appreciate entirely the distress this can cause. It only underlines the need to consult ahead of the legal requirement being introduced. We need clear evidence on how much information is needed, at what point in the journey and how often, and we need to factor it into any appropriate regulations. That will allow us to provide clear, evidence-based and legally mandated standards that all bus operators must meet, and that the Office of the Traffic Commissioners will have responsibility to enforce.

I now move to shared spaces, which are a particular concern for people with visual impairments. There is no single definition of “shared space”, but it generally

means a space that has different road users, including vehicles and pedestrians, sharing the street. This might be very good for some people with disabilities, especially those in wheelchairs, but kerbs and controlled pedestrian crossings are sometimes removed, which can be particularly difficult for blind or partially sighted people.

The Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, the Department for Transport's statutory adviser on accessible travel, has written to me about this to highlight its concerns about shared spaces. In addition, the consultation on the draft accessibility action plan prompted a lot of feedback on this issue. Once again, my father regularly updates me on how such spaces are not working for him. In short, concerns about the safety of shared spaces, particularly for blind or visually impaired people and guide dogs, are coming through loud and clear. In the light of these continuing concerns, the Government are considering what further action might be appropriate and will make this clear when the inclusive transport strategy is published.

We take this issue very seriously, and the strategy will cover most of the issues that the hon. Lady has raised, but whatever action the Government and other authorities take to improve the rights of disabled passengers, it will make a difference only if those rights are effectively enforced. To this end, I recently met the chief executives of transport regulators, including the Office of Rail and Road and the Civil Aviation Authority, and underlined to them their responsibilities for ensuring that disabled passengers receive the services they are entitled to.

Ruth George: I want to make a point about Passenger Assist. My visually impaired constituent was simply given a leaflet that was supposed to enable him to travel. Does the Minister agree that that is not acceptable? Although Passenger Assist is available to wheelchair users in my constituency, there are no taxis that can accommodate passengers with wheelchairs. I am trying to arrange for some disabled constituents to visit the Minister in a couple of weeks, but they are having real problems in accessing any sort of public transport.

Ms Ghani: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The purpose of Passenger Assist is to assist passengers with all kinds of disabilities, and handing out a leaflet is just not on. The role of Passenger Assist is to help passengers to reach their destination with the service for which they have paid. I look forward to meeting the hon. Lady and her constituents to discuss that further.

As I have said, I have met the regulators and reminded them of their responsibilities, and of the work they need to do to ensure that redress is available when things go wrong. That is another issue that we must tackle: when laws and regulations are in place, we must ensure that they are enforced.

I thank the hon. Member for Blaydon again for securing a debate on such an important issue, and I look forward to working with her and Members in all parts of the House to achieve our ambition to improve the travelling experiences of blind and visually impaired people.

Question put and agreed to.

7.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 6 June 2018

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

Employment Rates

9.30 am

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole)
(Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered recent trends in employment rates.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I am delighted to have secured the debate, not least because I missed the last one. I am particularly pleased that hon. Members from both sides of the House have risked coming along this morning for a second time—take two. The debate gives me the opportunity to update the House on the work of the all-party parliamentary group on youth employment, on which I will focus.

However, I will first mention some trends in employment growth as a whole. My speech will not be full of statistics; it would be very dull and boring if it were. However, I must mention some, and having missed the last debate in April, I now have May's Office for National Statistics figures, which show yet another rise in the employment rate, which is now at 75.6%. Had I turned up on time to that debate, it would have been only 75.4%, so in a way I am delighted to have missed that debate and to have an opportunity to update the House on the latest figures.

The overall unemployment rate is 4.2%. However, in the ONS figures, which are actually fascinating to look at, I always look out for the job vacancies, because quite often they tell a story in themselves. It is always of interest to see 806,000 job vacancies, which is 17,000 more than a year earlier. The largest area in which there are job vacancies is the services sector. Employment growth since 2010 has been called a jobs miracle, and long may it continue.

Let me mention one or two points about businesses. It is sometimes said that the Government create jobs, but I firmly believe that businesses create jobs and that the Government set the framework and create the environment in which businesses can flourish and then take on more employees. In that regard, the Government have cut corporation tax from 30% to 19%. Despite the doom-and-gloom cries about how that would reduce the tax take, the Exchequer has in fact seen an increased tax take as a result. There are 5.7 million businesses, which is an increase of 1.2 million since 2010. I am delighted that the World Economic Forum says that this country is one of the top places to do business.

Turning to youth employment, I am honoured and privileged to chair the APPG, which is a role I took over from my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith). Under her leadership, we changed the name of the group from the APPG on youth unemployment to the APPG on youth employment, which is much more positive and actually much more reflective of the facts and the statistics on the grounds.

The secretariat for the group is provided by Youth Employment UK. I pay tribute to its work, and particularly to Laura-Jane Rawlings, who provides the secretariat and support. What the group does particularly well is bring young ambassadors into Parliament. We try to meet on the day the ONS statistics come out, but it is the young ambassadors who really bring our meetings to life. I would be delighted to invite the Minister to come along to one of our meetings, although I must warn him that the young ambassadors can ask some of the trickiest and most ticklish questions, so he will have to be on his mettle.

The ONS recently changed the day on which it releases its labour force survey statistics, from a Wednesday to a Tuesday, which I am told is because it gives MPs more of a chance to examine the figures before Prime Minister's Question Time. Whether MPs avail themselves of that opportunity I am not sure, but that is the reason given for the change.

Looking at the 16 to 24 age bracket, the headline figure for youth unemployment for May is 12.1%. That is down from a year earlier and is in fact within touching distance of the lowest it has ever been on record, which was 11.6%. The highest, in 2011, was touching 22%. At each and every meeting of our APPG, I still say that it is too high—it is three times the overall unemployment rate of 4%.

We should perhaps not directly compare ourselves with Greece and Spain, where youth unemployment is 45% and 34% respectively. However, other international comparisons include Croatia on 23.5% and Denmark on 10%, but then Germany on 6% and the Czech Republic on 7.2%. We really should aspire to at least halve our youth unemployment rate. Interestingly, the youth claimant count is 3%. However, my view is that youth unemployment is still too high and that we must aim to eradicate it, or certainly to reduce it.

In the time remaining I will touch on our APPG's most recent report and on what we will be doing in future, and I will then look at an innovative, multi-APPG report on the hospitality sector. Our most recent report, entitled "Those Furthest from the Labour Market", had quite a wide remit. It looked at the barriers that young people face, from deprivation to disability. It made a number of recommendations, and I invite colleagues, and particularly the Minister, to look at all of them, but I will highlight what in my view are the three key recommendations.

First, we must ensure that all young people in education have access to work experience. That is absolutely key, as it allows them to develop soft skills, as well as to get information, advice and guidance, which must be practical but also inspirational. Secondly, one size does not fit all, as is so often the case in every sector. Education, employment and welfare services must recognise the unique potential of all our young people. Thirdly, we need better cross-departmental working. I would like the Minister to consider this point in due course, although perhaps not today. We need better co-ordination of responsibilities and services, including among the Department for Education, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Justice. I firmly believe that, through better cross-departmental working, we can truly look at youth unemployment as a whole. Our future

[Michael Tomlinson]

reports will include looking at young care leavers entering the workforce and also young ex-offenders looking at education and employment.

I will briefly touch on the hospitality commission that I mentioned a few moments ago. It is a multi-APPG that includes the APPGs for youth employment, for the visitor's economy, for tourism and hospitality in Wales, for education and the all-party parliamentary beer group. It will look at all aspects of the hospitality sector, including promoting careers, the diversity of the workforce and education and skills. Importantly, it will show that hospitality is not just a stop gap or a temporary job but can actually be career in and of itself. We had our first evidence session and we have two to go. I invite colleagues to look out for that report when it is published.

Finally, I will mention my constituency—it is always nice to be able to do so in this forum—and Dorset Young Chamber. I chaired the steering group when it was set up in 2016. It touches 13 schools, and not just in my constituency but right across Dorset. Ian Girling, the indomitable chairman of the Dorset chamber of commerce and industry, set up Dorset Young Chamber in response to an annual Ofsted report to Parliament in December 2015 that outlined the importance of strong careers advice and guidance and the firm need to improve the link between schools and employers. If we are to ensure that recent trends in employment rates continue, that will be absolutely crucial.

As part of the Dorset Young Chamber scheme, each school has a link with one local business that it can call on to help with careers advice, with an individual talk, or just to be that link between education and employment. The key is so often that young people see the purpose of their academic work and where it will actually lead in the end. I believe that is an invaluable link between education and employment and that that model could and should be adopted across the rest of the country.

I have tried to refrain from using too many statistics, but they are important and show just how far we have come since 2010. When it comes to employment, and especially the lives and job prospects of young people, we of course must not be complacent. We must continue to create the right environment to ensure that businesses expand and grow. I would like the Minister and the Government to keep a laser-like focus on youth employment statistics, not because the statistics are important in and of themselves, but because behind every number is a real person, a young person who is trying to get a job and a good start in life.

9.40 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) on securing this important debate. Sometimes we do not get into the nitty-gritty of the stories behind the statistics, so I would like to focus on that today. In particular, I will focus my remarks, as would be expected of a Plymouth MP, on the experience of Plymouth, which, as we know, is the centre of the world. However, I also want to delve into the statistics and to look at unemployment not in isolation but as part of a basket of measures, because there needs to be greater focus not just on one raw indicator, standing in isolation, but on the broader

picture if we are to safeguard the job creation, stability and quality of employment that we all want to see throughout the country.

Unemployment statistics are only one part of the picture, and I am always a bit cautious about Government statistics, whether they were produced under the coalition or the current Government or, indeed, when Labour was in power, because they are designed to tell one part of the story only. Although the overall jobless figures may be falling, which is to be welcomed, in-work poverty, insecure employment and the use of zero-hours contracts are rising. Food bank use is up. The housing crisis continues, and the welfare system continues to be cruel, all too often creating poverty and worry, where it should be achieving the opposite.

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me for interrupting him so early in his remarks, but I want to take him back to what he said about Government statistics. I agree that we should be cautious and have a healthy scepticism about statistics, but, of course, the statistics under discussion are ONS statistics, not Government statistics, so perhaps we can lend them greater weight than a sceptical public otherwise might.

Luke Pollard: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. How statistics are presented by Government can sometimes devalue some of the credibility that the original source may provide, and I am sure that we can all bring to mind examples of that. On the subject of statistics, I am a great believer in the way inflation is calculated. If hon. Members will indulge me for a few seconds, I will explain. Inflation is calculated by taking a basket of measures, of everyday goods, and calculating the inflation rate based on the real-world experience of many measures, many goods, not just one of them. In that sense, a basket of measures can create a fuller, more thorough illustration of what is actually happening.

The reality gap between individual employment statistics and the lived experiences, especially of young people, would be addressed much more thoroughly by having a basket of measures than by focusing just on the jobless figures or any other singular reality. I suggest that when we look at how we talk about unemployment statistics, employment statistics and debt, we look at a basket of measures, which needs to include employment, wages and wage growth, in-work poverty, child poverty, homelessness and temporary housing, disposable income, the number and penetration of zero-hours contracts and especially their demographic targeting, benefit take-up, sanction levels, household debt and overall personal indebtedness. Perhaps those things could be wrapped up together as a new basket of measures whereby we can look at the lived experience of people in employment, because all too often the fact that someone is in a job and that there is a tick beside that box is what is presented by Governments of all colours. We know that the lived experience of people in work, especially in today's economy, where simply having a contract does not guarantee that someone will get any wages at the end of the week or month, devalues some of the credibility that the jobless figures or employment figures may have carried in the past, when employment was more secure and long term.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very important point. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole

(Michael Tomlinson) for initiating the debate. My hon. Friend discusses a basket of measures. Does he agree that one thing that we would want to establish, if it was a business that we were looking at, would be the number of hours being worked by those in work—that is, the number of hours or days available to work? That could be one of the measures showing that we actually have significant under-employment in this country and that, rather than a jobs miracle, we have something of a jobs mirage.

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend has a way with words. Looking at the measure to which he refers as part of the basket of measures could well be useful. Indeed, we might also look at the number of jobs that individuals have, because although we have seen a rise in the number of people with contracts, many of those are part-time contracts, and people in Plymouth have certainly been telling me of needing not just one job but two, three or, in some cases, four or five jobs to pay their bills, because of the insecurity of those jobs and the hours they provide. Consideration of all those measures together would make possible a more informed value judgment about the state of the economy.

In recent years, we have seen a rapid shift towards a gig economy, and despite calls for an end to zero-hours contracts, many people are still struggling with the precarious nature of those contracts. There are some people who value zero-hours contracts, but my fear about what has happened with zero-hours contracts is that their utility for that small group of people has been overtaken by employers using them as a way of being more flexible with their workforce or cash flow. As a consequence, the utility of those contracts for a small number of individuals, because of the workplace flexibility they provide, has been eroded because they are being used to devalue secure work.

Before I came to the debate, I posted on my Facebook page—if anyone has not visited it, the address is [facebook.com/LukePollard](https://www.facebook.com/LukePollard)—to ask people what their experience was. I said, “I am going to a debate about employment statistics. Can you tell me your stories?” Normally on my Facebook page, I have a few regular posters, as I am sure other hon. Members do. What struck me about the response to this post was how personal, emotional and honest people were in telling me their experiences. If hon. Members have not done this on their own Facebook page, I encourage them to do so, because it helps to create a fuller picture.

Let me give some examples of what people said. Erin, who is one of my constituents, is a qualified secondary school teacher who has been forced to take zero-hours contracts by an employment agency for the past three years. She told me that, despite years of training, she was struggling to find permanent work, and that that has impacted her ability to pass the tenancy checks required for private renting. The figure for private renters in Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport is 43.5%, which shows just how important that can be. Erin now plans to leave the teaching profession for good and will be retraining in September. She is just one example of someone we need to retain in their role with more secure work.

Melanie is another example. She worked for three years at Royal Mail in Plymouth. She was on a fixed-term, 20-hours contract that was reviewed every six months.

As a single parent, she spoke of the stress that the uncertainty of that brought, as she could never be sure that she would still have a job once the end of her contract rolled around. Although Melanie has managed to secure permanent employment elsewhere, her story is not uncommon.

Those types of lived experience are the stories behind the statistics. I am talking about the frequency of needing to go to another interview to get extra hours and then the concern and worry about what happens if an employer wants their hours to coincide with another employer's hours. Those are concerns that many in this Chamber may not have experienced themselves, but they are genuine worries for many people up and down the country. That situation is adding to the complexity and inequality within our system.

Colleagues will know of the problems that universal credit has brought to the system. Indeed, the House of Commons Library points out that the roll-out of universal credit, which is taking place in part of the area that I represent but not all of it, skews the jobless figures for this period, so looking behind those figures is a little more complex and complicated than it might have been before universal credit was rolled out. I ask the Minister whether there is a way of navigating through that complexity and that added dimension to see what the underlying picture is. The roll-out of UC complicates that and affects our ability to get an accurate sense of where we are.

Universal credit is failing many people. We know the experiences that have been shared in this Chamber and elsewhere. Our benefits system should not allow people to spiral into more debt, and I am concerned about the sustainability of the system in its current form. Concerns around UC and the roll-out on to UC, especially for people in insecure work—although they may not be in the jobless figures that the Government provide—need to be addressed.

We also need to look at in-work poverty. I believe it is fundamental to most people's reasons for entering politics in the first place—be they on the red team or the blue team—that they want to make the world a better place. The only disagreement I perhaps have with colleagues on the Conservative side is how to do that. In-work poverty should be anathema from the perspective of the Labour party, the Conservative party and other parties as well. We all aspire to help people into work so that they can provide for their families through the hard work of their own labour. If someone is in work and still unable to provide for their family, something is wrong with our economy.

We know that that is the case in Plymouth and elsewhere at the moment, because we are seeing a rise in food bank use. One day I hope that we will no longer need food banks and that the fantastic volunteers who staff them can be redeployed to other endeavours. However, I know that food bank use is going up, and having seen the work of the fantastic soup kitchens and soup runs in Plymouth, I know that demand is increasing among not just rough sleepers, but those in insecure work and temporary accommodation, who cannot make ends meet and who struggle to feed themselves and their families.

I highly recommend that Members of Parliament and those watching at home go out on a soup run. It is an eye-opener in terms of the lived experiences of those

[*Luke Pollard*]

in our communities whom we may not see during the day. When they are handed a pasty or a banana from the back of an old Transit van—as happens every now and then in Plymouth—they give back stories and gratitude. It is a really humbling experience to see people who, in many cases, are now in work but still struggling to make ends meet.

We need safeguards to help those who are struggling to break into the job market and permanent employment, as well as to help those who are in the job market by making sure that work can truly pay. That is not where we are at the moment, and that is especially true for those with disabilities. One of my constituents, Jo, who works in the employment sector, told me that the job opportunities advertised for students and graduates often involve temporary contracts in low-skilled roles. Similarly, Mat, from Plymouth, shared his experience of having high-functioning autism and described his job search as “impossible”. That should shame us all. The challenge for us is how and where we present job adverts, what the employment process is and the jobs themselves. I am concerned that the lack of opportunities is impacting people in Plymouth on a personal and economic level, and we must act to contain the ongoing effects of not only unemployment, but under-employment and the impossibility of getting employment in many cases.

Many hon. Members will know of my desire to talk about transport. I occasionally talk about trains in this place. Connectivity for the far south-west is a complicating factor in the economic performance of Plymouth and the wider south-west economy, as it is for many other parts of the country. The investment we need in structural transport, both on road and rail, and bus services within cities, can open up and transform job opportunities.

I want to talk about buses for a moment, because when we look at under-employment, one concern that a number of people tell me about is that, without a car, they are sometimes unable to get to their workplace. That is because there is no public transport available or the buses stop at a certain time. That is especially true of low-wage service work. The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole talked about our hospitality sector. Without decent public transport, it is impossible for those people to get to shops, tourist attractions, cafes and restaurants early in the morning to provide sleepless people with their coffee on the way to work. The concern is that that means some people are spending their already low wages on taxis to get to work before the working day has started, eroding the value of that day's work for them.

There is a lot we need to do to look behind the statistics. I encourage the Minister to look at whether a basket of measures could be more appropriate. To an extent, the debate as to what goes in that basket of measures—just as the debate as to what goes into the inflation measure—tells a story about our modern Britain. For example, when we take a record player out from the basket of inflation measures and put in an MP3 download, we can see the way the economy is changing. That same principle should apply to how we look at employment statistics and the lived experience of people seeking employment or in employment. One day I hope we will be able to take out sanctions and food bank use from

that basket of measures. That should be a collective aspiration for all parties. Until the time when they are no longer in use, we should feature those as part of that collective basket of stories—that human lived experience—that sits behind the unemployment statistics. There are many other things we could add into that basket, such as mental health provision, which I have not spoken about, but I hope colleagues might add to the list in the debate.

So I ask the Minister whether the Department has considered a basket of measures in how it presents these stories, and I encourage all hon. Members to do as I did on my Facebook page and to get the lived experiences of constituents, because it is the most powerful and humbling experience.

9.54 am

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) on bringing this important issue to the attention of Parliament today. Our two constituencies could not be further apart on the map, but listening to his remarks about his own constituency, it is clear that many of his concerns regarding youth employment are similar to my own.

I will focus my brief remarks on an issue that is particularly relevant to my constituency in the Scottish borders, namely the problems surrounding low pay. I want to develop some of the themes touched on by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). My constituency has higher than average levels of employment. Some 2,700 more people are in work now compared to a low of 2,000 in 2010. That represents a rise of 6.5%. We also have significantly lower than average numbers of people claiming out-of-work benefits. We are hovering around an all-time low. The number is now half what it was in 2013. These are undoubtedly significant achievements. More people in my constituency with the security of a pay package and the positive benefits of being in work is certainly a good thing.

Behind the rise in employment, however, there remains a problem in my constituency: low pay. Many more people are in jobs, but too many of these jobs are low-skilled and low-paid. Gross weekly pay in my constituency is £56 a week lower than the Scottish average and £61 a week lower than the United Kingdom average. That means that employees in the borders are taking home nearly £3,000 less in their pay than the Scottish average. Those on hourly pay take home £1 an hour less than the Scottish average and £1.30 an hour less than the UK average.

We have a significantly higher percentage of self-employed people in the Scottish borders and more lower-skilled jobs, which translate to lower than average weekly pay. I am not here to talk down self-employed people or lower-skilled jobs. They are hugely important. Many of the jobs in places such as Johnstons of Elgin in Hawick, in my constituency, may be classified as lower-skilled, but these are incredibly hard-working people, who produce some of the finest products on the worldwide market. Nevertheless, across the United Kingdom, we need to offer a range of employment opportunities, and the borders certainly has fewer higher-paid jobs than other areas of Scotland or across the UK.

What can be done to address this? There are two important points. The first thing is to ensure that unskilled workers are paid a fair wage and take home more of the money that they earn. That is why I absolutely support the Government's introduction of a living wage and the continued increase in the personal allowance. Someone who used to be on the old minimum wage on a full-time contract took home around £11,100 a year in 2013. This year the same person, now paid the national living wage, would be taking home £2,600 more, thanks to the increase in the lowest wages and the rise in the personal threshold. That is effectively a pay rise of over 20% to those on the lowest incomes.

Secondly, beyond paying people more, in order to bring more highly skilled jobs to places such as those in my constituency, we need to look at why businesses are not basing themselves there at the moment. The main barrier to businesses in the borders is a lack of infrastructure, both physical and digital. I know that the borderlands growth deal will be looking at this as a matter of priority. A lack of decent broadband and transportation links is undoubtedly holding my area back.

I conclude by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole again for securing this debate. I urge all hon. Members to ensure that both the quantity and quality of employment across every part of the United Kingdom is a priority for the Government.

9.59 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) on securing this debate, albeit for the second time.

We can be in no doubt about the progress the Government have made on many fronts, in addition to economic growth, in the last eight years. We should never underestimate the impact that the 2008 financial crash had on our country. By the end of the recession that followed, our employment rate had taken a serious hit. Now, almost 3.5 million more people are in work and the employment rate is at its highest level since records began in the '70s. That is something we can all be proud of. It is also worthy of note that since 2013, more than 6,000 additional disabled people have gained the dignity and respect of employment, and we can build on that excellent figure through the Disability Confident scheme.

There can be no doubt that it has been a long road, and it has been hard work. The Government have asked the British people to accept some tough choices. The people came with us on an eight-year journey and, like the Government, they can see that that period of hard work and difficult decisions is beginning to bear fruit. Our economy is growing, unemployment is down and we are finally spending within our means.

Of course, there is much more to this debate than simply employment records, as has been said. We must look at the type of work people are undertaking. Are people working part time when they would like full-time hours? Are people being exploited by insecure forms of work? Are wages where we would like them to be? I do not think they are there yet, although the living wage is a help. It is all very well to have record employment, but we must ensure that it is of the right kind.

I do not agree with the Opposition's overly prescriptive policy of banning zero-hours contracts outright, or of branding all part-time or gig-economy work as bad. It is certainly not, and for many people those contracts work exceptionally well. I have spoken to students who welcome the flexibility of a zero-hours contract and to parents who are perfectly content in part-time positions that allow them to plan their lives around their families—what could be more important in life than family? I have heard from people who enjoy being their own boss, whether they are self-employed, as has been mentioned, or have the backing of an established company in an expanding franchise industry.

Many people have not secured the type of employment they would wish for, so I welcome the fact that the Government have commissioned the Taylor review of modern working practices, and have legislated to ban exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts. Those steps are proportionate and sensible, and offer real protection to people in the labour market, while allowing for individual circumstances, choice and preference. I commend the Ayrshire chamber of commerce for its "Developing the Young Workforce" initiative, which is extremely effective and welcome.

I stand in this debate conflicted. On the one hand, I look at the UK figures and the fantastic levels of employment, and I am proud of how far we have come. On the other hand, as a Member representing a Scottish constituency, I have concerns about how the economy north of the border is performing. Regrettably, the Scottish National party has missed five of its economic targets, which has cost more than £80 billion. That is a failure to grow the economy and to support Scottish businesses.

Since 2010, the UK has made great strides. There is further to go and more to do, but the direction of travel is right. I do not want my constituents to be left behind by a Scottish Government who are distracted.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that many of the macroeconomic levers that would be required to grow the economy to the level that he talks about still rest with Westminster?

Bill Grant: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention, but I do not accept what she says. There are plenty of tools in the Scottish Government's toolbox. There are so many levers that they do not use them, and sometimes they hand them back. The gift of sorting out the economy lies with Holyrood in partnership with the UK Government—not fighting against them, but working with them. That is where future success lies.

We have proven that with hard work, focus and determination, record levels of employment can be achieved and maintained. With progress being made in city deals and growth deals through both Governments working together—that is where the trick is—I am sure that Scotland's economy will grow over time and that Scotland will, as always, make a significant contribution to the overall UK economy. However, good Governments know that the way to have more money for public services is to expand the economy, not to tax the people.

10.4 am

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I commend the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) on securing this important debate on employment rates. He was remarkably upbeat in the face of the pending catastrophe of Brexit and its possible effect on future, and indeed current, employment rates in certain sectors.

I commend the hon. Gentleman's work with young ambassadors. It is important for young people to get involved in such schemes and I am pleased that he is part of that. I also commend his call for better cross-departmental working to address youth employment and unemployment. As I know from serving on the Public Accounts Committee, there are often calls for that sort of cross-departmental, non-silo approach, and we have to keep on at those Departments, because it is so important and it will make a big difference in those areas.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) gave an excellent speech that cautioned against the selective presentation of figures by the Government, by Members of the governing party and by Opposition Members, which is very good advice. He also rightly talked of the need for a basket of measures, and about considering the lived experience of people in work, an idea at which the Government should look carefully.

It was good to hear the figures from the constituency of the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), which show a rise in employment generally and among young people, and to hear about his contributions in regard to the ongoing problem of low pay.

I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) point out that the nature of employment needs to be examined, which was part of the Taylor review. We are yet to see the full implementation of that review or what parts the Government will act on, but iniquities in the type of employment that people undertake must be examined as well. However, I must strongly disagree with his presentation of the Scottish economy.

As we have heard from several hon. Members, there is some good news about employment rates across the UK, which I warmly welcome. I am pleased about the record lows in unemployment in Scotland and the increase in employment among women. There is lots more to be done to close not just the gender gap, but the gaps in disabled employment rates, as has been mentioned, and for minority ethnic communities. It is also good that the number of young people who are not in education, training or employment fell to 8% in Scotland last year. The Scottish Government have done a lot of work to create opportunities for young people. They have an excellent, well-established apprenticeship system that the rest of the UK might do well to have a peek at.

My city of Edinburgh has the highest proportion of high-skilled occupations among the major UK cities, including London, and unemployment rates have been lower for the last 10 years. There is a boom in the creative industries and in business start-ups, thanks largely to council and Scottish Government support, as well as the city being such a fantastic place to live. That

success brings challenges, but hon. Members should not worry: I am sure we will always find room for friends from the south who are escaping Brexit.

To stay on the positive for a bit longer, it is heart-warming that so many Conservative Members are keen to talk about jobs and employment. What some might see as a Damascene conversion from the days of "Unemployment is a price worth paying" is very much to be welcomed, although I hope it is not just to "drool and drivel they care", as Margaret Thatcher once said. Reformed and compassionate Conservatives might also want to have a word with their bosses about what I have to describe as the callous approach taken to people who cannot work for whatever reason of cutting cash that puts food on the table, as eloquently referred to by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport.

Bill Grant: Where is that compassionate Government when people in Scotland are taxed far more than people in the rest of the United Kingdom?

Deidre Brock: The hon. Gentleman needs to look at the facts, because that is simply not true. *[Interruption.]* No, it is not. If he went back and looked at Scottish Government figures, and did not just listen to his party colleagues spinning that point, that would be good.

Returning to jobs, it is not only having a job that matters, but getting fair pay—enough to live on—and decent working conditions. Here, the UK Government are again falling short of the mark. The UK national living wage is not a real living wage. It is not based on the cost of living; it is a con-trick. The scourge of the working poor continues, as wages are frozen and the cost of living rises. More than two thirds of children in poverty have at least one parent in work—that is a shocking statistic—and a fifth of workers earn less than the living wage.

As has been referred to, we continue to see a rise in the use of zero-hours contracts, which were up 100,000 in 2017, compared with the previous year. It is time to sort that out. We have also seen the regressive Trade Union Act 2016, a deliberate attack on the ability of employees to defend their rights. I cannot see the Government sticking up for the rights of workers any time soon. This is a Government that had to be dragged kicking and screaming through the courts to scrap fees for employment tribunals and allow the poor access to justice. Frankly, I shudder to think what is in store for our rights after Brexit, but I imagine that at least the lawyers will be kept busy, as there will be an awful lot more court cases.

The employment regulations so loathed by right wingers are there to protect us—to ensure that work is safe and fair and that we have a voice when things go wrong. If the UK Government decide that fair work is important, and I hope they do, they could certainly do worse than to look to the Scottish Government for some inspiration. For example, they could look at the Fair Work Convention, which is successfully driving forward a very new approach, and recognise that working in partnership is more productive than just putting the boot in.

The UK Government could also support the Scottish Government in their successful drives to boost jobs in sectors such as food and drink, instead of imposing the self-harm of leaving the EU. We have already read of secret plans to sell out the fishing industry—again—and US demands for a deal that could lower food standards,

end labelling protections and allow cheap US whisky to flood the market. Trade within the EU protects not only standards but jobs—134,000 in Scotland, according to the Fraser of Allander report on Brexit. Ignoring or denying that real and present threat to the employment trends we are considering today is not good politics. It is not working together; it is working against Scotland's best interests. We cannot just sit back and let that happen.

10.12 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) on yet again securing this debate, and on his work on youth employment as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on youth employment. We have heard some very interesting contributions today, including from the hon. Gentleman himself, and I really look forward in particular to the group's work on care leavers and prison leavers, who are a matter of concern; I am sure he shares that concern.

We heard a good contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who quite rightly raised the issues of in-work poverty, insecure contracts and food bank use, all of which have risen, as well as discussing how zero-hours contracts devalue the rights of employees. He also spoke about the importance of looking at a broad range of measures and at the lived experience of work; the testimony he received from his constituency, via his Facebook page, was very interesting.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) made a useful intervention about the question of the availability of hours for people in insecure work, and said that rather than looking at a "jobs miracle" we are looking at a "jobs mirage," which I thought was a pertinent way of describing the situation.

I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) spoke about the particular issues that rural communities face. He also called for the quality and quantity of work that is available to be a focus for the Government across the board.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) said that he did not agree with banning zero-hours contracts. I have to disagree with him on that, and I remind him that the number of people on zero-hours contracts is heading towards a million, so it really is a significant issue and I will touch on it later in my speech.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) quite rightly called for fair pay—enough for people to live on—and pointed out that the national living wage is not, of course, an actual living wage.

Increases in employment are welcome, but we also need to look beyond the statistics, as many Members have said, to see what the world of work is really like. Average real pay has still not returned to the level it was at before the financial crisis, and although inflation has started to fall, it has nevertheless outstripped wages for almost all of the period since 2010. Public sector workers have been particularly badly hit; they saw their pay

frozen for two years, in 2011 and 2012, and since then any increase has been capped at 1% a year, regardless of the rate of inflation.

Then, of course, there is a generation of people who were in their twenties at the time of the financial crisis, so they have spent almost all of their adult life in this period of austerity. They are now in their thirties—an age when many of them will have young children—yet median pay for people in that group is nearly 9% below the level that it was at in April 2008.

The Resolution Foundation predicts that this decade is likely to be the weakest decade for real pay growth in almost two centuries. Some 20% of Britain's 33 million workers earn £15,000 a year or less, and a recent report by the Centre for Social Justice forecast that the pay of those workers in particular would be squeezed over the next decade, as a result of trends such as the growth of the gig economy, automation and global competition. So can the Minister tell us what action the Government will take to improve the prospects of low-paid workers and what investment they will make in skills?

Around 8 million people are living in poverty in the UK, even though at least one person in such households is in work, and of course many people move in and out of low-paid work. Universal credit was originally aimed at smoothing the transition into work and at making work pay, but the cuts to work allowances announced in the summer Budget of 2015 severely damaged the work incentives that universal credit offers.

Reports by independent organisations such as the Resolution Foundation and the Equality and Human Rights Commission have made it clear that the increase in the national living wage and personal allowance do not compensate for the cuts to social security since 2010 for people on low income, with disabled people and single parents being hit especially hard.

According to a TUC report, the public sector pay cap, coupled with cuts to in-work support, means that the number of children in working families growing up in poverty will be 3.1 million this year, which is 1 million higher than in 2010. Will the Government listen to the call from the TUC and Labour to reverse the cuts to work allowances in universal credit and abolish the pay cap across the public sector, which Labour has committed to doing?

There are deep inequalities in the labour market, on the basis of where people live, ethnic background, gender, age and disability. The Government have repeatedly failed to address those inequalities, despite the Prime Minister's fine words outside No. 10 Downing Street on coming to power. More than eight out of 10 companies employing more than 250 staff—such companies were required to report on their gender pay gap in April—paid men more than women and three out of 10 of them had a gender pay gap higher than the national median of 18%—in some cases it was over 50%. So now we know about those companies, but they will not face any action as a result, except perhaps reputational damage. Labour would introduce fines for companies that have a high gender pay gap that they have failed to reduce. Are the Government going to act on the gender pay audit, and if not, why not?

According to the Prime Minister's race disparity audit, around one in 10 adults from a black, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or mixed background are unemployed,

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compared with one in 25 white British people. There are also significant differences in the kind of work that people do. For example, more than two in five people from a Pakistani or Bangladeshi background work in low-skilled occupations. Audits are important to tell us what the facts are, but we need action to address the issues they raise. How are the Government going to do that?

I turn to the situation for disabled people. Back in November, the Chancellor disgracefully sought to somehow blame disabled people for the UK's poor productivity record. That was particularly shocking given the Government's approach to supporting disabled people into work. The Work and Pensions Committee has highlighted that funding for specialist employment support for disabled people will fall substantially, from around £1 billion under Work Choice and the Work programmes to £554 million over the lifetime of the Work and Health programme.

A study by WPI Economics for the Employment Related Services Association estimates that the number of disabled people receiving specialist employment support will drop from around 300,000—the number it was between 2012 and 2015—to only 160,000 between 2017 and 2020. That would be a cut of around 50%, so I would be grateful if the Minister could comment on that, as it would not only be clearly detrimental to the lives of many disabled people, but would make no economic sense. Research by Scope suggests that a 10% increase in the number of disabled people in work would increase GDP by £45 billion by 2030 and benefit the Exchequer by £12 billion. If the Chancellor really wants to address the UK's productivity problems, he might like to give those figures some thought.

The majority of employment support for disabled people will be provided through Jobcentre Plus by general work coaches. If the Government are going to take employment support back in-house, will they look again at providing specialist support, rather than adopting a generalist model for work coaches?

With youth employment, the figures are less rosy. One in eight young people aged 16 to 24 are unemployed, which is much higher than the overall unemployment figure. The number of young people who are economically inactive rose over the past year. That is a matter of real concern. Just over 11% of 16 to 24-year-olds, or 808,000 young people, were not in education, employment or training—NEET—in the final quarter of 2017. Only about two fifths of those young people were registered as unemployed. The rest were economically inactive and hidden from the benefits system. The proportion of certain groups that are not in education, employment or training is shockingly high. Some 30% of disabled young people and 40% of care leavers are NEET, as compared with 9% of other young people. The Children's Society has made a strong case for there to be a specific marker for care leavers in universal credit, as in legacy benefits, so that we can measure their progress. Will the Minister commit to doing that?

Since April 2017, young people aged 18 to 21 claiming universal credit receive employment support through the youth obligation. After six months of what is supposed to be intensive support, they are required to take up an apprenticeship, training or a work placement. However, organisations such as Centrepoin are concerned that

young people who face the greatest challenges in finding work—for example, care leavers—might need longer than six months and more personalised support to get to the point where they can do that. The all-party group has also made that point, stressing the importance of young people with greater challenges being given support in the first instance to develop basic skills. Can the Minister tell us what percentage of young people have found work through the youth obligation so far? Will he look at the case for personalised support for young people on universal credit through specialist work coaches?

The European social fund is a vital source of funding for employment support at the local level for disabled people and young people who are NEET, for example. In the present funding round for 2014 to 2020, the UK is receiving around £500 million a year, but ESF funding is important not only for the direct support it provides, but for attracting funding from other sources. The Government have announced that they will create a shared prosperity fund to replace the ESF, but time is running out to have a successor ready in time. They have said that they will publish a consultation some time later in the year, but no timescale has been announced. Can the Minister tell us when the consultation will take place? Can he tell us what he is doing to ensure that there will be no gap in the provision of employment support when ESF funding comes to an end?

Young people are also more likely to be working part time, in temporary employment or on a zero-hours contract than workers who are older. It is little wonder that the chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority warned last year about levels of debt among young people that are built up in just trying to cover basic bills. Women are especially likely to be in part-time or insecure work. Some 55% of people on a zero-hours contract are women, and 45% are men. Similarly, a high proportion of people from some ethnic minority communities are more likely to be in part-time or insecure work. According to the Government's race disparity audit, more than one in four Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers were employed in distribution or in hotels and restaurants, and one in five were in transport and communications industries, where low-paid, insecure work is common. Around 900,000 people are on zero-hours contracts.

More than half the zero-hours workers in a TUC survey said that they had shifts cancelled at less than 24 hours' notice. People with caring responsibilities simply cannot afford to take shifts at such short notice. Having made provision for childcare, to then have a shift cancelled is particularly frustrating and expensive. Three quarters of the people responding to the survey said that they had been offered shifts at less than 24 hours' notice, and a third said that they had been threatened that they would not be given shifts in future if they turned down work. How are people supposed to manage their finances and their lives when they are on zero-hours contracts—when they do not know how much money will be coming in each week and how much childcare they are likely to need? Will the Government ban exploitative zero-hours contracts, as Labour would?

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk spoke of the importance of the work of self-employed people. In evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee in January, the director of universal credit at the Department for Work and Pensions said clearly:

“Self-employment is a cause of in-work poverty.”

We should all be alarmed by that statement. The number of self-employed people has increased. They now make up about 15% of the workforce, or 4.8 million. That figure is for 2017, and compares with 12%, or 3.3 million, in 2001. The design of universal credit means it can fail to protect self-employed people on low income from poverty. Under the minimum income floor, self-employed people claiming universal credit are assumed to be earning the equivalent of 35 hours at the national living wage after a year, even though in many cases their earnings may be much less. That is exactly why they need to claim universal credit.

In February the Office for Budget Responsibility estimated that by 2022-23 more than two thirds of self-employed people claiming universal credit would lose out from the minimum income floor by an average of £3,000 a year. Someone who is self-employed, but on exactly the same annual income as someone who is an employee, can be entitled to less universal credit because it fails to take account of the fluctuating earnings that are a basic characteristic of self-employment.

In conclusion, high rates of employment should be good for those who are employed. They should mean higher wages and more security, but in reality people can face years as agency staff on temporary contracts, and zero-hours workers can have shifts cancelled at less than a day's notice, with all the insecurity that that brings. It is little wonder that the TUC has reported parents being penalised by employers for asking for flexibility for family reasons, such as for simply wanting to take annual leave when their child is sick. Work should be a route out of poverty, but recent research by the Living Wage Foundation reveals that more than a third of working parents on low incomes have regularly skipped meals because they are short of money, and almost half have fallen behind on household bills. On coming to power, the Prime Minister promised outside Downing Street to be on the side of families who were just about managing, but it is clear that her Government are failing to do that. High employment rates are welcome, but they do not tell the whole truth about most people's experience of the world of work.

10.26 am

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) on securing, for the second time, this important debate on recent trends in employment. He made a fine speech, as did colleagues from all parts of the House. I have time in this debate to respond to a lot of the points that have been raised, and I will aim to do that. I will also come back to some of the points that my hon. Friend raised.

Sir Roger, I think you and I are probably the only Members here who were in the House in 2010, when the Conservative-led Government came into office. One of their first acts was to introduce an emergency Budget. At the time—both during the debate and subsequently—there were many siren voices on the Labour Benches that warned with great conviction that the Government's policies would lead to a big increase in unemployment. Well, those doom-laden predictions have not come to pass; as Members on both sides have pointed out, we have seen strong jobs growth.

The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) is no longer in his place, but, frankly, to talk about this jobs miracle as a mirage is insulting. It is insulting to the more than 3 million people who now have a job as a result of the jobs created since 2010. It is also insulting to the employers—the hard-working companies and organisations that have created those jobs.

Margaret Greenwood: Will the Minister comment on the 900,000 people who are on zero-hours contracts and cannot manage their lives? They do not know how much money they are going to earn. They do not know how much childcare they need. It is a state of real insecurity, creating anxiety for a lot of people, and it is not good for the economy either.

Alok Sharma: I will of course come on to discuss precisely those points, because they are important.

The labour market statistics published last month by the independent Office for National Statistics—I point out once again to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) that it is independent—show that employment in the United Kingdom reached a record high in the last quarter of 75.6%. That was the 17th new record employment rate since 2010. Employment is up by more than 3 million since 2010. I place on record my thanks, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole did, to all the businesses and organisations across our constituencies that have created those jobs. The unemployment rate has fallen to 4.2%, which is a 40-year low. As my hon. Friend pointed out, there are now more than 800,000 vacancies across our economy.

Those who cannot quite accept that positive trend will say that all those jobs are low paid and temporary, but that is absolutely not true. Some 70% of the increase in employment has been in higher skilled occupations that pay higher salaries. Three quarters of them are full time and permanent.

A point was made about where those jobs are created and whether they are all in London and the south-east. I can confirm that 60% of the growth in private sector employment since 2010 has been outside London and the south-east.

Various colleagues, including the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), made a point about zero-hours contracts. Such contracts represent less than 3% of all people in employment. The hon. Lady is right to say that that is around 900,000 people, but the number is down on the year. On average, someone on a zero-hours contract usually works 25.2 hours a week. Again, of those who stated a preference—to be clear, this is in the ONS's own labour force survey—only 30% of those on a zero-hours contract stated that they wanted to work more hours. So when the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport talks about only a small number of people valuing such flexibility, I have to say that that is not what we see from the independent figures—a point well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant).

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the Minister for giving way again; he is being very generous. Is he aware of the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace among staff on zero-hours contracts? What advice would he

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give to a young woman on such a contract who is experiencing that? Where can she go for support? How can she tackle it, and how can she remain employed, but in a safe environment?

Alok Sharma: Frankly, any kind of bullying and any such acts are completely unacceptable, whether someone is on a zero-hours contract or a full-time contract. As the hon. Lady knows, there are avenues open to people, but if she has specific cases, she is welcome to come and talk to me about them. It is important that we have flexibility in work patterns, which is what zero-hours contracts allow, but it is also right that the Government have banned exclusive zero-hours contracts.

We have discussed employment outcomes by groups. If we look at some of the groups that have historically been under-represented in the employment market, we have seen a significant improvement in their participation in the workforce. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) welcomed the record high of 71.2% in the female employment rate, which I of course welcome as well. There are now more than 3.8 million people from ethnic minorities in work—an increase of 1.1 million since 2010. The ethnic minority employment rate currently stands at 65.1 %, which is a record high. However, I completely accept that the employment gap between ethnic minorities and the white population is too high, at 12%, and we are working to address that. If I have time, I will talk about the response to the race disparity audit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock talked about disabled people. We have seen a welcome rise in the employment of disabled people—600,000 in the past four years—to around 3.5 million people today. He also talked about the Disability Confident scheme. More than 6,000 employers are involved in that and in Access to Work support. That is really important in encouraging everyone in our country who aspires to work to have an opportunity to do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole made a powerful opening speech and highlighted the excellent work of the all-party group on youth employment, which he chairs. He has shared with various ministerial colleagues reports from inquiries that the APPG has conducted. Of course, I would be delighted to come to the APPG to discuss its work and to meet the youth ambassadors, who I am sure will ask challenging questions. As my hon. Friend highlighted, we have made progress on youth employment. The employment rate for those not in full-time education stands at 74.9%, and youth unemployment is down by 40% since 2010.

My hon. Friend made international comparisons, some of which I will repeat. The UK youth employment rate is 18.3 percentage points above that of the euro area and more than 16% above the EU average, but of course I agree with him that we need to do more. We therefore have a skills agenda, with a focus on apprenticeships and technical education. Colleagues have talked about the youth obligation support programme, which started in April last year, and about the ability to get work experience. We have also been encouraging work-based academies, which I think have been very successful.

My hon. Friend talked about whether there should be better working across Government on these issues. Of course, many are joined up. I can confirm that we have a number of taskforce initiatives where Ministers work together. He will be pleased to know that straight after this debate I will be having a meeting with the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills to discuss precisely these issues.

The Government are funding lifelong learning pilots, investing in a national retraining scheme, and delivering basic digital skills and careers advice for older workers who need them. We are also ensuring there is support to assist those with a health condition or disability, to make sure they are able to access the support they need to move into work.

On the cost of living, I know that all Members will welcome the fact that the ONS reported last month that salaries are starting to outpace inflation. I certainly want to see that very welcome trend continue. We absolutely recognise that people need additional support with living costs, and we have been providing that support. We have recognised that high childcare costs can affect parents' decisions to take up paid work or increase their working hours. That is why, by 2019-20, we will be spending around £6 billion a year on childcare support. That includes 30 hours' free childcare for working parents of three and four-year-olds. Within universal credit, claimants are eligible to claim up to 85% of their childcare costs. The outcome from independent evaluation in areas of early introduction shows that, with increased childcare support, parents are able to work more flexibly and increase their hours. We are championing shared parental leave and have introduced a right to request flexible working.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) welcomed the increase in personal allowances, which means that a typical basic rate taxpayer now pays more than £1,000 less in income tax than in 2010. We also introduced the national living wage in 2016, which increased by 4.4% this April. Thanks to the national living wage, full-time minimum wage workers have had a boost of £2,000 since 2016.

Numerous colleagues, including the hon. Members for Edinburgh North and Leith and for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport and my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk, talked about job quality and the Matthew Taylor review. Although we need to continue to work to maintain high levels of employment, I absolutely agree that we must also address the important issue of job quality. Among its recommendations, last year's Taylor review asked the Government to focus on the quality of work and to identify a set of measures to evaluate job quality.

A strand of the Government's industrial strategy has a focus on the creation of good jobs and greater earnings power for all, so the Government have outlined five foundational aspects of good work: overall satisfaction; good pay, which includes perceptions of fairness relative to one's peers; participation and progression in the workforce, which includes the ability to work flexibly and acquire new skills; wellbeing, safety and security at work; and voice and autonomy in the workplace. It is self-evident that if people feel a sense of control over how they carry out their job, they will generally feel much more positive about it. The Government are

working with experts to identify a set of measures against which we can evaluate quality of work, and I certainly look forward to the outcome of that work.

I have time to go through a number of points that colleagues have raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole talked about the hospitality industry, and we absolutely want to see a strong and vibrant hospitality sector. I recently met Brigid Simmonds, chief executive officer of the British Beer & Pub Association, to talk about the hospitality sector. In February this year, the Department for Work and Pensions ran the annual Hospitality Works campaign, which aims to raise awareness of the thousands of great career options that exist in the sector and to showcase some of the key employers we work with.

Luke Pollard: Yesterday, in Question Time, the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) raised the issue of introducing a seasonal hospitality workers scheme similar to the agricultural workers scheme. The one thing we know is that, after Brexit, there is a real risk that many roles in the hospitality sector could be eroded by the lack of available labour, which would impact on the domestic market, as well as on incoming tourists. Will the Minister briefly reflect on that?

Alok Sharma: I am, of course, happy to reflect on that. Perhaps it would be useful to have a discussion with the hon. Gentleman after the debate on any thoughts that he may have.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the claimant count, which is down significantly in his constituency from 2010. However, the claimant count is no longer a consistent indicator. The ONS has acknowledged that and removed it from its monthly labour market statistics. As he will know, we have launched a consultation on a new measure, and I hope that he and all colleagues will take part in that. Previously, the claimant count looked at people purely on jobseeker's allowance, whereas now, with universal credit, which is both an in-work and out-of-work benefit, those numbers are increasing. They do not necessarily have a bearing on what is going on in the labour market, but clearly we need a consistent set of figures. I hope that colleagues will respond to that consultation, which closes on 21 July.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of in-work poverty for working-age adults. Whichever way one looks at it, poverty rates, whether relative or absolute, or before or after housing, are lower than in 2010. Adults in workless families are four times more likely to be in poverty than those in working families, which is why we are keen to see more people move into employment.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned people with disabilities. I have talked about the Disability Confident scheme and the Access to Work scheme. The number of people with disabilities in work has increased significantly over the last four years. That is something that both he and I greatly welcome. He also made a point about having a basket of measures. The Government already use a range of measures to assess labour market performance. We look at not only employment rates, but pay and productivity, security of work, and employment by labour market group—we have already talked about women, people from ethnic minority backgrounds and older workers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk raised the issue of productivity. That is an important point, in the sense that our productivity levels have lagged behind those of some of our peers for a long time. That is why we now have a national £31 billion productivity investment plan, focused on exactly the sort of issues that colleagues have been highlighting, such as housing, physical infrastructure, digital infrastructure and, of course, research and development.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith mentioned the working relationship between Westminster and the Government in Scotland. Actually, I have had a very good set of conversations with the Minister for Employability and Training in Scotland. In fact, when we spoke about Fair Start Scotland in our last conversation, he highlighted that as an example of the UK Government and the Scottish Government working well together. Of course we want to work together, but it requires both parties to come to the table when there are decisions to be made.

The hon. Member for Wirral West talked about the gender pay gap and the race disparity audit. That audit was conducted under a Conservative Government, by a Conservative Prime Minister who cares deeply about the issue. It is the first time that such an audit has happened, and I know the hon. Lady will welcome it. In terms of the plans we have to assist people, we have identified 20 challenge areas where the employment gap between the white population and the black and minority ethnic population is quite large. We are looking at a number of pilot schemes to see what can eventually be rolled out across the country.

The hon. Lady talked about public sector pay. As she will know, the Government ended the 1% pay policy in September last year, and pay review bodies will now come forward with proposals for pay that will be considered by the relevant Ministers. We have already announced that many of the lowest paid NHS workers will see double digit pay rises over the next three years.

I think I have answered many of the points that were raised, so I will conclude by saying that the recent trends in employment are very positive. It is a welcome development that we are starting to see wages outpace inflation, and the Government are enacting measures to help people with the cost of living. We are ensuring that our population, both younger and older workers, are able to upskill for the jobs of the future.

10.45 am

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to the Minister and to all colleagues who have contributed to today's debate. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said that we must look at the stories behind the statistics. I completely agree, and I hope that I gave a sense of that in my speech as well. The Minister has answered the hon. Gentleman's point about having a basket or range of measures, but I believe that we should perhaps do the same thing more broadly when we look at poverty—we should use a broader range of measures to look at that issue. The hon. Gentleman made a very interesting point.

The Minister responded to the point made by the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) about the jobs "mirage". I do not think that a fair look

[Michael Tomlinson]

at the independent statistics bears out the hon. Gentleman's soundbite, although I was pleased that he was able to make it to the debate, albeit for a short time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) raised a lot of issues that many of us in more rural constituencies will recognise, particularly on infrastructure and the importance of digital infrastructure, which is a vital part of the infrastructure that we need. He also mentioned the importance of getting more high-skilled jobs.

I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) raised the issue of the Disability Confident scheme. We must ensure that we narrow the disability employment gap. Importantly, he mentioned the Matthew Taylor review. The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) mentioned zero-hours contracts, but my hon. Friend the Minister made a very good point about cutting down on exclusivity clauses. That point was particularly welcome.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) accused me of perhaps being overly rosy. If I was overly rosy, perhaps she was overly pessimistic, not least about Brexit. Perhaps the hon. Member for Wirral West was also being a little pessimistic in her outlook, but I welcomed some of her thoughts. However, I was pleased that the Minister had time to make some points about zero-hours contracts in his response.

Finally, I was particularly pleased by the Minister's comments on cross-departmental working. That is a key message, and it is something that must continue in not just this area but all areas. I am pleased that he has accepted the invitation and the challenge to come to the all-party group.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered recent trends in employment rates.

10.47 am

Sitting suspended.

Type 26 Frigates: Base-Porting

11 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered base-porting of Type 26 frigates.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. As the Member of Parliament for Devonport and its dockyard and naval base, I am proud to be standing here again making the case for ensuring that Devonport—the largest naval base in western Europe—is home to all the Type 26 frigates and, I hope, the Type 31s and the remainder of the Type 23 frigates with tails. As the son of a Devonport-based submariner, I know how important a strong defence is to our city. Plymouth is a proud military city, but it is living under the cloud of possible defence cuts.

We live in uncertain times, with the rise of Russia, new insurgent technologies and tactics destabilising countries across the globe, autonomous warfare, cyber-warfare, piracy and old foes investing in their militaries. I believe that the best deterrent against a rearming and resurgent Russia is a strong Royal Navy. I make no apologies for again making the case that many have heard me make in this Chamber and elsewhere: we need more and more capable frigates, and we must preserve our amphibious capacities and base-port all our new frigates in Devonport.

Given that a decision on base-porting frigates might be imminent in the upcoming modernising defence review, I hope that this debate will help to convince the Minister of the compelling case for basing all the new global combat ships—the Type 26 frigates—in Devonport. I will set out why I believe there is a compelling and convincing case for Devonport and why the Type 26 frigate is a platform we can be proud of. I will also talk about the critical cog in the Royal Navy, the backbone of the senior service—the men and women of the Royal Navy—and why basing them and the frigates in Devonport is the right thing to do. That is not just my view; it is the view of the cross-party Devonport taskforce, co-ordinated by Plymouth City Council. Whether Conservative-run, as it was up to May, or Labour-run, as it has been since May, there is cross-party support, consensus, and determination among all local parties to win these frigates, to protect our amphibious ships and Royal Marines, and to deal with the legacy of the old submarines. I know that the Minister values cross-party campaigning, and I hope we can demonstrate that today.

Devonport is already home to half the nation's frigates. We are the base for the Royal Navy's anti-submarine warfare Type 23 frigates. The Type 23s with tails are the frontline of our efforts to counter increased Russian submarine activity in the north Atlantic and protect our northern flank.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): NATO revised its view of the north Atlantic and the High North in the maritime strategy, as the hon. Gentleman has just suggested. I understand his making the case for his own constituency, but is it not sensible to ensure that some of the Type 23s and Type 26s are based in Rosyth, for example, to give us extra cover in the north? We have seen many examples of incursions from Russian ships

of late, so it would make strategic sense to base some ships—perhaps not the whole fleet—in Scotland, and particularly in Rosyth.

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I disagree with base-porting older frigates there, but the idea of forward-deploying the Type 31e frigates, which I will come to in a moment, and basing them in locations other than just their base port is a good one, and he might want to pick up on that.

Devonport already has the skills and expertise to base the Type 23s. Indeed, it is arguable that we already have Type 26s in Devonport. I say that because HMS Argyll—a Type 23 frigate that is already equipped with much of the tech of a Type 26—is already one of our ships there. The hulls might need renewing, but that Type 23 frigate, which I was very pleased to visit on choppy seas earlier this year, is already carrying the combat systems—the tech and operational control functions—of a Type 26 frigate. Much of the crew of the first Type 26—HMS Glasgow—are already probably serving on Devonport-based Type 23s.

With quick access to the deep water of the north Atlantic, Devonport is ideally suited to counter the threats in the Atlantic and to support the continuous at-sea deterrent and carrier strike. Devonport has another ace up its sleeve: we are home to the world-class Flag Officer Sea Training establishment, under Admiral John Clink, who will retire shortly. Plymouth and navies around the world, including our own, are indebted to his leadership. FOST is the final hurdle that a ship and its crew must clear before being sent on missions around the globe. It is a jewel in the crown of the British armed forces and, like all good things in Plymouth, we rarely tell anyone about it. As a proud janner—someone born in Plymouth who lives in Plymouth—I feel I can say that Plymouth all too often hides its light under a bushel, and then hides the bushel. That has been the case with FOST, and I think we should speak loudly and proudly about its global role. Given the location of FOST, Devonport's experience of basing anti-submarine warfare frigates, and its geographical position, there is a good case for allied nations using it more as a quick reaction base for surface ships. I encourage the Minister to look creatively at inviting NATO forces to use Devonport's superb facilities in the months and years ahead.

The people of the Royal Navy are the backbone of the fleet. The crews of the Type 23s with tails have already made Devonport and Plymouth their home. They have found schools for their children and homes, and they have a genuine connection to our city and the areas around Plymouth. Those people will provide the leadership, specialist trades, expertise and crews for the new Type 26 frigates.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions the importance of the crew to the local economy—they are very much part of our culture. He is probably aware of a study that either the council or the university—I forget which—did about 10 years ago. It showed that, surprisingly, quite a large proportion of the crew of any ship base-ported in Plymouth—or anywhere else, I imagine—live elsewhere in the UK, but a hard core, or a significant minority,

live in Plymouth or the port area. They have a significant role in boosting our local economy and being part of the local social fabric.

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. It is really important that we value the people who serve on our ships and, importantly, the people out of uniforms—the civilians—who support the base-porting of the ships and the jobs that result from that.

Many of the warfare and technical specialists who use the combat and operating systems on the Type 23s and Type 26s already live in a PL postcode. As south-west Members know, the PL postcode extends far and wide across the far south-west, as it should do. Preserving those roles and those people in our region is paramount in this basing decision. Confirming Devonport as a long-term naval anti-submarine warfare centre of excellence would support forces families as well as strategic efforts.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I am sure he will recognise that this is about not just the PL postcodes but the TQ postcodes of south Devon. Many of the workers whose skills will be of benefit to the future Type 26 programme live and work there and commute to Devonport every day. To base-port the frigates in Devonport would boost the wider regional economy, not just Plymouth's.

Luke Pollard: I thank my near-neighbour for that comment. It was foolish of me to forget our friends up the A38, which I hope will soon be the M5.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I too congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. It is important that we in this House acknowledge the very proud service history that he has referred to in his constituency. This is due serious consideration. Having the frigates based there will ensure job security and will send a very clear message that the modern defence strategy incorporates the ability to place ships strategically in strong defence areas. The hon. Gentleman represents one of those areas.

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. I agree that it is important that we build on the areas of expertise we already have. In Devonport, Plymouth and the wider south-west we have military expertise and a close connection with the armed forces, which aids recruitment.

The context of this debate matters. It is not just frigates that are based at Devonport naval base and serviced in the dockyard, but amphibious ships. When the news of the threats to HMS Albion, HMS Bulwark and the Royal Marines was first mooted last summer, I called for clarity and for Ministers to rule out those cuts. Some said that I was scaremongering, but the threat to those ships was real then and sadly is real today, as is the threat to HMS Ocean, our amphibious helicopter carrier, which will shortly leave Devonport for the last time and join the Brazilian navy as PHM Atlântico. That is when I launched the campaign to fight for more frigates in Devonport. I believed that we needed not just one extra Type 23 with a tail transferred

[*Luke Pollard*]

from Portsmouth, but a commitment to make all the Type 26s and Type 31s Devonport-based, too. At the time, I said:

“I’m no longer content with Devonport being on the defensive and today call for all of the new Type 26 and 31 Frigates to be based in Devonport alongside our world class amphibious ships.”

Most of the Type 31e frigates, which will join the Type 26s as part of the replacement for the Type 23s, will be forward-deployed. The Type 26s will not be, so their basing arrangement is perhaps the bigger win for any locality, even if the Type 31e frigates may be with us sooner than 2026 for their larger sister ships. I also believe that the Type 31s should be based in Devonport, even if that is more paper-basing than base-porting in the traditional sense, due to the forward-deployed nature of many of the new lighter frigates.

In January I led a Westminster Hall debate on the Government’s national shipbuilding strategy. I made the case to the Minister for why Devonport is a world-class naval base and why it should be home to the Type 26s. The energy behind the will to base the frigates there also arises from the local community in the far south-west to protect our amphibious warships. The petition that I launched to preserve the amphibious ships and the Royal Marines attracted 30,000 names, the bulk of them from the far south-west, although the Minister will be pleased to hear that 34 people in his constituency also signed it.

Since then, however, we have seen further threats to our city with the confirmation that Stonehouse barracks, the spiritual home of the Royal Marines, is to close, as is the Royal Citadel, both in my constituency. There are also job losses as Babcock restructures.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): The hon. Gentleman may be slightly mistaken. The announcement of the rebasing strategy was in 2015, long before the current process. This is not about party politics, because over the years Governments of all colours have not paid enough attention to Plymouth, but if the rebasing strategy happens and the Type 26s can be base-ported in Plymouth, does he agree that under this Government we shall actually see a growth in the military for the first time in a generation, and that is to be welcomed?

Luke Pollard: We shall actually see replacement of the existing Type 23s with Type 26s, so the risk is that we shall lose ships if we do not get the Type 26 decision, rather than gaining extra ships. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are already losing HMS Ocean, sadly, so our naval base contingent is already one large ship down.

The modernising defence review is a chance to present a new vision for defence in Plymouth to back our jobs and secure our future. The review needs to be used as a positive way of encouraging more people to see their future not only in the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines, but in the industries that service the ships and our fighting forces. To do that, we need certainty on the future of HMS Albion, HMS Bulwark and the Royal Marines—from the volume and frequency of questions I have asked the Minister over the months since he took up his role, he knows that I feel strongly about that.

However, we must be under no illusion: the new frigates should not be based in Devonport simply as a sop for losing the amphibious ships. We have fought a cross-party campaign across Plymouth on three fronts: frigates; amphibious ships and Royal Marines; and our legacy submarines. We need to win on each of them, and we cannot afford to lose any one element.

The Minister knows that I have had concerns about the Type 31e and how lightly armed it is, but I have no such concerns about the world-class Type 26. It is a ship that our nation should and will be proud of. It is being built in Scotland—

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Saying that, the hon. Gentleman allows me to ask whether he agrees that the fact that the Type 26s are being built on the Clyde shows the importance of Scotland’s place in the United Kingdom, both for UK defence capabilities and for the shipbuilding industry on the Clyde.

Luke Pollard: I agree entirely. The remark about the apprentice who will work on the last of the Type 26 frigates not being born yet shows what a long-term commitment to British shipbuilding the Type 26 programme represents and how important it is for us to secure other shipbuilding contracts, such as that for the fleet solid support ships, so that such ships are built in British shipyards, which many people across the House believe should be the case.

The Type 26 will be a world-class ship. My only concern is that there are too few of them—to be precise, five too few—and that we are not replacing all Type 23s with a Type 26. However, there is no doubt that this ship is world-class, can be put in harm’s way, will have the capabilities of a modern navy, and will be the envy of our allies and a worry to our opponents. Numerically, our fleet is small compared with that of Russia or China, but our capabilities are miles ahead. Indeed, these are ships that our allies may well sail as well.

I hope that Canada chooses the Type 26 platform for its six new frigates and that our cousins down under order nine of them for the Royal Australian Navy’s future frigate programme. There is cross-party support for selling not only the design of the platform but the expertise in the supply chain, because not all the export jobs for the frigates will be in building hulls, but in weapons, combat systems and other support items on the frigate, supplying value to the entire British supply chain.

I do not want to use any time saying why other bases would not work for the Type 26, because Plymouth and Devonport’s case is sufficiently compelling. Portsmouth is a good base for the carriers, the Type 45 destroyers and the OPVs, or offshore patrol vessels. Devonport should be home to frigates, refits and the Royal Navy’s amphibious capabilities—not all the Royal Navy, just the best bits.

Back in June last year, in my maiden speech, I called for more capable frigates, which the capabilities of the Type 26 deliver. Shortly after winning my seat in the general election, I wrote to the then Defence Secretary asking for a new Type 26 to be named after Plymouth. That was a campaign started by my predecessor, Oliver Colvile—formerly the Conservative MP. I supported it as a candidate, and I continue to do so now as an MP. I want to see one of the new city-class ships named after

Plymouth, but there is little point naming her after Plymouth if she is to be based in Portsmouth, as I am sure the Minister understands.

With others, I have been working hard to lobby Ministers, making the case for Devonport. This has been a team effort, and our case is strongest in that cross-party spirit. I have also been lobbying colleagues on the Labour Benches. I am really pleased that Labour has backed my campaign, pledging that a Labour Government would base-port all Type 26 frigates in Devonport. Whether that Labour Government is sooner or later, the shadow Defence Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), is right when she says that Devonport's case for the new frigates is "compelling, comprehensive and convincing". I agree with her on that.

Plymouth's three Members of Parliament—all present today—the Labour leader of Plymouth City Council and the Conservative leader of the opposition are united in our belief that Devonport is the best place for the new ships. I have called for cross-party working on the issue since I started the campaign last year. Ministers have told me that that is the approach they want to see from Plymouth in the campaign, and I recognise that a strong and united campaign by Plymouth is vital to persuade the Ministry of Defence to decide in Devonport's favour. We achieve more when we work together and less when we are divided. By the end of this debate I hope that Ministers will have heard from the united voice of Plymouth and the surrounding areas that Devonport is the ideal location for the Type 26 frigates.

From 2026 onwards, I want to see HMS Glasgow and her sister ships in Devonport, together with our world-class amphibious ships. In setting out the case for Devonport, I have also set out the cross-party and cross-Plymouth support that the campaign enjoys. Basing the new frigates in Devonport is the right strategic choice, the right defence choice, the best option for forces' families, and the right choice for Plymouth, Devonport and our nation. I realise that the Minister has to make many tough decisions in his role—hard decisions, life-and-death decisions—but this is not one of them. This should be a simple decision—an easy choice for him. Devonport is the best location for the Type 26s. I encourage the Minister to make that decision in our favour at the earliest opportunity.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on his speech, much of which I agree with and subscribe to. I also congratulate the other Members for the city of Plymouth on being present to support the debate. It is right to describe the Plymouth campaign as city-wide, and the campaign is appreciated. It was certainly difficult not to come away from my visit to Plymouth with the strong impression of the support afforded over centuries to the Royal Navy by the people of the city of Plymouth. I appreciate the passion displayed by all hon. Members, the three representing the city in particular, and the Ministry of Defence and I understand the feeling behind the speech.

The decision on the base-porting of the Type 26 is an important one that will have to be taken sooner rather than later. When we take that decision, we shall take into account a number of factors that have to be considered seriously and carefully, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport will understand. We shall be looking at issues of logistics, infrastructure and personnel. On personnel, I echo the tribute he paid to the Royal Navy crews who man the frigates already based in Plymouth and to their support staff, whether military or civilian.

Johnny Mercer: On the timing, does the Ministry of Defence grasp the issue about us needing a commitment not even sooner rather than later, but before the summer recess? We need a decision point that we can look at, and take back to people and say, "Yes, we will get a decision on it," so that we will have delivered something from the campaign.

Guto Bebb: My hon. Friend tempts me to offer an answer now, but I am sure he understands that it would be remiss of me to make such a commitment now, especially as we are still awaiting the completion of the Modernising Defence Programme. However, I stress again that we are looking at the issues seriously, including training, force generation and cost. We will certainly make an announcement before the end of the year. I anticipate that we might be able to make announcements before then, although I would not want my hon. Friend to come away thinking that the intention is to have an early decision. We are trying to ensure that we make a decision based on the facts of the situation, and I assure my hon. Friend that the support that Plymouth is showing for the campaign is being taken on board. Plymouth's capability and the capacity as a naval base is also understood by the Ministry of Defence. I hope that gives some reassurance, if not the exact dates that he was looking for.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Has the Minister given any consideration at all, on a slightly longer time scale, to where the new Type 31s may be based?

Guto Bebb: Ultimately, we are looking very carefully at the rebasing; the fact of the matter is that we are building an enhanced Royal Navy. We will have more surface ships in the Royal Navy than we have had for a long time. We have seen the Royal Navy grow for the first time in a long time. All these decisions are under review. That is why it is important to understand that the decision on the Type 26 is not being taken in isolation. We are making decisions in the context of a growing Royal Navy. I suspect that every Member who has spoken in this debate would welcome the fact that the Royal Navy is growing. The reason for that growth is the new challenges that we face and the demand that we respond to them, and some of those were articulated by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport.

We are aware of the long-standing support offered to the Royal Navy by Plymouth and the Devonport base since 1691. There is a 300-year history. It is very difficult to visit Plymouth without being moved by the contribution that the city has made to the prosperity and the protection of this country over 300 years. Clearly, the size of the estate is unique. It is the largest base of its kind in Europe, stretching over 940 acres, and has more than 100 listed buildings and 3.5 miles of waterfront. This is

[*Guto Bebb*]

a base that has been providing support for our Royal Navy for a very long time. That history is clear from visiting the city of Plymouth.

The Government's commitment is clear: to enhance the Royal Navy—the surface fleet and the submarine fleet. It is important to understand the context of this debate, which is the growth in the Royal Navy. We are committed to building our eight anti-submarine warfare Type 26 frigates. The hon. Gentleman's support for our export campaigns in Australia and Canada is appreciated. We have run a fantastic campaign in Australia and we are running a fantastic campaign in Canada. The capability of the platforms that we are building, with the support of our fantastic shipbuilders on the Clyde, is something that we take very seriously. It is great to see this unified approach to highlighting the capability of the Type 26.

The contract to build the Type 26 was awarded in June 2017. We have already cut steel and are building the first blocks on HMS Glasgow, which is very good news. Some people have claimed that it is nothing more than a paper ship; any hon. Members who have been to the Clyde will be able to say quite categorically that that is not the case. The work is being undertaken and the quality of the work is excellent.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport highlighted the long-term commitment to shipbuilding on the Clyde that that order represents in his comments about the apprenticeships opportunities. The last of the apprentices who will be involved in the Type 26 programme have not yet been born. The Type 26 programme shows our commitment to long-term shipbuilding. I make no apology about the fact that we are also looking at the Type 31e. It is a case of identifying our capability need and what the Navy needs. The Type 31e is welcome from a procurement point of view. It is a general-purpose frigate being built to a cost limit, but it is also a new way of doing procurement.

When I travel around the world in my role—when the parliamentary arithmetic allows such travel to occur—I find it fascinating to see how closely defence departments in other countries are watching our Type 31 procurement. The capability and the cost of the Type 26 are recognised and have been recognised in the debate. Not many countries have the capability or the financial power to purchase such a high level of capability as the Type 26, but they are interested in what we are trying to achieve with the Type 31. The combined effort is showing a degree of confidence in our shipbuilding strategy, but it is also showing a confidence in our Royal Navy.

It is important to highlight that the Type 23 frigates have been and remain a significant part of the activities in Devonport. The decision to base the eight anti-submarine Type 23s in Devonport was correct. That decision has resulted in more coherence in our basing. I share the hon. Gentleman's admiration for the crews of the Type 23; I have also flown on to Argyll and have enjoyed Thursday war games with the crew. The professionalism and the commitment of the crew was something to behold.

I take exception to the comments that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport made about defence cuts. We have to acknowledge this issue on a cross-party basis, and it needs to be very carefully articulated, because it contributes to a false impression of what is happening in defence. The Government are committed

to increasing defence spending. We have a protected budget of £37 billion. That budget is increasing by half a per cent above inflation year in year out for the lifetime of this Parliament. That commitment needs to be understood.

We talk about cuts, but it is important to put that in context. We are increasing defence spending. The challenge is to manage that increased spending. When we casually use the word "cuts", we are sending a message—often a false message—that is a reassurance to our opponents and that causes distress and concern for some of the people working in our armed forces. I understand the context in which the comment was made, but I want to put it on record that we are expanding and extending our defence capabilities and are spending more on defence. My own equipment budget is £180 billion over the next 10 years, which by any stretch of the imagination is a significant budget. That includes a £63 billion commitment to enhancing the Royal Navy. I am sure that most Members will acknowledge that that is a significant commitment.

Johnny Mercer: I welcome the Minister's comments. Clearly, we have to conduct the debate from a position of truth. We have a growing defence budget, but in Plymouth we have seen things like the defence rebasing strategy that have put people's livelihoods and jobs in that city under threat. It has kind of paused; it is not going anywhere. We need the commitment. Will the Minister take back to the Department that we need something firm to deliver for the people of Plymouth in the very near future?

Guto Bebb: At the risk of repeating myself, I think the message has been heard loud and clear from the three Members from Plymouth and from other Members. The Ministry of Defence has heard that message. We have to put things in order, because we have to do things in the context of the Modernising Defence Programme, but I assure my hon. Friend and other colleagues that the message about the importance of this decision for Devonport has been understood.

Wayne David: Will the Minister give way?

Guto Bebb: For the final time, I will.

Wayne David: I thank the Minister for his generosity. He talks about cuts, but I would argue that the position is not quite as he painted. Can I infer from what he has said that HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark are now safe?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark are safe until 2033 and 2034, which is the current situation. Those are the decommissioning dates for both vessels.

The situation in Plymouth and Devonport is still a significant success story. I acknowledge that there are challenges, but the activities taking place there—the flag officer sea training, Royal Marines Tamar and the commitment for the new oil jetty that has been built at Thanckes—are commitments and expenditure that highlight the fact that there is a very positive future for the base at Devonport. That positive future is not because we owe anything other than the right decision for the people of Plymouth, but that right decision will reflect the history of service and support that has been offered to the Ministry of Defence and the Royal Navy by the people of Plymouth and the people involved in the bases in

Plymouth. We should be very proud of the fact that it is a key component of our defence infrastructure. The continued added investment made by the Ministry of Defence highlights the fact that there is a bright future for the base in Devonport.

I will close by thanking all hon. Members who have contributed to what has been a constructive debate. It is important to put everything into the context of a growing Royal Navy, for the first time in decades—we all welcome that. The context is an enhanced and increasing defence budget, but one that is still challenged, for the reasons that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport highlighted, such as the changing threat environment.

I stress to all hon. Members, especially the three hon. Members representing the city of Plymouth, that we have heard the message very clearly. That message will be conveyed back to the Department. I look forward to the result of the Modernising Defence Programme and, in due course, a decision being made on the basing of the Type 26 frigates, which are a world-class capability.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Northern Rail Services: Greater Manchester

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir David Crausby (Bolton North East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Northern rail services in Greater Manchester.

It is always a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. When I was elected 21 years ago, in 1997, our railways were still, in effect, publicly owned. The reality then was that the service was rubbish, and it had been rubbish for a very long time. John Major, the then Prime Minister, having starved the railways of investment, privatised them in indecent haste—I think he thought that would be his legacy; perhaps it is—just before he was forcefully expelled from office in the 1997 Labour landslide.

The ensuing Labour Government decided that there were more important priorities, particularly in health and education, than the renationalisation of the rail system. The truth is that we wrongly assumed, as far as public transport was concerned, that things could only get better. In fairness, there has been significant investment in the system in the intervening years, paid for by rail travellers through increased fares and passenger numbers. I am certainly not in favour of returning to the failed services delivered by British Rail in the 1990s, and I do not believe that anyone else is, but the fact is that the present system is broken and was unfit for purpose from the outset. That is clearly demonstrated today and every day in Greater Manchester and the north by the delivery of services by Northern rail.

Northern is the trading name of Arriva Rail North, whose franchise began in April 2016. Provided that it does not walk away, we may suffer it until 2025. Arriva Rail North has been a disaster from day one. It has been in freefall ever since, and it does not deserve to be entrusted with the franchise for another day. The Northern franchise, which is one of the largest in the UK, provides more than 16,000 train services to a population of 15 million people. In Greater Manchester, Northern trains call at 97 stations, which are used every day by a huge number of people, who depend on the service to go to work and education, as well as to enjoy their social and family lives. According to Office of Rail and Road estimates of station usage, there were nearly 81 million passenger entries and exits at Greater Manchester stations in 2016-17.

The quality of those services is essential to the lives of thousands of families and has an enormous effect on the economy of the north. It is a very big deal. We must not allow the political argument about our transport deficiencies to descend into the Government automatically supporting all private transport providers and the Opposition automatically attacking them all. Regardless of our views about nationalisation and privatisation, Northern rail is failing.

When Northern was first awarded the franchise, it promised more than 2,000 additional trains each week, with more frequent, earlier and later trains offering passengers greater choice. It promised a 37% increase in

[Sir David Crausby]

peak-time capacity. It promised 281 new carriages, plus the full refurbishment of the remaining fleet and the removal of all Pacer trains within three years. Yet according to the Office of Rail and Road, the punctuality of Northern's services in Greater Manchester and Liverpool has plummeted from 90% to 83% since the start of 2017. It must be compelled to do much better, and fair compensation is central to improving its performance.

If we are to remain with a privatised service, franchisees must be answerable to passengers. As the situation stands, they are not. As we would expect from an operation focused on profit, Northern does little to encourage passengers to claim compensation. The Consumers Association, which publishes *Which?* magazine, has called for improvements in the delivery of compensation. Its research found that only a third of passengers who may have been entitled to compensation made a claim. The two main reasons why people fail to claim are that it is too complex and there is a lack of information about the claims process. The Consumers Association found that unsurprisingly, as the way train companies award compensation varies widely across the country. It reports that train companies can take up to 20 days to respond to claims, with one in four people needing to prompt the train company about their claim.

Northern's compensation scheme excludes people with multi-modal tickets, despite Ministers stating that it must include them, and passengers are left waiting for as much as four months for a response to their refund applications. Over the past two months, things have gone from extremely bad to even worse. All that adds up to Northern's record before the unbelievable timetable transfer.

When things go wrong at Northern—and things are certainly going wrong—the whole of Greater Manchester is in danger of grinding to a halt, because the road alternatives are often close to gridlock. The major problem at the moment is that Northern simply does not employ enough drivers to allow for flexibility. Its model is dependent on drivers working on their rest day. To make matters worse, the company clearly has industrial relations problems, and there has been no rest day working agreement since February. It blames industrial action for its poor performance, but when the Government privatised the system in 1997, they privatised its industrial relations, too. It is just not acceptable to blame the trade unions and no one else. The company must be accountable for disputes with its employees. It must manage its industrial relations. That is its job, not anyone else's. The sad reality is that most of Northern's employees despise their employer about as much as most of its passengers do.

In fairness—this is the only time I will say that—Northern's operational problems have certainly been made much worse by delays to the electrification of the Blackpool to Preston line by Network Rail. Drivers have to undergo safety training before trains can operate on new lines, but Northern's lack of planning meant that, from 16 April, drivers were pulled away from scheduled services across the network to undergo training. Services were cancelled every day, leaving passengers stranded at stations on their way to work. Northern knew well in advance that that combination of problems would leave it short of drivers to operate the timetable.

Those problems should in no way have taken it by surprise, yet they have gone on for weeks and weeks. Sources tell me that on 16 May—a full month after the issues with driver training began and before the timetable fiasco—91 trains were fully cancelled, 140 were part-cancelled and 48 had a reduced number of carriages. Every day is the same, yet Northern buries its head in the sand and acts surprised by its driver shortage.

I have repeatedly asked why no strategy was in place and why there was no set schedule for cancellations so that passengers would know what to expect. Why were there no rail replacement bus services? Northern has provided no explanations for its failures. The restatement of its explanation that cancellations are due to driver shortages is simply not good enough; neither is the promise that things will improve by 2020. Northern, I am sad to say, reminds me very much of the Secretary of State, repeating the mantra, "It's not our fault. Things will get better." Ordinary, hard-working people's jobs are at risk, and family livelihoods depend on the ability to get to work on time, yet Northern, along with the Secretary of State, has taken no action and just looked the other way. If my constituents were to apologise to their employers for being late for work every day, while assuring their bosses that their timekeeping would improve by 2020, they would be out of a job long before 2020—and Northern should be, too.

Unbelievably, when the new timetable began on 21 May, things got very much worse. There was clearly a major change: Northern admitted that 90% of the new schedule was different from the old one, and services along what is already an overcrowded corridor were greatly reduced. Commuters in my constituency, with their long-term experience of this operator, were braced for a difficult experience that day, but they still expected trains to arrive. What they got was chaos. Right across Greater Manchester, passengers were left stranded on platforms with no trains and no information.

I am told that, on the first Monday of the new timetable, there were 196 cancelled services and 131 part-cancelled services across the Northern network. Forty-two of those cancelled services were due to stop in Bolton. Just over a week later, on 29 May, the number of cancellations had risen to 254, and as of 7.30 this morning there had been 50 cancellations, with 43 trains part-cancelled. Is it any wonder that my constituents are striving to pass their driving tests, buy cars and block up even more of our overcrowded roads? These are people who just want to go out and do a hard day's work, and it is our responsibility and the Government's responsibility to help them and encourage more travellers to get on the train.

The week before the new timetable was introduced, passengers were being told by train guards that the drivers' new work schedule would not be completed in time. Passengers expected chaos, and train guards expected chaos. Only the Secretary of State and his so-called experts were in the dark. Drivers were expected to turn up for work on 21 May as though nothing had changed, even though 90% of services changed in the new timetable. When Northern said that services were cancelled because of staffing issues, they should have said they were cancelled because of management issues and its own incompetence. If it was as good at running trains as it is at making excuses, we would have nothing to complain about, Mr Howarth, and we would not be bothering

you with this debate. The fact is, they failed to plan properly for the biggest timetable change in years. These are problems of Northern's own making, and far too often it leaves Greater Manchester without the basic train service it is entitled to.

Passengers do not really want to know about new ticket machines and wi-fi on the train; they just want to go to the station and catch a train that is on time and that has a seat for them to sit down on. One of my constituents texted me to say she was stood in the toilet of a packed train with three other people she did not know. Let me tell the Minister that wi-fi cannot be used in those circumstances. He will understand my constituent's concern.

I frequently say that we have an excellent train line in Bolton, which runs right through my constituency. There is potentially a great service—all we need is some trains with enough carriages. It is not rocket science, is it? When a peak-hour train with two carriages—instead of the promised four—arrives at Bromley Cross station in my constituency, an audible groan runs right down the platform, because people expect to have to fight to get on.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): That train then goes to Bolton station, in my constituency, and by that time there is no space for anyone to get on it.

Sir David Crausby: That is right, because nobody gets off in Bolton—they are going to Manchester. People are getting on the train all down the line, so the closer people are to Manchester, the smaller chance they have of getting on at all. Four-carriage trains are essential. That has nothing to do with the timetable issues. Promises on the delivery of extra carriages have been repeatedly broken by Secretaries of State and by the previous Prime Minister, who visited Bolton before the 2015 election and is now long gone down the line. We are fed up with the daily struggle to catch a train.

A seriously disabled passenger who wants to travel to work in Manchester from Bolton might as well give up their job, because catching a train in the peak period from Bolton is a rugby scrum, and people need to be 100% fit to succeed. It is a disgrace. There is no room for prams and no room for bikes, and it is absolutely impossible for anyone with mobility issues. In this country, in the 21st century, that is completely unacceptable. Northern must accept its responsibility and be called to account by the Secretary of State.

Bolton has suffered disproportionately from a terrible service over many years, and our experience is a result of problems that continue within the system. The division of responsibility between rail companies, Network Rail, rolling stock leasing companies and the Government has allowed them all to blame each other for failures, and passengers end up paying for them, sometimes with their jobs. What is wrong with this privatisation model is that passengers cannot vote with their feet and use another provider—and too many train operators know it. If publicly owned monopolies are unsuitable, privately owned monopolies are very much worse.

The ultimate responsibility for this catalogue of failures must lie with the Secretary of State for Transport. If not, what is the point in having a Secretary of State for Transport? I very much doubt that he will sort out these

problems, but if he does not do that in the short, medium and long term, there is certainly no point in this Secretary of State for Transport, and he should clear his desk, along with Northern rail.

2.49 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Sir David Crausby), who I congratulate on securing the debate. It is also a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. However, the residents of Stockport who I represent have been experiencing anything but pleasure from the introduction of Northern rail's new and chaotic timetable, which came into force a couple of weeks ago.

There are many unacceptable elements to Northern rail's timetable, but the most pressing for me is the glaring gap that has been created at peak morning rush hour, owing to the removal of the two most popular commuter services, the 7.50 am and the 8.01 am from Hazel Grove to Manchester Piccadilly, which also called at Woodsmoor and Davenport stations. That has meant that all three well-used commuter stations now have a 45-minute gap in trains to Manchester from just after half-past seven until around 8.20 am, and then no services again until 9 am.

That has left hundreds of commuters unable to get to Manchester on time for work, forced to arrive either much too early or too late. It has disrupted pupils' ability to get to school, as well as having an effect on parents who have to co-ordinate dropping off their children in the morning, sometimes at multiple schools and nurseries. When passengers can get on a train, they are faced with huge overcrowding, with many unable to get seats, and some trains now have two cars rather than four. In one recent case, overcrowding led to a passenger needing medical attention after fainting in the cramped carriages. It is also forcing many commuters to abandon the rail network entirely and to travel by car instead, adding further to the already all-too-congested roads, including the A6.

It is not just the morning rush-hour services that are affected; Sunday evening services out of Manchester have also been cut or brought forward. For example, the last train back from Manchester to Romiley and other nearby stations is now at 9.45 pm, meaning that people who want to spend the evening in Manchester have to cut their time there short.

These timetable changes are having a damaging and hurtful impact on both the family and professional lives of my constituents. I have not even attempted to calculate the economic cost of the hours of lost productivity. Sadly, I hear consistently from residents about their impression that the rail industry as a whole does not care about passengers. There is extreme anger. The two words that have appeared most often in the dozens of letters and emails that I have had on this subject are "ridiculous" and "unacceptable", and I must agree entirely with those descriptions. The sad fact is that this timetabling nightmare is overshadowing what should be welcome news of upgrades to infrastructure, more trains overall and new or refurbished rolling stock.

During my Adjournment debate on the last day before recess, I highlighted in detail how the issue affected my own constituency. However, it has become

[*Mr William Wragg*]

clear in the days that followed, as the stories shared by hon. Members across the House illustrate, that this is not just a case of a few hiccups of implementation on a few lines or services, but a systemic and structural shortcoming of the whole Northern rail timetable.

Much of the blame for this bungle falls at the feet of Network Rail. Its catalogue of delays relating to the electrification project from Manchester to Preston via Bolton, which the hon. Member for Bolton North East alluded to in his speech and which is now apparently two years overdue, has meant that train operators faced uncertainty over the state of the available infrastructure. That had a knock-on effect on their ability to plan an effective timetable. Also, they are unable to use the electric engines on that line and so are reliant on old diesel engines to make up for the shortage of rolling stock. That in turn caused Northern rail to put its timetable bids in late, by which time many of its required platform slots had been taken up by other operators. It has been a perfect storm of delayed rail upgrades leading to delayed timetable planning, leading to delayed or even missing trains.

While I have had some positive dealings with regional representatives of Network Rail, this whole debacle is a symptom of Network Rail's aloofness, unaccountability and, at times, sheer arrogance in failing to communicate with either train operators or passengers, let alone Members of Parliament. When its chief executive Mark Carne, who does not readily reply to my letters, leaves later this year, I am sure he will not be missed by passengers—and certainly not by me.

However, while it may be justifiable to heap a large portion of the blame for the delays and their consequences on Network Rail, relevant questions must be asked of others, including the Government, given their ultimate control of Network Rail. What were the reasons for the further delay to the Bolton electrification project, which has caused this mess-up of the timetabling process? What assurance can be given that the work will not be subject to further delay? When the delays on the Bolton line upgrades came to light, why did Northern rail say it would still be able to manage, and why did it not flag up the depth of the problems that that would cause? Did the Department for Transport not know that the infrastructure delays would scupper the timetable? Why did rail experts advise Transport Ministers that it would all be fine? What searching questions did Ministers ask to verify what they were being told?

What passengers really want to know is what is being done to get us out of this mess. On Monday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State told me in the Chamber that he would bang heads together to sort out the 45-minute gap in morning peak-time services that is affecting my constituents so badly. Yesterday evening I met with him again to reiterate those concerns. Furthermore, this morning I met with both Network Rail and Northern rail, who gave assurances that the Bolton electrification project would definitely be completed this year and that that would enable Northern to plug the unacceptable gaps in the current timetable. I will have to hold somebody to account for that statement.

Questions still remain for passengers faced with a whole summer of disruption. Will Transport for the North, the regional transport body, conduct a formal

assessment as to whether Northern rail is in breach of its performance targets as set out in its franchise agreements? If it is, what action will be taken? Transport for the North is currently co-running the rail franchise in the north, but is not using the full extent of its powers. Will the Department for Transport ensure that it uses those powers? Finally, do passengers really have to wait for the six-month timetable review, or will the Minister do all he can to get things moving more speedily? I look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend the Minister. He is in an unenviable position, but I am sure he will appreciate the anger of my constituents and those of hon. Members across the House, and do his very best by them.

2.56 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Sir David Crausby) on securing a debate that is important to all our constituents in Greater Manchester.

As I said in the Chamber on Monday when the Secretary of State made a statement to the House, the problems my constituents are experiencing are not new. They have endured months of misery, beginning well before the botched introduction of last month's new timetable and well before the delays in completing the infrastructure improvements. In fact, my constituents have been used for far too many years to an unreliable, infrequent service on clapped-out old Pacer trains, which are still running on the line despite promises of replacements to come, and they are frankly fed up with what they have had to put up with.

Although performance has not been good for a very long time on the line through my constituency between Liverpool Lime Street and Manchester Oxford Road, the performance in recent months has been particularly abysmal. Day after day, constituents have been in touch with me about delayed, cancelled or overcrowded trains; trains that have only two carriages when they should have four; trains not stopping at all at scheduled station stops because they are too full for anyone else to get on, meaning that people who need to alight at those stations cannot do so and are taken well out of their way; huge gaps between services as not one, not two, but sometimes three consecutive rush-hour trains are cancelled, meaning people cannot get home from work to see their families in the evening; and a dearth of information for passengers, with information switching at the last minute from, "The train's on time," or, "The train's two minutes away," to, "The train's 15 minutes delayed," or, "It's not coming at all."

It is absolutely impossible for passengers in those circumstances to have any confidence in the service they need to rely on. No wonder that they are thoroughly fed up and furious. No wonder, as other hon. Members have said this afternoon, that they have started to drive to work or to other engagements, although many would prefer to take the train, because they know they cannot trust the service. As my hon. Friend alluded to, it is also no wonder that staff morale is so poor when drivers, conductors and other staff find themselves delivering a service that they know is substandard and for which they take the brunt of passenger anger. I have no doubt that that is contributing to the already difficult employment

situation that my hon. Friend mentioned, with Northern itself acknowledging to me that absence rates are on the rise.

Passengers in my constituency do not really care whether it is Network Rail, Northern rail, Rail North or other train operators that are actually responsible for this mess and they do not really care about this passing the parcel of blame. They want someone to take responsibility for the whole system's functioning, in order to fix the service and to make it reliable now. That is why I will put three particular questions to the Minister this afternoon.

First of all, we need a reliable, credible, up-to-date information system for passengers that tells them what is going to happen, and for that to then happen. My constituents have been relying on the now notorious hashtag on Twitter, #NorthernFail, to tell them what is going on; indeed, that has been my best source of information about what is happening to my constituents too. If #NorthernFail can give us up-to-date, real-time information about what is going on with the rail service, why on earth can Northern rail not?

It should not be too hard to give passengers reliable and accurate information that allows them to have faith that a service will run, rather than the situation they are in now, in which they do not know if a train will run or not. If that does not change, many of them will vote with their feet and simply not use the service at all. Will the Minister say what is being done to improve the quality and reliability of information to passengers, so that we can win back passenger confidence in the service and ensure that they can use it confidently in future?

Secondly, my hon. Friend talked about the compensation scheme that is in place, which I would also like the Minister to address. I was very pleased to hear the Secretary of State for Transport say in the Chamber on Monday that the compensation offered will be equivalent to that provided to Southern Rail users, who have suffered similar levels of disruption in recent years. It is absolutely clear that the current system is simply not adequate to compensate passengers for the level of inconvenience that they have suffered. The delay repay system does not address the persistent pattern of delay, cancellation, uncertainty and inconvenience.

That limited system has been exacerbated by passengers being frankly insulted by long delays in getting their compensation, by being refused for petty reasons and by being offered quite derisory amounts. Passengers have told me of compensation of £1 or £1.12, which is hardly worth the effort of asking for. What more can the Minister say to us about a proper, appropriate and fair compensation scheme that will recognise this persistent inconvenience? When will it be in place, how will passengers access it and what can they do to gain redress if they are not satisfied with the compensation they have had so far?

Thirdly, what will the Minister and his Department do going forward to monitor and enforce a Northern rail performance that complies with its contractual obligations under its current franchise, and what will he do to drive improvement? Passengers have been telling us for months that the service is dire, so I am at a loss to understand why it has taken so long for the Secretary of State to act. As my hon. Friend pointed out, this

fragmented system is clearly not delivering for passengers, because Network Rail, Northern, the different train operators and numerous oversight and governance bodies all seem to stir the pot but do not actually take responsibility for putting things right.

Will the Minister describe exactly who is responsible at every level in this chain of command, from the operating companies to the infrastructure companies, to the oversight companies, and to the Department for Transport and Ministers themselves? I am not clear to whom the different demands and challenges should be directed, and I am tired, as are my constituents, of seeing blame passed all the way around.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's answers to these questions, but my constituents look forward most to assurances that a service that they have endured for too long will now finally see real improvements.

3.4 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the Chair, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Sir David Crausby) on his comprehensive and historical analysis of the failings of the transport network, and particularly of Northern rail in its delivery of services to so many of our constituents.

I will focus specifically on the recent timetable changes and how they came about, and what I think the Government should have done to address these problems before they actually happened. I also have some specific questions about compensation and contingency arrangements. I was promised by the Secretary of State that things would improve by today, but I am afraid that the information I have so far is that there has been no improvement at all.

As colleagues have mentioned, there have been many issues with the new timetable, including a shortage of properly trained and available drivers who are qualified to run the new services, as described in last year's Gibb report, and, as my hon. Friend mentioned, the overrunning of engineering works—specifically, the electrification of the Manchester-Bolton-Preston line. Those issues meant that the proposed new timetable had to be overwritten, delaying its launch and the driver training for the new routes. Network Rail's planners were unable to confirm routes and times until a matter of weeks before the revamp, rather than the normal three to six months for a routine change. Will the Minister explain why the timetable changes were not deferred once these multiple problems became clear?

We have heard words of remorse from the Transport Secretary, Network Rail and others, but in addition to many constituents asking me to raise the matter with the Transport Secretary last November, many rail experts also raised these issues. They have been proven right. Why were they not listened to? How could this have gone so horribly wrong, and why was there no delay in implementing the new timetable?

The Transport Secretary said in the Chamber on Monday that

“both Northern and GTR were not sufficiently prepared to manage a timetable change of this scale... Neither Northern nor GTR had a clear fall-back plan.”—[*Official Report*, 4 June 2018; Vol. 642, c. 50.]

[*Debbie Abrahams*]

If that was the case, why were Ministers and officials within the Department not aware of it beforehand? Surely, given the sheer scale of the changes being introduced, they should have been closely monitoring this.

In Oldham East and Saddleworth there has been deep concern from passengers at Greenfield station for many months about the proposed new timetable, with a reduced service and capacity at peak hours, destinations changing from Manchester Victoria to Manchester Piccadilly and poor connection times via Stalybridge, as well as ongoing accessibility issues at Greenfield. I wrote to the Secretary of State about these issues last November, and in response the then Transport Minister, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Clevellys (Paul Maynard), said the new timetable would deliver “significant reliability benefits”. The evidence has shown that response to be completely wrong. Given that “significant reliability benefits” have not been delivered, will the Minister ensure that future timetable planning now underway for the December changes will actively involve rail users and not ignore their concerns?

The impact of the timetable changes on people’s lives cannot be underestimated, particularly on those with caring responsibilities. Parents who were previously able to drop their children off at school before getting their morning train into Manchester now struggle to do so if they are to get into Manchester for 9 am. The changes to the timetable mean that there is a 44-minute gap between 7.45 am and 8.30 am, which is the time that they are able to do so after dropping their children off. Their return journeys are equally fraught, with not just too few trains between 5 pm and 6 pm, but the timings of these trains being at 5.17 pm and 6 pm.

We realised that the new timetable was going to play havoc with the lives of working people using Greenfield station in particular, but the chaos since 20 May has been far worse than we feared. Both Northern and TransPennine Express trains have frequently been cancelled and have too often been late as well. The TPE delays significantly impact on constituents interchanging at Stalybridge and have a knock-on effect on their arrival at work

As I told the Transport Secretary following his statement in the Commons, on Monday there were five cancellations at Greenfield station alone, and that was before the evening peak. That was under the new emergency timetable that was meant to address these issues, but made things worse. Such a level of incompetence from TPE and Northern is unacceptable and my constituents deserve much better.

The Government must ensure that appropriate compensation is paid to season ticket holders and that there is a reduction in general ticket prices. The announcement that there will be a special compensation scheme for passengers on affected routes on Northern is to be welcomed, but passengers affected by disruption to TPE services must also be included. The Government also need to look at wider compensation for people who may have had their wages docked or even worse. We have heard of cases where people are on final warnings and have been threatened with losing their jobs.

What details can the Minister provide on how passengers will receive appropriate redress for the disruption and other hardship that they have experienced since 20 May?

My constituent’s children were under intolerable stress on their way to exams and experienced delays, which adds to their stress.

Kate Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing attention to the situation faced by constituents trying to travel to exams. I know of exactly the same situation. Even more shockingly, when a taxi had to be used and the cost was claimed back from Northern rail, it said that such expense would not be covered by the compensation system.

Debbie Abrahams: Clearly that is absolutely unacceptable. I hope the Minister will reassure us that that will not be the case and that he will take that up with Northern.

We need timescales, eligibility requirements, details of how passengers can claim, and confirmation that entitlements will be similar to those conferred by last year’s Southern passenger compensation scheme, as mentioned by the Transport Secretary on Monday. Will the Minister confirm that compensation for poor service will be measured against the original timetable proposed, not the slimmed-down one now on offer? Will Northern tickets be able to be used on other operators and modes of transport, as called for by my colleague, the Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham?

Northern’s action to set a unilateral timetable should not go unchallenged. I repeat my earlier point: passengers must be engaged with and consulted on the timetable. What discussions has the Minister had with Northern on customer consultation on the timetable? The Transport Secretary assured me and my hon. Friends the Members for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) on Monday evening that the emergency timetable will deliver significant improvements by today. I have mentioned what we have found out so far, but I will hold the Secretary of State to that.

What contingency arrangements are in place to remove the franchise from Northern if services do not rapidly improve for passengers across Greater Manchester? I would expect the contingency arrangements to be in place already. Finally, will the Department look to give Transport for the North the necessary policy and financial powers to ensure oversight of all suburban and regional services and work in tandem with Network Rail?

It is clear from this fiasco that our railways cannot be cared for properly from London, and the failure to fairly fund transport in the north exacerbates the problems we face, with deferred electrification and poor-quality, ageing rolling stock. The Minister will be aware that local and regional newspapers yesterday joined together under the banner #onenorth to fight for the north and called on the Government to prove their commitment to our region. I hope that his response will show that commitment.

3.13 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Sir David Crausby) on securing this timely debate, coming as it does with the fiasco of the timetable chaos. I will not repeat what my colleagues have said. Hon. Members have dealt with the issues and challenges and with the main problems with the transport system in the north, and they have also mentioned solutions.

I want to talk about the experience of people using transport in the north, and particularly my personal experience. I will declare an interest here: I am a regular traveller on the trains from Bolton to Manchester and then onwards. Most of the time, I never find a seat to sit on, and we are always crammed in like sardines. At peak times, many of us cannot get on the train at all because it is already fully crowded. I am not talking just about problems with people occupying seats or people standing; we are literally pressed against each other. As a result, some people cannot even get on the train, which means they miss that train. The next one is about 20 or 25 minutes later, which means people miss connecting trains. Students are delayed getting to universities, colleges and schools. Most of the people who work, especially in the early hours of the morning, often get to work late. I am not exaggerating when I say that I have had constituents write to me to say they have lost their jobs because they have been turning up late day in, day out. That is not an exaggeration—it is the complete truth.

On Monday I received an email from Mrs Dearden, who wrote:

“I’m writing to ask you to seek some responsibility and accountability from Northern Rail, and the Government, to sort out the sorry state of rail travel around Greater Manchester. I just wanted to add to your portfolio another tale of the family stress this is causing. My daughter-in-law, a solicitor, travels to work, in Preston, from Bolton every day. She also needs to take and collect her son to and from nursery. For the past few weeks the...unpredictable service that Northern Rail has been providing has meant that she has been faced with the ‘choice’ of getting to work later each day and leaving work earlier in order to collect her son from nursery. As you can understand, this doesn’t amount to a normal working week from her employer’s point of view, nor to her colleagues. It leaves her child, and his nursery, with uncertainty.”

She is not alone, and her case is not exceptional. Many thousands of people in similar situations are suffering extreme disruption to their family life and are being put under stress from a service that they, as customers, pay for. It is not a free service, but something they pay for.

The situation is not new. It has been going on for years. In February 2014 I met senior managers from Northern Rail, Transport for Greater Manchester and First TransPennine Express to discuss the problems with our rail services, and on 5 March 2014 I went to see the then Transport Minister, the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), to present a petition to him and to lobby for improved rail services. I have had frequent discussions with Northern and correspondence with subsequent Transport Ministers, but nothing has changed. It is clear that rail in the north is being discriminated against in favour of the train system in the south. I have nothing against people in the south having a great transport network, but I would like to see that in the north as well.

I want to thank and acknowledge those involved in the strong campaign that has been run by newspapers in the north, including *The Bolton News* and *Manchester Evening News*. All we want is a decent, safe, reliable rail service. I would like the Minister to ask the Prime Minister—clearly, the Secretary of State seems not to have dealt with this matter properly—to summon transport chiefs and business leaders to 10 Downing Street this week for an emergency summit to devise an action plan to get the region moving again, to announce a special compensation scheme for the passengers most affected by the delays and disruption, and to give Transport for

the North the necessary policy and financial powers so that it can have full oversight of all local, suburban and regional services and work in tandem with Network Rail. It is quite clear, as has been pointed out, that our railways cannot be cared for properly from London.

The Government must commit themselves to a full and fundamental review of rail franchising. The Northern fiasco is just another example of franchisees over-promising and under-delivering. Will the Government also demonstrate a commitment to fair transport funding for the north, with a pledge to give the planned high-speed line across the Pennines equal priority with Crossrail 2 in London?

3.20 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Howarth. I appreciate that many of your constituents in Knowsley have been frustrated in the past couple of weeks, whether travelling in the region or across the country. We heard about the issue in Monday’s urgent statement, of course. It was unprecedented: for 90 minutes 65 MPs of all parties relayed to the House the pain that passengers throughout the country were experiencing, including anxious students not able to get to college to sit vital exams, children late for school, adults late for work and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) has said today, people who have lost their jobs. Family life has been disrupted and childcare made impossible; people do not know when they are going to get home of a night, and businesses struggle when staff do not arrive. In the heart of the tourist season there is the fiasco of trains being cancelled at peak times in the Lake district—we stand with the businesses there.

I was struck by the experiences of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), who talked on Monday—column 63 in *Hansard*—about people who were fasting during Ramadan standing for five hours in blistering heat. Trains have been cancelled and delayed; they do not stop. People have been failed—“Northern fail” is the expression that comes to mind. The situation is not just in the north, but across the country. I know that passengers in the south-east in particular have also had years of that pain. We have a broken railway system.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Sir David Crausby), who eloquently highlighted the pain of his constituents, particularly the pain caused by Arriva Rail North. Electric trains in his area should have been running from Manchester via Bolton to Preston last year, but it will be lucky if they do so by the end of this year. Northern provides a poor service to passengers and they now have their worst punctuality rating in eight years. As we heard, only 83% of their trains arrived within 10 minutes of the scheduled time. Of course, in the past week things have got worse, with trains often being cancelled altogether at weekends.

The story for passengers in Bolton is one of broken promises, within a completely deficient system, and they are of course dependent on a completely deficient compensation scheme. As we have heard, it is far too complex for passengers to engage with, and it does not work for multimodal transportation, so fewer people claim on it. We have heard that disabled people and

[*Rachael Maskell*]

parents with prams have no chance of using the railway. At certain points on the line the trains are already packed, as there are too few carriages to meet the need. In the new upgraded rail system there is still a need to install the overhead gantries for the power lines at places such as Chorley, Bolton and Salford. However, because of poor ground conditions due to uncharted shallow mines around those locations, a third of the foundations were unsuccessful at the first attempt. All that work was outsourced to the failed company Carillion.

I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate—the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), who put some pertinent questions to the Minister, and my hon. Friends the Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), for Bolton South-east, and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams)—for sharing the impact of the rail meltdown on their constituents. The upset, anger and frustration that have been heard in the House this week are nothing compared with the actual pain that we have heard about directly from the public. Despite all that, the Secretary of State could not find it in himself to apologise for the part that he played. The only reason he remains in his post this afternoon is that the Prime Minister is too weak to sack him. All that we got was his belief that he was clever in apportioning blame to everyone but himself. Others are to blame—I grant him that; but the person in charge, at the heart of it all, is the Secretary of State. Perhaps the Minister will offer an apology on his behalf for the fact that he has utterly failed the British public.

So what do we know? Network Rail ran into serious trouble during control period 5, not completing many of the planned infrastructure projects, including promised electrification upgrades. Did the Secretary of State know? Yes; he personally intervened, cancelling many electrification projects. Hon. Members will remember that that was the day after the House rose last summer—presumably to avoid questioning of the kind that happened on Monday. The right hon. Gentleman announced that trains that do not even exist would run in the future, and said they would replace the planned new electric rolling stock as on the TransPennine Express route.

It is deeply offensive that new trains that cannot accommodate wheelchair users have been put on that line. We heard how Network Rail failed to complete its timetabling programme and how the Secretary of State, despite initial denial, knew that that was coming over the horizon. He said on Monday that he took calls weeks before the new timetable was due to be introduced, but in his statement he failed to mention that, with regard to a company limited by guarantee, he was the one person in charge—allegedly. Therefore he is fully to blame. If he neglected or negated his responsibilities he should resign.

People in the industry whom I have talked to have told me that the crisis was long predicted. When the company moved the timetabling function to Milton Keynes a significant proportion of the very skilled timetabling staff were lost, so there were not the personnel to do the work required. I have also been told that the process of rescheduling an entire timetable normally takes the best part of a year, and at least nine months. Given that the project commenced in earnest in February, it was not likely to meet its own timetable, to be stress tested and to be sure to work.

The glaring absence is the fact that the Secretary of State did not at any stage intervene and postpone the new timetable—and we learned why. He is, it now appears, the only person on both sides of an apparent Chinese wall dividing his Department. On a wing and a prayer he ordered that the timetable change should go ahead. There was a threat that the operators—the private, fragmented companies that he always defends—would sue him or the Department if the timetable was withdrawn. They had received promises from him on the new timetabling: that in May they would be able to run their new trains, on new infrastructure and at new times. Their financial structures, including how they would afford to pay their levies to the Department and how they would pay their shareholders, could not be delivered unless all the new slots ran on the promised terms in the new timetable, as set out in the franchises.

I think that we can expect law suits to come flooding in now. After all, those private companies' sole reason for existing is to drive profit out of the state. Those rail companies had hired their new trains for the new electrified lines and expanded timetables. I remind Members that they do not own their rolling stock, but lease it by contract at an exorbitant rate from consortia of investment companies and fund managers. These private profit companies exist to drive profit out of the train operating companies, which in turn drive profit out of the state, taxpayers and passengers. They have disposed of their old rolling stock and moved it on to their next customers, while the new rolling stock cannot operate on the de-electrified lines—you could not make it up, Mr Howarth.

Then there are the train operating companies, and today we have heard much about Northern rail and its failure. It went ahead and signed contracts, demanding that services be run down to the bone. We heard how it cut the number of crucial staff to maximise its financial gain, and it failed to maintain or recruit sufficient staff to run on the new timetable. It knew what was coming over the horizon, and it failed. It is also trying to get rid of train guards, the very people at the heart of looking after the needs of passengers. We have ended up with not enough trains or staff to meet the needs of a rushed and untested timetable, although I must say that the staff have been phenomenal across the rail network, and we salute them for all that they have had to contend with over the past few weeks.

Only the Secretary of State and his Ministers sit at the top table and the interface of track, timetable and train. He knew about these challenges but did nothing. He let this chaos happen, either through sheer incompetence or by hoping that it would be the least worst option. He is the head of every decision, which is why either he must resign or the Prime Minister should sack him.

One subject that was not mentioned on Monday was how much all this will cost the public or passengers through future ticket increases. The money has to come from somewhere. I am sure the TOCs will call for compensation—they always do—and we also have the compensation scheme, and a commitment to a new compensation regime, which fellow MPs are already saying will be insufficient and that more will be required. Will students who were not able to sit their crucial exams, or businesses that could not open their doors because their staff had not arrived, be able to claim compensation? How much will all this chaos cost? I put

that point specifically to the Minister, because ultimately taxpayers or passengers will pay, and they need to know how much it will cost.

This story will not end happily ever after. First we get a revised timetable that, as we have heard, has in many places been much worse than the original one. Then we get the mass cancellations across the service. We have heard that whatever timetable is applied, the chaos will run for months and months into the summer. What has the Secretary of State offered? An inquiry that will report at the end of the year. Thank goodness the Transport Committee, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), will provide answers long before then through its own inquiry. The Secretary of State's inquiry will not report until after the next set of timetable changes have been put in place in December, although I have heard that those changes have fallen behind schedule.

This chaos has forced passengers off trains and into their cars—a modal shift. We talk a lot about a modal shift across our railway system, but we aspire to it going the other way. When rail services do not work and fail the public, people jump back into their cars because they have no other option. That leads to more congestion on our roads, more frustration and more pollution to exacerbate our poor air quality. I am sure that the rail companies will challenge the Government about that fall in patronage.

The great British public have been completely let down by this Government and their failed rail model, and they are right to be furiously angry at the Secretary of State, who blames everybody else—the bosses at Northern rail, for example—while forgetting that he is in charge. That simply could not happen under Labour's proposals for a new model of public ownership. We will scrap the juggling of multiple private company interests and have one rail service that works together in the interests of passengers. The Secretary of State could make a start by moving towards that model—that would massively satisfy passengers across the north—and he could take the contract away from Northern rail, and use his powers to start providing reparations for this complete disaster on our railways.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I gently remind him that it is customary to leave enough time for the mover of the motion to respond briefly to the debate.

3.35 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Sir David Crausby) on securing this important debate and giving us another opportunity to discuss the disruption on Northern rail services.

The Department is focused on ensuring, as rapidly as possible, that the industry restores reliability for passengers to acceptable levels. I assure passengers who have been affected that I share their frustration, and we have heard from hon. Members across the House about how their constituents have been affected in a number of completely unacceptable ways. I echo my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's words of sympathy on Monday, as well as the apology that he gave to the

House. That mirrored the apologies from the chief executives of Northern rail and Network Rail, as well as from train operators in other parts of the country, for everything that has gone wrong and for all the difficulties that have been caused to people in the north of England and other parts of the country.

The new timetable was introduced on 20 May, and as a number of Members have acknowledged, this episode has overshadowed what should have been a positive story for our railways and the economy as a whole. The May 2018 timetable change was planned to deliver more services up and down the country as part of the biggest modernisation of the railway since Victorian times, taking into account the great growth in passenger numbers in recent years. As we have heard, for Northern rail, which is co-managed through the Rail North Partnership on behalf of Transport for the North and the Department for Transport, that timetable change unfortunately resulted in significant disruption and inconvenience for passengers and the travelling public as a whole.

Northern's new timetable was planned to improve services for passengers across the north, and it was intended to increase services by 1,300 a week. It was designed to give passengers the benefits of the unprecedented investment that we are making, including an expanded train fleet. It was also intended to take advantage of big infrastructure projects such as the Ordsall Chord, which has linked Manchester's three main train stations for the first time, as well as the upgrade of Liverpool Lime Street and of tracks between Manchester and Liverpool. Further investment will deliver faster and more frequent services, with more seats, by 2020. That includes upgrading the route between Manchester and Blackpool via Bolton and upgrades to the Calder Valley routes, ahead of significant improvements to the transpennine route from next year. By 2020, all Northern and TransPennine Express trains will be new or refurbished, with—finally—the Pacer trains entirely gone.

A number of hon. Members mentioned the regional disparity in funding, which they indicated was part of an underlying problem. Going forward, we want to ensure that any disparity that there may have been in the past gets comprehensively addressed. I hope hon. Members will find it comforting that the Infrastructure and Projects Authority analysis of planned central Government transport investment shows that, over the next four years, the north will receive more investment on a per-person basis, at £1,039, than the south, at £1,029.

I want to go into more detail about what went wrong and answer the questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) about who knew what, when, and about why there was not adequate intervention if that was indeed the case. I will need to backtrack on the sequence of events. After the decision was taken in the summer of 2017 to de-risk the potential delay of infrastructure from the major timetable change in December 2017, Northern planned to introduce changes in two phases, in December 2017 and in May 2018, with the May 2018 change, recasting services around Manchester, being most significant. The planned changes for May were underpinned by planned line speed improvements and electrification of the route between Manchester and Preston via Bolton. As hon. Members have noted,

[Joseph Johnson]

that would enable Northern to operate electric rolling stock, freeing up diesel units to provide additional capacity on other parts of Northern's route.

In line with normal industry deadlines, Northern submitted its proposed timetable for May 2018 to Network Rail in August 2017, and Network Rail agreed it in November 2017. Network Rail had expected to complete the work that would facilitate that timetable change before May 2018, but faced significant complexities based on the interconnectivity of the network and the planning by all operators, and in January 2018 it acknowledged that it was unable to complete the work as expected. Those delays were further exacerbated by the disruption caused by Storm Emma and the severe cold spell—the beast from the east.

After it became apparent that the Manchester to Preston electrification was not going to be completed for May 2018, Northern took on the task of wholesale replanning of rolling stock, staff rostering and driver training to accommodate the lack of wiring on that route. As hon. Members will know, that is because drivers have to undergo essential safety-related route training before trains can operate on new lines. For Blackpool, that meant retraining 400-plus drivers from all the depots that operate that route.

Debbie Abrahams: Were not some of the delays, and the causes of the delays, predictable? Surely there should have been contingencies in the upgrading process and plans that would have accounted for that. If that was not the case, what is the Minister doing on, for example, penalties in relation to the franchise so that he is able to claw back from the providers?

Joseph Johnson: That is a good question, and one of the things that Stephen Glaister's review will be looking at very carefully. It will look at all the processes that went into the creation of the May timetable and all the planning and preparation around it, to answer those kinds of questions and to see what lessons can be learned for future timetable changes, including the December timetable change. I will come on to compensation, if the hon. Lady hangs on for a second; I want to ensure that I complete the account of how we got to the May timetable change and what lessons we can learn from that.

I was talking about the training of drivers. Some drivers have been unavailable for their normal train-driving duties while they were and are undergoing that training. To make a difficult situation worse, Northern was unable to ask its drivers to work on their rest days for the last three months of this period, because, as hon. Members will know, ASLEF declined to extend the rest day working agreement that ended in February. That meant that Northern has not been able to absorb those exceptional or last-minute training needs and provide the additional flexibility for the train driver rosters that it needed to.

Let me turn to the questions about who knew what, when, and about where the DFT was in all this. In January, Network Rail informed the Department that it would not complete its upgrade of the Manchester to Preston route in time for the May timetable change. In response, Northern developed a new timetable in a compressed period and briefed stakeholders on the

reasons why that was required. Following that, the late completion of the Blackpool to Preston blockade in mid-April meant that Northern had less time to complete those plans and its driver training. Northern then did not finalise its plan for the timetable until three days prior to its introduction. Industry readiness boards assured the Department and the Secretary of State that the timetable was ready for introduction, and the Department was not made aware of any expectations of high levels of cancellations.

Hon. Members have asked about compensation to reflect the significant inconvenience experienced by passengers. There is no doubt, and the Department accepts, that Northern passengers have faced totally unsatisfactory levels of service. I have met with many colleagues in the House, and I have also heard directly many stories from the travelling public of how the disruptions have impacted the lives of all those constituents.

It is entirely right for all those affected by the disruption to be properly compensated. I encourage passengers, in the first instance, to continue to use Northern's Delay Repay compensation mechanism for affected journeys. Northern operates the Delay Repay compensation system for all its passengers. Under that scheme, as hon. Members will know, passengers are entitled to claim compensation for each delay of 30 minutes or more that they experience, whatever the cause of the delay. There are no exclusions for weather or other delays outside the control of the rail industry.

The Office of Rail and Road guidelines require train operators to respond to claims within 20 days of their receipt. Northern has assured the Department that it is working hard to respond to all claims within industry standards. I acknowledge the complaints that the hon. Member for Bolton North East has made about various aspects of the Delay Repay scheme. The Department is discussing with Northern ways in which we expect it to reduce its processing time for Delay Repay claims.

In his statement on Monday, the Secretary of State announced that, in addition to the standard Delay Repay compensation mechanisms, there would be a special compensation scheme for Northern passengers, subject to agreement by the board of Transport for the North. It is to be funded by the rail industry and will ensure that regular rail customers receive appropriate redress for the disruption that they have experienced. The industry will imminently set out more detail of the eligibility requirements and how season ticket holders can claim. However, the Secretary of State has already indicated, at a high level, that he expects that the scheme should offer Northern passengers who have experienced protracted disruption of this kind similar entitlements to those under Southern's passenger compensation scheme last year.

Rachael Maskell: Can the Minister set out exactly who he means by "the rail industry"? Clearly, we are talking about Network Rail, which is culpable for some of the issues, as well as the Department for Transport and the operators themselves.

Joseph Johnson: I want to allow us a few days to refine the details of how the compensation scheme will work. We are working carefully with all players in the industry to ensure that a fair scheme is put forward that adequately provides redress to passengers. The Secretary

of State has been clear that this will be funded by the industry. We will be bringing forward further details imminently, which I hope will answer the hon. Lady's question.

What are we doing concretely to fix the problems that have occurred? Acting through the Rail North Partnership, the Department for Transport has put in place an action plan with Northern, which includes improving driver rostering to get more trains running now, increasing driver training on new routes, additional contingency drivers and management presence at key locations in Manchester, and putting extra peak services in the timetable along the Bolton corridor. Northern has also announced that, until the end of July, it will run fewer services than were originally planned, per the May timetable, to give passengers greater certainty and to increase opportunities for driver training. I believe that this temporary measure is necessary to stabilise the service, enabling improvements to be introduced gradually. Northern will then get back to a full timetable service.

The interim timetable, rolled out on Monday, will see an approximately 6% reduction in the number of train services—about 165 out of the normal 2,800 daily services. Northern is expecting to start to see significant improvements this week, from today, as their drivers are fully rostered on to the new interim timetable. The timings for today, as of 10.35 am or so, saw Northern achieve 86% on the public performance measure. With 665 or so trains operated, 2% were very late or cancelled, which is about 15 trains. There is positive progress here. This is Northern's best weekday morning performance since the timetable changed. That 86% compares with weekday out-turns of between 60% and 70% for the first two weeks following the introduction of the May timetable.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I have not heard an explanation of why Northern could not suspend bringing in the new timetable. The Minister has just outlined that the new interim timetable has made a difference. Why could it not have thought about bringing in an interim timetable in the middle of May, instead of the new changed timetable?

Joseph Johnson: The May timetable is a big timetable change. It is roughly four times larger than any previous change over recent years of such timetables. It was a six-monthly timetable change. It was a very big change that reflected the massive investment that has been going into the rail system and all the opportunities to create new services across the country. In those circumstances, the timetable change did not just affect Northern and Thameslink, it affected every train operation in the country. All those other train services around the country had interlinkages with the train services being run by Northern, Thameslink and other Govia Thameslink Railway services.

As a consequence, simply suspending the timetable was not possible, because all the other train operators had put in place their own driver rosters and driver training programmes for all the other services running across the rest of the country. Not introducing the May timetable at that point would have been a far worse and more disruptive solution. This is progress. We recognise that there is significantly more to be done. We want to get back to where we were meant to get to, which was

the full introduction of the May timetable, as soon as we can, but we want to do that gradually and to reintroduce services as soon as we can, once the appropriate driver training has taken place.

How can we ensure this does not happen again? As I have mentioned, work has begun to set up the independent inquiry into the timetable, implementation and deliverability of future timetable changes. That will be chaired by an independent transport expert, the chair of the current independent regulator, the Office of Rail and Road, Professor Stephen Glaister. In parallel to the inquiry, the Department for Transport is assessing whether Northern met its contractual obligation—a subject which a number of hon. Members asked about—in the planning and delivery of this timetable change. We will carefully assess Northern rail's planning, risk assessment and resilience in preparing for the May timetable change.

We are currently reviewing whether Northern is in contravention of the franchise agreement. If it is found to be so, it would be referred to the Department's enforcement advisory panel. The purpose of that panel is to review any contraventions of the franchise agreement fairly and consistently across all franchises. It will seek to respond in a consistent manner where different train operators commit similar contraventions, taking account of the Department's enforcement policy and previous enforcement decisions, and will recommend the appropriate response, including any remedial plan or enforcement action, if required.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister set out a timetable for that? I think passengers have a real interest in knowing what timetable that scrutiny will cover.

Joseph Johnson: Work has been underway over the last few weeks on this question, and we expect to come to a conclusion as soon as is reasonably possible.

In assessing whether Northern has breached its franchise agreement, it is important to bear in mind that there are other players in this story and Network Rail is an important one. While bearing in mind Network Rail's failure to deliver the infrastructure I mentioned on time, I want hon. Members to be assured that we will hold the operator to the terms of its contractual obligations.

I want to give the hon. Member for Bolton North East a chance to wind up at the end. I thank all colleagues for their contributions. I remind them that once this phase has been completed, passengers on Northern will benefit from 1,300 extra services a week. Rail users of Northern have much to be hopeful about in the future of their rail services. Brand-new trains will soon be introduced, building on the improvement to timetables and stations already made in recent years. We are working closely with train companies to drive down cancellations and will support Network Rail and the wider industry in delivering these significant improvements.

3.56 pm

Sir David Crausby: The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) raised the question of promises. Let me tell him that I have had enough promises to fill a small filing cabinet from Northern rail. When I last met Northern rail and it made further promises, I said, "I'll put them with the rest of them and believe it when I see it."

[Sir David Crausby]

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) talked about winning back confidence and the issue of compensation. It occurs to me that compensation is absolutely vital, because nothing will focus the mind of an operator such as Northern rail more than money. Not only must we ensure that passengers are compensated; the operator must be deterred from delivering such a poor service.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) talked about timetable issues and the question of removing the franchise. I did not hear the Minister talk about removing the franchise, but I was pleased to hear that it is at least being looked at. It does need to be seriously looked at, and certainly a little more than it has in the past.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) talked about family stress and the devolution of power to the north. I can tell the Minister that there is a perception in the north that if this had happened in London and the south-east, the Army would have been called in, Northern would have had the franchise removed and the Secretary of State would have been sacked already. Whether that is fair or not, that is how people in the north feel. There is an important job to do to ensure that that is not how people see it.

In conclusion, I want to see a better service that is fit for local people. That is something that we should all have in common, so that we can move forward without any political prejudice.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Northern services in Greater Manchester.

Hezbollah's Rocket Arsenal: Southern Lebanon

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

3.59 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Hezbollah's rocket arsenal in southern Lebanon.

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank Mr Speaker for granting this debate, and I welcome my right hon. Friend the Minister to his place to listen and respond. I called the debate because on the northern border of one of our closest allies, Israel, there is a rocket arsenal of up to 150,000 missiles aimed at all its major towns and cities, and something should be done about that. In the debate, I will rely heavily on a superb report by the High Level Military Group, "Hizballah's terror army: how to prevent a third Lebanon war", which was published in October.

The High Level Military Group is a group of distinguished international senior military figures, including our own General Lord Richard Dannatt and Colonel Richard Kemp, which has looked into the issue thoroughly. The report gives us a stark warning:

"The last war between Hizballah and Israel in 2006 was a severe blow to the terrorist group. But since then, Hizballah has been able to recover militarily, amassing a huge stockpile of weapons, developing and fielding new and more precise and lethal systems, and gaining combat experience fighting for Iran and...in Syria."

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): On the subject of Hezbollah being a terrorist organisation, does my hon. Friend share my view that the distinction that we choose to make on our side—that there is a military and a civil wing to Hezbollah—is entirely artificial and that Hezbollah sees itself as a unified terrorist military organisation?

Mr Hollobone: Yes. Not only do my right hon. Friend and I agree that there is no distinction, but so does Hezbollah. In October 2012 its Deputy Secretary General, Sheikh Naim Qassem, said:

"We don't have a military wing and a political one; we don't have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other... Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members as well as our various capabilities, are in the service of the resistance, and we have nothing but the resistance as a priority."

John Howell (Henley) (Con): To follow up on that point, at a protest outside the Israeli embassy in Kensington in July, Israeli flags were burned and Hezbollah flags were waved with impunity. Does my hon. Friend agree that that sends a signal of lauding a terrorist organisation that should infuriate all British people?

Mr Hollobone: I agree with my hon. Friend. We will probably see more flag burning this Sunday at the al-Quds demonstration in London. I deplore all flag burning. As British Members of Parliament, we have probably seen the Union Jack burned more often than most other flags. It is frankly a disgrace that Hezbollah can parade on the streets of London. Let us remember that its flag has a raised machine gun on it, which demonstrates its belief in violent resistance.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): My hon. Friend has mentioned the al-Quds march in London. One of the reasons why the distinction that our right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) sets out is a problem is that that is how Hezbollah gets away with flying those flags. When it is challenged about being a proscribed military organisation, it effectively has some small print at the bottom of the flag that says it is the civilian wing, and the police are then not empowered to do anything about the march. Does my hon. Friend think that issue should be tackled?

Mr Hollobone: Yes, I absolutely agree, and I hope that the Minister will relay to the Home Office the concerns that have been raised about that here. As we have discussed, Hezbollah does not see a difference between a military and a political wing. Very distinguished international bodies have banned Hezbollah outright and have proscribed it as a terrorist organisation, including the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, the Arab League and the Gulf Co-operation Council. Frankly, we should join them.

Before I took those three helpful interventions from distinguished colleagues, I was in the middle of quoting the High Level Military Group report, which continues:

“There is nothing predetermined in strategic life, but the new configuration of forces in the region could lead to a new war that, because of the regional dynamics and new security imperatives, will be much more violent and destructive than the previous ones.”

We have been warned.

In case I get distracted during the rest of my contribution, I will go on to the solutions that the High Level Military Group outlines. Having extensively researched the subject, including through visits on the ground, it states that

“our assessment is that a new and grave conflict is only a matter of time, and the international community must act to help prevent it.”

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend in mid-flow, but by drawing attention to the financial backers of Hezbollah and Hamas—the Iranians—whose mission seems to be to create mayhem, chaos and murder in the middle east, should we not send a message, as strongly as possible, that Iran’s malign and wicked influence in the region is a threat to peace and we will not tolerate it?

Mr Hollobone: I agree with my hon. Friend. Iran is the bully in the playground. According to the High Level Military Group, Hezbollah is

“an Iranian creation that sits as the crown jewel in Iran’s regional strategy of jihadi revolutionary warfare”.

In short, it is

“the most powerful non-state armed actor in the world.”

It is potentially more lethal than ISIS, and it is all backed and funded by Iran.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that support for terrorist proxies, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, poses a serious threat to Israel and its borders? Does he also agree that a massive failing in the Iran nuclear deal was the immediate lifting of sanctions, which allowed Iran to plough millions into proxies such as Hezbollah and Hamas?

Mr Hollobone: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that sanctions relief funds the jihadi revolutionary network driven by Iran. It is not just Israel that is under threat, but Saudi Arabia. Iran is effectively establishing rocket arsenals in southern Lebanon with Hezbollah, in Gaza with Hamas and now in Yemen against Saudi Arabia with the Houthi rebels. We should call that out.

That excellent report continues:

“Urgent steps are required to contain Hizballah and de-escalate the tensions on the border between Israel and Lebanon.”

The first point for the Minister is that there must be

“a clear recognition of the geopolitical ambitions of Iran,”

which we have just discussed,

“its religiously motivated imperialism and its pursuit of Israel’s annihilation as the core driver of the danger...The international community must take actions to curtail Iran’s activities, raise the cost of its behaviour and engage in efforts at deterrence.”

Apparently, with our new relationship with Iran, we were meant to be able to dissuade it from engaging in that sort of activity, but it seems that since the nuclear deal was agreed, if anything, Iran has stepped up the pace.

The report’s second recommendation is that

“the more specific problem of Hizballah must be addressed from multiple angles. Within Lebanon itself, the political cost of the integration of this terrorist organization into the fabric of the state must be raised. Thus, European nations should legally proscribe Hizballah as a whole, ending the fraudulent distinction between ostensible political and terrorist wings of the organization. Similarly, donor nations to Lebanon, led by the U.S., should make new investments conditional on a plan to strip Hizballah of its de facto status as the leading force in the country... The full implementation of UNSC”—

United Nations Security Council—

“resolutions 1559 and 1701, enforced by an expanded mandate for UNIFIL”—

the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon—

“and the requisite political pressure, should be a central part of such an effort.”

The third recommendation is that

“the West should strongly support Israel in its efforts to de-escalate the tensions. There is no plausible legitimate explanation for Hizballah’s efforts to arm itself and threaten Israel other than the explicit religiously motivated Iranian drive to destroy Israel.”

Again, in the clearest possible terms, the report sends us a serious warning that war is very likely in the short term in southern Lebanon.

Hezbollah is Arabic for “Party of God”—that is what the name means—and it is a radical Shi’a Islamist terror group based largely in southern Lebanon. It was founded in 1982, with Iranian support, after the first Lebanese war. Hezbollah takes all of its ideological inspiration from the Iranian revolution and the teachings of the late fundamentalist Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. Hezbollah seeks to violently impose its totalitarian ideology on Muslims and forge a radical, Iranian-style Islamic state in Lebanon in its determination to destroy Israel and drive out western and other non-Islamic influences from the Muslim world.

The Hezbollah leader is known for his venomous, anti-Semitic rhetoric and has called repeatedly for the destruction of the state of Israel. Hezbollah is linked to a history of international terror attacks. It now has de facto control of Lebanon’s Government and boasts the country’s largest military infrastructure, including up to

[Mr Hollobone]

an estimated 150,000 Iranian-supplied rockets capable of striking anywhere in Israel. Iran provides financial support for Hezbollah, with weapons, technology and salaries for its tens of thousands of fighters.

At the time of the last Lebanon war, in 2006, it was estimated that Hezbollah had between 10,000 and 15,000 rockets, and about 10,000 fighters. Now, in 2018, the rocket arsenal has increased tenfold, to up to 150,000 rockets, and Hezbollah has as many as 45,000 fighters, many of whom are battle-hardened from experience in Syria. As well as having a military footprint on the ground, Hezbollah is also involved in drugs and arms smuggling, money laundering and document fraud.

Hezbollah's rocket arsenal has only one purpose and that is to threaten Israel. Israel has no territorial ambitions in southern Lebanon at all. Moreover, Hezbollah has not only imported weapons from Iran but it now has the capability to manufacture such weapons itself in at least two rocket factories located in Lebanon.

The rocket arsenal includes everything from Katyusha rockets at one end, which have a small payload and a very limited range, all the way up to Syrian B302 missiles, Zelzal-2 missiles, M600 missiles and Scud B missiles at the other end, which can reach anywhere in Israel. Although Israel has anti-missile capability, with its anti-missile batteries, taking out 150,000 rockets that are all fired basically at the same time would be impossible for any military force to achieve.

Another problem is that this rocket arsenal is not all lined up on the border, so that everyone can see it; it is embedded in more or less every Shi'ite village located in southern Lebanon. Effectively, therefore, Hezbollah is using the population of southern Lebanon as a human shield for the development of its weapons systems. What is rather more serious is that Hezbollah is not only using the Lebanese civilian population as a human shield, but effectively using UNIFIL as a shield for its activities as well.

At the end of the second Lebanese war, Israel withdrew under the terms of UN resolution 1701. One of the clauses in that resolution said that UNIFIL should disarm military actors in southern Lebanon. Members do not need just to believe me, because the report states:

“UNSC Resolution 1701 mandates that UNIFIL monitor the cessation of hostilities, accompany and support the Lebanese armed forces as they deploy throughout the south, and to take ‘steps towards the establishment between the Blue Line’—the border with Israel—

“and the Litani river of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL deployed in this area’.”

It is clear to me and to the High Level Military Group that UNIFIL has completely failed in this part of its mandate and that it has effectively allowed a tenfold increase in the rocket arsenal that Hezbollah can deploy against Israel.

My big ask to the Minister is that we need to use our good offices in the United Nations to strengthen UNIFIL's mandate, so that it can proactively disarm Hezbollah's rocket arsenal. Otherwise, what is the point of UNIFIL? I would even go so far as to say that, although there has not been any major outbreak of fighting in southern Lebanon since 2006, it is not clear to me that that has

anything to do with UNIFIL's presence on the ground there. If anything, UNIFIL's being there has effectively allowed Hezbollah the space and cover it needed to build up its rocket arsenal, which would not have happened if UNIFIL had not been there in the first place.

We can also play a part, as many right hon. and hon. Friends have said, by banning Hezbollah in its entirety and proscribing it as a terrorist organisation, because it entirely meets the criteria for full proscription under the Terrorism Act 2000. The Home Office guidance to that legislation states:

“Under the Terrorism Act 2000, the Home Secretary may proscribe an organisation if she believes it is concerned in terrorism, and it is proportionate to do. For the purposes of the Act, this means that the organisation: commits or participates in acts of terrorism; prepares for terrorism; promotes or encourages terrorism (including the unlawful glorification of terrorism)—

we will see that “unlawful glorification” on the streets of London this Sunday during the al-Quds march—

“or is otherwise concerned in terrorism”.

Hezbollah is the most destabilising factor within Lebanon itself. It has now become a state within a state, and it has built up a massive rocket arsenal that threatens one of our closest allies. The evidence is there for all to see, especially by those in the Foreign Office, and it is now time for Her Majesty's Government to take action.

4.16 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): Thank you, Sir Christopher, for calling me to speak and, as always, it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) on securing this debate, and other colleagues on their interventions and other contributions. I also congratulate my hon. Friend on the thoughtful and detailed way in which he set out the concerns, based on the report, “Hizballah's terror army: how to prevent a third Lebanon war”, by the High Level Military Group.

According to sources in the region, Hezbollah's military capability has grown significantly since the start of the Syrian civil war. I do not have precise figures to respond to my hon. Friend with, but reports suggest that Hezbollah could now indeed have as many as 100,000 rockets, including hundreds of advanced rockets with a range of up to 300 km. That is deeply concerning and a clear threat to the stability of the region. The premise of my hon. Friend's debate is entirely correct and fully well founded.

In addition, Hezbollah is also in direct violation of UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701, which my hon. Friend mentioned and which stated that there should be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than those of the Lebanese state and that only the Government of Lebanon were permitted to authorise the sale or supply of arms and related materiel to Lebanon. I will say more about our detailed support for Lebanon in a moment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for giving way, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) on securing the debate—I also apologise to him for not being here earlier to hear his full speech.

The Minister mentioned the 130,000 to 150,000 rockets. Is he also aware of the 50,000 soldiers, including reservists, that Hezbollah has? Does he agree that Israelis are entitled to be concerned about the relationship between Lebanon and the Hezbollah terrorists? Quite clearly, there is a connection between the two at this moment in time, so Israel has every right to have fears.

Alistair Burt: Yes, Mr Speaker—sorry, Sir Christopher. I am giving you an elevation there—in due course.

In response to the hon. Gentleman's intervention, yes, the premise of the debate is correct; there is no argument about that here. Hezbollah is a dangerous and destabilising force. It sits on the northern border of Israel. Israel has every right to be concerned and to seek support in relation to dealing with that. That is what I would like to explain in terms of the United Kingdom's relationship here.

I confirmed the United Kingdom's support for the position in UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701 when I was at the International Support Group for Lebanon meeting in Paris last December and at the Rome II ministerial conference on support to the Lebanese security forces in March. The joint statements that followed those meetings, which were agreed by a large cross-section of the international community, emphasised the role of the Lebanese armed forces as the sole legitimate armed force of Lebanon. I should add that Israeli overflights of Lebanon also violate UN Security Council resolution 1701 and contribute to increased tension in the area. The activity by Hezbollah risks triggering a conflict between Hezbollah and Israel on a scale far beyond that seen during the 2006 war. That could devastate Lebanon and further destabilise an already vulnerable region.

The UK has made clear our concern at Hezbollah's destabilising actions in Lebanon and the region. We operate a policy of no contact with the entire organisation, and we have repeatedly condemned the group's support for President Assad's brutal regime in Syria.

Stephen Crabb: I am listening to the Minister with great interest, as I always do. Just a moment ago, was he drawing an equivalence between Israeli overflights of Lebanese territory and Hezbollah's stockpile of 150,000 rockets?

Alistair Burt: No, not at all, and I would not seek to do so. I was saying that when people are looking for violations of resolution 1701 in the region, as they do, that is an issue that comes up. Clearly, the risk of the missiles is far beyond that of Israeli overflights. I mentioned it simply because if people are going to take note of the resolutions, then everyone should do so, but I fully understand the context in which the overflights take place.

The UK proscribed Hezbollah's external security organisation in 2001. In light of Hezbollah's support for militant groups such as Jaysh al-Mahdi, which was responsible for attacks on British troops in Iraq, we extended the proscription in 2008 to include Hezbollah's military wing, including its jihad council and all units reporting to it.

We are working with our European partners to challenge Hezbollah's malign activities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering set out. We are a key player in

international efforts to strengthen the global response to money laundering, terrorism financing and crime. The UK is a founding member of the Financial Action Task Force. We spend significant resource on strengthening that global network, working with it and the Financial Action Task Force regional body for the middle east and north Africa. We fund and deliver a significant amount of technical capacity-building, including in the middle east. We also designate certain individuals linked to Hezbollah under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010.

Mr Harper: I hope the Minister will forgive me if he is about to cover this point in his remarks, but I was listening very carefully a few moments ago when he said that the British Government have no contact with any part of Hezbollah. I welcome that, but I genuinely do not understand why we make the distinction in the way we do between the military arm and the non-military arm. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) said, the organisation does not make that distinction in that way.

Alistair Burt: The distinction has been drawn for some time. We recognise Hezbollah as a political entity in Lebanon in an exceptionally complex Government structure that I am sure all colleagues are aware of. That does not mean we do not keep all its activities under careful monitoring. We have no contact with any part of the organisation, but it is not Government policy to discuss organisations that are not on the proscribed list, including speculation as to whether an organisation is or is not under consideration for proscription. Beyond that, I cannot say anything further. What I want to spend time in the debate doing is illustrating the work that the United Kingdom undertakes to undermine the criminal and terrorist activities of Hezbollah and what we do to strengthen Lebanon in relation to its response to Hezbollah.

Ross Thomson: Just before my right hon. Friend moves on to that important part of his remarks, would he not accept that the UK Government should judge Hezbollah by the totality of its actions in terms of criminality, drugs smuggling, terrorism and militant activities? By proscribing Hezbollah, we would send the strongest possible message that the UK abhors terrorism in all its forms.

Alistair Burt: I have no need to express our view on terrorism any more forcefully than my hon. Friend has, as what he said is the policy of the United Kingdom. I have already said what we are doing to try to mitigate the effects of Hezbollah, but I have also said I will not be drawn down the line of proscription, because we do not discuss organisations and whether proscription is possible. If he will forgive me, I would like to say what we are doing to strengthen Lebanon and fulfil some of the obligations of those UN Security Council resolutions, which are crucial.

We maintain that the best way for the UK to help to tackle Hezbollah and its weapons and to support Israel is threefold. The first part is to support UNIFIL, which is important, and I will come on to that point later. The second is to support the defence of the state of Israel, and I do not think anyone queries whether the United Kingdom does just that—we do so in a number of

[*Alistair Burt*]

different ways. The third is to strengthen and empower the Lebanese state, which should not be seen as a bit-part player; it is crucial, but all too often it is left out of discussions. It is important we do what we can to protect Lebanon from wider instability in the region.

John Howell: I hear what the Minister is saying, and I would like to concentrate on his third point. I support him in trying to support Lebanon's many moderates, but does the existence of Hezbollah not make that a difficult thing for us to achieve?

Alistair Burt: The region is mostly difficult. Many difficult characters fill Government positions and political positions throughout the region, not all of whom would be elected to our parish and town councils, because of their backgrounds. That is the reality of life. We draw careful distinctions, as we are right to do. It does not make life impossible, because it should not. If I may, I will explain how we try to deal with that.

Lebanon's security services have a vital role to play in ensuring the country's stability, security and sovereignty. That is why we promote their role as Lebanon's sole guarantors of security. Power must be in the hands of the state, not the hands of non-state actors beholden to external forces. With an accountable and professional military in place, the Lebanese people would have less cause to turn to others for their security. That is why we have been working with the Lebanese armed forces since 2012 on a £61 million project to help secure the Lebanon-Syria border. Once complete, the Lebanese armed forces will have secured the entire Lebanon-Syria border for the first time in Lebanese history.

With our support, and the support of other key donors, the Lebanese armed forces have developed and modernised over the past 10 years, to become a respected, professional army capable of protecting Lebanon. I was pleased to meet them and see some of our work there last autumn when I went to Lebanon. The Lebanese

forces demonstrated that progress in August last year by defeating Daesh on the Lebanon-Syria border in an operation involving UK-trained troops and border positions constructed with UK assistance. We want to help maintain that success. That is why, at the Rome II conference, I announced an additional £10 million of security support for Lebanon.

However, that security support from the international community will not be sufficient on its own to ensure a stable and secure Lebanon. It is vital that Lebanon's next Government make clear political progress to strengthen the Lebanese state. We welcome Lebanon's first parliamentary elections since 2009. We now hope to see the swift formation of a new Government addressing crucial issues. Lebanon cannot afford to be a factor for conflict in the middle east, because that will attract instability to itself.

The next Lebanese Government will have the important task of protecting Lebanon's stability and security. They must do so by robustly implementing the policy of disassociation from regional conflict, by abiding by the provisions of all relevant UN Security Council resolutions—in particular 1559 and 1701—and by ensuring that the state's legitimate security institutions hold the monopoly on the use of force. While the UK wants to continue to support Lebanon, I fear that the international community will find it increasingly difficult to do so if the next Government do not take concrete steps on those crucial issues. It is imperative that we see progress.

To conclude, Hezbollah's actions and the reported size of its weapons arsenal are deeply concerning to the United Kingdom and a threat to stability in an already fragile region. The best way to tackle both those things is a secure and stable Lebanon with strong institutions, a professional army that inspires the trust of its people, and a Government who protect Lebanon from wider instability. We stand ready to support Lebanon in upholding these values and addressing the challenges it faces and to support those threatened by Hezbollah. We will continue to help them in relation to this difficult situation.

Question put and agreed to.

Voter ID Pilot Schemes

4.29 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered voter ID pilot schemes.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. The voter identity pilot scheme that was used in five local authority areas in this year's local elections signals one of the most disproportionate and ill-thought-out changes to our electoral system in recent years. As the only Labour Member of Parliament representing an area used in the pilot scheme, I feel compelled to give the other side to the story that is being given by those merely repeating buzzwords and top lines on behalf of the Government.

The foundations for the pilot are well known and, arguably, well intentioned. It is true that at election times there is the potential for cases of fraud or voter impersonation. I do not dispute the fact that any attempt at fraud or voter impersonation is wrong, should be thoroughly investigated and, if appropriate, prosecuted. Electoral fraud is a serious crime, but to suggest that it is a widespread problem is gross hyperbole, and the introduction of voter ID schemes is akin to using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

In Great Britain, excluding Northern Ireland, where they have their own arrangements, there were 21 cases of alleged impersonation in polling stations in 2014, and 26 cases in 2015, amounting to 0.000051% of overall votes cast. In 2016 there was one successful prosecution and three cautions. In 2017 there were just 28 allegations of impersonation and one prosecution, equating to 0.000063% of overall votes cast.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate; she is making an excellent speech. On the point that she has just raised, is that not precisely why the respected and independent Electoral Reform Society is opposed to the scheme? The Equality and Human Rights Commission also warned the Government that a voter ID scheme would have a disproportionate impact on protected characteristic voters, such as those from ethnic minorities, older people, trans people and people with disabilities. That is precisely why the scheme should not have gone ahead.

Ellie Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is right that the Electoral Reform Society has criticised the scheme, stating that electoral fraud at the ballot box "is an incredibly rare crime because it is such a slow, clunky way to steal an election—and requires levels of organisation that would be easy to spot and prevent."

I will talk about protected characteristics later in my speech.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I rise to speak only because the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) mentioned the Electoral Reform Society. It is worth putting it on the record that after the election the Electoral Reform Society alleged, early in the day, that 4,000 people had been turned away from voting. It turns out that that number was massively overstated; the real number was actually, at most, 340. That was

beautifully demolished by the Radio 4 programme "More or Less". It is worth putting it on the record that the ERS was not very accurate in its analysis.

Ellie Reeves: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for those points, but the reality is that it is very difficult to monitor how many people were disenfranchised, because some people did not turn out to vote or left the queues. That was certainly the experience in my constituency, which I will talk about later. I expect that the figure probably is quite a lot higher than the 300 that has been quoted.

The introduction of voter ID laws would make no difference to allegations of fraud with postal votes, proxy votes, breaches of secrecy, tampering with ballot papers, bribery, undue influence or electoral expenditure, which are arguably the areas where most electoral offences occur. Let me repeat: any attempted voter fraud or impersonation is wrong and should be thoroughly investigated, but the figures relating to alleged fraud at polling stations do not point to any widespread issue or problem relating to impersonation. An overhaul of the voting procedure by introducing identification requirements has been a step too far.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): The hon. Lady mentioned Northern Ireland a moment ago. Given what she says, presumably there is evidence of marginalised groups being discriminated against in Northern Ireland. As I understand it, voter identification has taken place there simply and effectively for many years. What is the evidence of discrimination?

Ellie Reeves: There has certainly been clear evidence of people being disenfranchised in my constituency, which was part of the pilot. In fact, in Bromley, the area I represent, prior to the scheme being launched an impact assessment said that the scheme was likely to have an adverse impact on older people and trans people. That is evidence from Bromley's risk assessment.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ellie Reeves: I want to make some progress. I have big concerns about the potential disenfranchisement of voters in areas where people who are legally entitled to vote may not have identification in line with the requirements. Even before discussing the concept of voter ID, the requirements across the pilot schemes were wide ranging and different, meaning that aggregated findings or comparative analysis will both be questionable in any Government evaluation. Bromley, Gosport and Woking required ID documents, whereas Swindon and Watford required only a poll card. Interestingly, none of the trial areas had a significantly poorer or more ethnically diverse population than the national average, or any recent historical examples of voter fraud or voter impersonation.

As I said, Bromley Council's impact assessment stated that there would be a noticeable effect on the elderly and trans people. It highlighted concerns that voters in those categories would be less likely to have up-to-date documentation in line with the requirements. As my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) said, prior to the roll-out the Equality and Human Rights

[Ellie Reeves]

Commission warned the Government that voter ID schemes would have a disproportionate impact on voters with protected characteristics, particularly those from ethnic minority communities, older people, trans people and people with disabilities.

Before committing to any further changes to the way in which citizens vote, we should look at the experience of other countries that have rolled out identification checks at elections. Experience from the United States has shown that voter ID schemes disproportionately affected marginalised groups, because those who could not afford to drive or go on holiday often did not have the specified documentation. Figures from the last census, recorded in 2011, show that 9 million people in the UK do not hold a driving licence and 9.5 million do not hold a passport. To put that in perspective, figures from the Electoral Commission show that 24% of the electorate do not have access to a passport or photographic driving licence.

Furthermore, 3.5 million people in Great Britain—7.5% of the electorate—do not have access to any form of photo ID whatsoever. If voters live in shared accommodation or often move, they are also less likely to have bills or paperwork in their name. With regard to the groups highlighted in the various equality impact assessments, we must consider the impact on those unlikely to have up-to-date ID. The recent Windrush scandal has shown that even those who are legitimate citizens and voters have struggled to access services to which they are entitled. Further expansion of voter ID schemes could see the Windrush generation denied their democratic rights, adding further insult to injury.

Notwithstanding those points, it has also been reported today in *The Guardian* that two barristers have called into question the legality of the pilot, given that it made voting harder, casting further doubt on a scheme that might have unlawfully denied people their right to vote.

Mr Lord: The hon. Lady speaks about passports and driving licences, yet even Woking, which was an ID pilot area, allowed lots of different forms of photographic identification—I think 10% of those who voted had a senior bus pass, and various student cards were also admitted. She talks about millions of people being disenfranchised. In Woking only a tiny percentage of people did not hold any of the forms of strict ID—and, of course, such people could always apply for a free elector card.

Ellie Reeves: I will go on to talk about the experience in Bromley, where people were turned away. A number of different forms of ID could be taken to the polling station, but nevertheless people were disenfranchised, and I will speak about that in a moment. Unlike in Swindon and Watford, where voters were required only to bring their polling cards, in Bromley, Gosport and Woking, where formal ID was required, voter turnout was marginally down compared with the 2014 local elections. The scheme took place in five areas, but I can speak specifically, and with first-hand experience, about the impact of the trial in Bromley. Reports on polling day from the Bromley wards within my constituency highlighted numerous cases of voters being turned away and prevented from rightly casting their vote. The council's

figures suggest that 154 people in Bromley were unable to cast their ballot on 3 May. When I was out campaigning on the doorstep, I was told of a significant number of people telling activists that they would not be voting because they did not agree with the principle of being asked for ID. Although that is direct evidence of voter disenfranchisement, it is unfortunately incredibly hard to measure.

On polling day, four polling stations in the Crystal Palace ward in my constituency had already turned away multiple people by 10.30 am for not having the correct ID. When I went to vote at 8.45 am at my polling station, I was told of two people who had already been turned away. In addition, the increased time that it takes to do ID checks puts a strain on the rate at which polling stations can process voters. In the morning on polling day there were reports of queues in Bromley due to the extra processing time, and of voters leaving before casting their ballots because, understandably, people do not necessarily have the extra time to wait while also juggling family and work responsibilities.

I also heard reports of polling station staff not being fully briefed on what ID was acceptable. In one case, a voter with a bank card was initially refused, but subsequently showed the polling staff the guidance that stated it was a valid form of ID. How many people might they have turned away before being shown the correct guidance? Another case involved a voter with a utility bill on their phone, who was told by staff to go home and print the document out. The polling station staff clearly had not been given guidance on whether a digital copy was sufficient. Such examples suggest that polling stations across Bromley were not adequately prepared for the trial and that Bromley's measurements of 154 voters being turned away are far from exact. I believe that many more people might have been turned off from voting.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate on an important issue. She is quite rightly highlighting some of the challenges that voters might face when we introduce a new system. Would she also accept that this was a pilot scheme, and that we aim to learn from pilots? Is she, in principle, supportive of the idea that voters should prove who they are when they go to the polls?

Ellie Reeves: No. For the reasons I have already set out and will continue to set out, I do not, in principle, support the changes because, as the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Electoral Reform Society have identified, it is likely to lead to widespread disenfranchisement. I say that 154 people being disenfranchised in Bromley is 154 too many.

Mr Dhesi: Studies from the University of California have shown that such schemes are merely a tool for voter suppression. Does my hon. Friend agree? As the Windrush scandal has aptly highlighted, many people within the UK do not even have one piece of ID, let alone several.

Ellie Reeves: I agree that the scheme seems to disenfranchise certain groups, and that is something we should all be very worried about. The Labour party has

been clear, repeatedly, that we believe the pilot to be misguided. I understand that more than 40 campaign groups that share our view have contacted the Cabinet Office, calling on the Government to drop any further roll-out.

Mr Harper: On that point, will the hon. Lady give way? Will she indulge me?

Ellie Reeves: I will give way briefly, but I do want to make some progress.

Mr Harper: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and I promise that I will not intervene again. She mentions the Labour party. Why is it that she does not think people should have to prove their ID when they are voting in public elections, yet my understanding is—although I am obviously not an expert—that the Labour party in internal party elections, such as those for selecting candidates, insists that people have to show ID to prove who they are? Is that not a little hypocritical?

Ellie Reeves: It is right when people vote in internal Labour party elections that they can demonstrate that they are a Labour party member. That is completely different from someone exercising their democratic and fundamental right to vote in elections for their representatives in local government or in Parliament. The analogy is misguided and wrong.

When the issue of the pilot schemes was recently raised at Cabinet Office questions, the Minister suggested that the pilot was deemed by the Department to be a success. However, there is no doubt that voters were denied votes and that voters were put off—disproportionately so, in comparison with previous reports of voter fraud. Can a flagrant disregard for disenfranchising voters really be regarded as a success? In the year of celebrations marking the centenary of the Representation of the People Act 1918 and women being entitled to vote, do we really think it is appropriate to advocate a scheme that has irrefutably excluded some voters?

Turnout at general elections has faltered over the past 25 years and it was encouraging to see a 2.5% increase in votes cast at the 2017 snap election. I am concerned that, were the scheme to be rolled out further, we would see greater issues at the next general election.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. I wonder whether she shares my concern about vulnerable groups. None of the five trial areas had significantly older, poorer or ethnically diverse populations. How can we be sure that a large number of such voters would not be disenfranchised?

Ellie Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for making that important point. I have very real concerns that if the scheme were to be rolled out in inner-city London constituencies or Manchester constituencies, for example, where there are much larger ethnic minority communities, swathes of the electorate could be disenfranchised. In my view, swathes of voters could be turned away if this scheme was rolled out country-wide at a general election. Voter ID does little to instil confidence in our electoral system or encourage greater participation—in fact, quite the opposite.

On current data, figures and analysis, we have a pilot scheme that risks disenfranchising many and creating issues that did not previously exist. The 2017 figure that 0.000063% of overall votes cast were allegedly fraudulent is set against data that shows that 7.5% of the electorate do not hold any photographic ID, which means the number of those at risk of disenfranchisement outweighs the number of allegations of voter fraud by a factor of more than 119,000. I have previously used the analogy of a sledgehammer to crack a nut, but I am no longer confident that that is a sufficient metaphor to describe the utterly disproportionate methods we have seen trialled this year.

Although the schemes will now be evaluated by the Government and the Electoral Commission will prepare its own report, I am concerned that the schemes will be clumsily rolled out across the country through secondary legislation without due care and attention, as exhibited in the run-up to the pilot, and we could find ourselves with a cumbersome, ill-thought-out electoral process that leaves thousands of legitimate voters without their democratic voice. At the moment the Government find themselves patting each other on the back, congratulating themselves on a job well done, but I must tell the Minister that the pilot cannot be regarded as a success. I have voiced legitimate concerns on behalf of my constituents who took part in the pilot, and their opinion and experiences must be taken on board. If not, this Government will have voter disenfranchisement added to their ever-growing charge sheet on alienating the public. It is surely time to think again.

4.48 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for securing this debate. It is really important that the House has the opportunity to discuss voter ID.

Some Members may be aware that I laid a ten-minute rule Bill to discuss voter ID before the House. Since I presented that Bill, many constituents and others from around the country have raised the subject with me, expressing their enthusiasm for the scheme. Many people find it incredible that they do not have to show ID when they go to a polling station. They have to show ID when they collect a package from Royal Mail, and in so many other parts of life—it is a common and accepted thing. Why, when engaging in such an important matter as democracy, is the threshold for participation so low? A minimum threshold of proving who you are to engage in democracy is quite reasonable.

Mr Harper: As my hon. Friend says, it is important for someone to be able to show their identity. Does he welcome the fact that a range of different mechanisms were tried in the different pilot areas? Is he also aware of the fact that in Northern Ireland, where they have had this system in place for many years—a system that was legislated for by a Labour Government—any voter can have an ID card free of charge to use specifically to prove their identity in an election, and that that does not seem to have caused particular problems?

Chris Green: That is of great importance, and I agree entirely. A range of forms of identification were checked in these schemes, and a variety of options could be

[Chris Green]

used. Northern Ireland, where there is excellent participation, is a role model for how the scheme can be implemented in the rest of the country.

Mr Dhesi: Northern Ireland has invested millions of pounds over a considerable period to put that scheme in place. Such a scheme would have to be rolled out across the whole of England, but in these austere times we are led to believe that we do not have the money for our NHS. If we have the money for this pilot scheme, surely money should also be spent on much worthier causes, such as our NHS and our education system.

Chris Green: I think we have a different point of view. I hope that my constituents regard our democracy as very important and worth investing in. Northern Ireland is a role model for how this can be delivered. It is interesting that there has been no evidence forthcoming from Northern Ireland about people with protected identities being disadvantaged. I would have thought that Opposition Members might focus a bit more on the evidence from the United Kingdom, rather than referring to the United States of America, which has a very different system.

People expect to show ID. In fact, people often think they are disenfranchised because they have lost their voter card. It is posted out weeks before the election, and if people lose it they think, "I don't have my card, so I can't vote. I'm disenfranchised." If we use forms of ID that people carry daily, they will feel more confident attending the polling station, presenting their ID, voting and participating in our democracy. As was highlighted previously, that is no less than the Labour party expects.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman rightly stated that the democratic right that we enjoy should be protected, but is he concerned that this measure has been introduced without an Act of Parliament?

Chris Green: At the moment, we are just looking at trial schemes. It is important to have evidence from trials before we roll out the scheme across the country. There were five pilots around the country for checking voter ID.

My constituents are also concerned about postal voter fraud, and there was a postal vote trial in Peterborough, Slough and Tower Hamlets. When people think about voter fraud and corruption of the political system, they think of Tower Hamlets. It was not the Mayor of London but a Mayor in London who was kicked out of office because of irregularities in the voting system in Tower Hamlets. Statistics such as 0.000-whatever per cent are not very relevant when a Mayor in London has been kicked out of office. I welcome these pilots, and I hope the Minister will give some indication of when the scheme can be rolled out across the country, because my constituents would welcome that.

4.53 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I am delighted to follow my fellow five-a-side footballer, the

hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green). I am sorry to disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), who passionately outlined her position, but as the hon. Member for Bolton West just outlined, although Tower Hamlets was not in the voter ID pilot, we were a postal voter pilot, so we have some experience of this. I will speak briefly, because other colleagues want to contribute.

I support the Government's efforts to protect our democracy. I am not persuaded by the argument that people have been deterred, and especially not by the argument about pensioners not having passports or driving licences. Every pensioner in London has got a freedom pass. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether the freedom pass, which is photographic ID—I do not know any pensioner in London who does not have such a card, which allows them to take advantage of free travel—is an appropriate document for the trials.

The hon. Member for Bolton West mentioned Tower Hamlets. We have had allegations of fraud in every single domestic election except 1997, including of personation, intimidation and postal vote manipulation. The ID proposals should deal with personation. Intimidation has been dealt with by establishing sterile areas outside every polling station, which are policed by the Metropolitan police at every election. I think postal voting is still far too lax, which is why I am glad Tower Hamlets participated in the pilot. Every political party has been spending far too much time harvesting postal votes from its supporters. Anyone can sign up for a postal vote, which is to the parties' advantage, but I think that devalues postal voting and lightens the democratic burden on the citizen to participate in our democracy.

The final paragraph of the Tower Hamlets briefing that I sought for this debate, which was very superficial, says:

"On completion of the two stages the data compiled was extracted and forwarded to the Electoral Commission for analysis in accordance with the requirements of the order. Once analysed by the Commission all stakeholders—namely the Commission, Cabinet Office and Tower Hamlets Returning Officer—will meet to compare the data extracted, review the process and explore the merits of these pilots and any further schemes that may be considered necessary in the future."

My question to the Minister is, is there a timeframe for when we might hear what the conclusion of that analysis was?

Postal voting is far too easy. I had a look at the briefings from the House of Commons Library, the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Reform Society. I had to chuckle at the briefing from the Electoral Reform Society, because one of the frequently asked questions it attached to its response is:

"Don't you need ID to vote in Europe?"

It says:

"Nearly all European countries have mandatory ID card schemes with either free or low-cost cards. As the ID cards are mandatory all voters have ID cards, so no groups of voters are discriminated against."

I am very disappointed that, when the Labour Government proposed ID cards, we were beaten back by the liberal left, the libertarian right and the media, which said, "This is outrageous and too expensive." It not only would have dealt with voter fraud and personation but would have improved security, dealt with NHS tourism and helped to deal with benefit fraud, but the proposals were defeated.

Voters welcome the opportunity to defend their right to vote. That is a precious privilege that we need to defend—I do not think that that view is something that is under attack. I will be listening to the Minister, because I think these pilots are important. Serious questions are rightly being asked of the pilots, and the Government will have to defend their conclusions, but I am not opposed to the fact that the pilots took place, as we need to defend our democracy as best we possibly can.

4.58 pm

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): My constituency of Woking was one of the areas that had a voter ID pilot, and I think it is fair to say that it was the strictest of them all. It demanded a specific item of photographic voter ID or an elector card, which could be applied for before 5 pm on Wednesday—the day before polling day. Woking Borough Council has already submitted an interim report, which states:

“Voters across the Borough were required to show one of a number of approved forms of photographic identification before they were issued with their ballot paper at the polling station. Where electors did not have one of the approved forms of identification, there was the option to obtain a free Local Elector Card, with 57 of these cards issued during the trial.

Figures demonstrate that out of 18,851 voters who attended a polling station, 99.73% of electors provided the right form of photographic ID. In total, 51 people (0.27%) brought the wrong ID or attended with no ID and were not issued with a ballot paper. The report indicates that overall turnout to the election was unaffected by the trial, comparing favourably to previous elections at 37.75% compared to 37.71% in 2017 and 35.81% in 2012 (when the last Borough only election was held).”

That is a pretty remarkable result.

Ray Morgan, Woking Borough Council’s chief executive and returning officer, expressed satisfaction with the trial:

“Given that 99.73% of voters brought a correct form of ID and engaged positively with the pilot and only 0.27% did not, I think we can call this trial a great success. I would like to thank Woking’s electorate for their cooperation and understanding throughout the trial. I would also like to acknowledge the hard work of all members of polling station staff and Council officers in the lead up to the election, and on the day, to make the new process such a success.”

I would like to add my personal thanks. Mr Morgan continued:

“Following our experiences in the polling stations on 3 May, I see no reason why bringing ID to vote cannot be embedded in our democratic process and have already expressed my desire to the Cabinet Office that Woking continues to participate in any future trials.”

We have heard some good speeches on both sides of this debate, but I remind those who seem to have set their face against voter ID for local and parliamentary elections that only a handful of votes can be crucial. In one of the 10 wards up for election in Woking this summer, one of the candidates won by just 10 votes and another by just 16 votes. Indeed, in recent years in Woking we have had single-figure majorities in different wards.

Chris Green: Given the numerous different ways to determine a draw, whether tossing a coin, drawing a straw or pulling a card, would it not be advantageous in the event of a dead heat in an election for voters to know that every one of the votes cast had been genuine? The election may be for a town council, borough council

or a Member of Parliament, and at a time of minority Governments, as we have now, that could determine the Government of the country.

Mr Lord: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent and important point. In the 2017 general election, as we all know, the constituency of North East Fife was won by the Scottish National party candidate by only two votes. Further parliamentary seats were won by fewer than 100 votes, such as Perth and North Perthshire with 21 votes, Newcastle-under-Lyme with 30 votes, Southampton, Itchen with 31 votes, Richmond with 45 votes, Crewe and Nantwich with 48 votes, Glasgow South West with 60 votes, Glasgow East with 75 votes and Arfon with 92 votes. A small number of votes can swing seats at a parliamentary election and therefore determine who are the Government of the day.

Jim McMahon: The percentage of people turned away in Woking was about 0.2%, but 45 million people voted in 2017, and if 0.2% had been turned away, that would be 90,000 people. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that that is proportionate?

Mr Lord: I would make two points in response to that. First, one should not necessarily accept that all those who were refused the right to vote were genuine voters. Everyone received several reminders about voter ID and had the opportunity, if without the right ID, to get a local elector card. It is important to note that people must come to the polling station with the correct ID, as they do in Northern Ireland. Woking went out of its way to publicise that. This was effectively the first time ever that people were asked to present voter ID at the polling station, and personally I think that the number of refusals was remarkably small. For a pilot area, a one-off, I do not think that anyone would expect anything else.

Furthermore, as I have said already, the turnout increased by comparison with the most equivalent elections. If we extrapolate from that, that is hundreds of thousands of voters across the nation in a general election.

Jim McMahon: I do not want to explore this cyclical argument too much, but let us say that we learn from this experience and voters become used to it, so that instead of 0.2% the figure falls to 0.1%. Does the hon. Gentleman believe, even so, that it is proportionate for 45,000 people to potentially be excluded, when only 28 allegations of voter fraud were made in the last general election?

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Before we hear the answer to that intervention, I must say that we shall start the wind-ups at 10 minutes past 5, and I would very much like to get another speaker in.

Mr Lord: Of course, Sir Christopher. In response to the intervention, I would say a couple of things. First, the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) said when introducing the debate that none of the pilot areas had a history of voter fraud. I am afraid that that is not the case in Woking: there is a history of voter fraud, in one ward in particular. When Opposition Members talk about the very few accusations of and convictions for personation, that is a vast underestimate of the potential level of fraud.

[Mr Lord]

Anecdotally, I am afraid to say, where postal voter fraud has happened in the past, lots of personation was almost certainly going on as well. I have heard horror stories from various parts of the country, including Woking, because personation is so easy. All that is needed is to know that someone is going on holiday, and anyone of the right sex can simply turn up at the polling station giving that name and address. That is all that is required, so in a marginal ward with a history of voter fraud, it is ridiculous to suggest that personation has not been taking place. Furthermore, we know from our history that personation in Northern Ireland did take place.

To sum up, it is well past time for us to have voter ID for our British elections. It has worked in Northern Ireland and worked remarkably well in our pilot areas, and I urge the Minister and the House to adopt it expeditiously.

5.7 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing this debate, but I have to state clearly that I cannot support her point of view. I shall speak from a Northern Ireland perspective and explain in a short time—a very short time, as it turns out—exactly what we have done.

The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland is the returning officer and has responsibility for electoral registration, compiling the electoral roll and managing all elections in Northern Ireland. By and large, that has worked pretty well. Before the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, the head of household was required to register all residents who were eligible to vote. The 2002 Act changed the registration procedure, introducing individual electoral registration and requiring eligible voters to provide the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland with their signature, date of birth, national insurance number and current residence. The Act also required voters to present photographic identity.

Many people in Northern Ireland therefore acquired an ID card, first, for purposes of electoral identification and, secondly, because when travelling from Northern Ireland to the mainland, photographic evidence has to be provided. The ID card was a method of doing so. People could get an ID card for the price of two photographs, whereas applying for a passport cost £68, or £40 for an Irish passport. That was how it was done, so people saved money.

Over the years, we have encouraged our constituents to apply for ID cards, and many have done just that. ID cards were introduced to counter a lack of public confidence in the electoral process in Northern Ireland. By and large, the Act changed that. There are still some issues with proxy and postal votes, but those can be looked at and changes made. A voter ID card scheme is one that I would support fully.

I will give a quick example of where frustrations can arise. My parliamentary aide's sister came into my office one election to say that she had moved house. Having completed the sale on the day that registration closed, she thought her vote would stay with the house,

but the person who bought it registered there and she lost her vote. That is an example of where people need to be sharp. By the way, that was not illegal—it was the system running as it should, and there is nothing wrong with that. The fact that I may have lost two votes is only part of it; the rules were being enforced.

I will conclude, Sir Christopher, because you have been clear on your timescales. There must be reform here on the mainland and there must be further reform in Northern Ireland to address proxy votes and postal votes. It is essential that we encourage more people to get on the register and use their vote, but also that we are as confident as possible that the vote returned reflects the will of the electorate and is not a result of fraud or scamming. That is what we need to do, and I would encourage the Minister to do that in England as well. Let us do it everywhere, right now.

5.11 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): We have a real problem in this country with democratic participation and engagement. At the last general election, 14.6 million people who were registered and entitled to vote did not do so. In all parts of the country, at every local election we do not have a majority of those who are entitled to vote taking part in the election. In other words, our democracy hangs by these very shoochy nails, and we all ought to be extremely concerned about the situation. It therefore bewilders me that in the midst of all the things we need to do, the Government are committing so much concern and energy to this particular issue, which as far I can see has not been demonstrated to be a problem at all.

As others have said, we are talking about 28 alleged cases of personation last year—one case for every 1.6 million people who voted.

Mr Lord: With the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I am afraid I do not have time.

That seems to be a problem so marginal as not to require Government attention. We also know that the public are not concerned: a survey released today by the Electoral Reform Society showed electoral fraud at the very bottom of a list of potential concerns the public have about the voting system

Dr Poulter: With the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I am sorry, but I will not take interventions because we are short on time.

Unlike in Northern Ireland, where there was a serious problem, the instances alleged appear to be sporadic and individual rather than as a result of any organised campaign to scam an election—I have yet to see any evidence that the latter is the case. Given that, why are the Government so concerned and being egged on by some members of the governing party, for whom this seems to have become something of an obsession? Indeed, I note that someone recently put in a freedom of information request to the Human Tissue Authority, which regulates dead bodies, to ask what information it has about electoral fraud, as if we are looking at zombie voters coming to influence the situation.

As the evidence is not there that this is a huge problem that needs to be tackled, there is a case in what the Opposition are saying. In fact, the motivation is party political, with people seeking a party advantage. It is the case, is it not, that photo identification is less likely to be held by people who are unemployed, people who earn low incomes, black and minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities and migrant communities? All of those people have one thing in common: they are less likely to vote for the Conservative party. It seems to me that, as the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Lord) said, potentially very few votes influence the outcome of an election, if photo ID achieves the suppression of participation by voters in those categories—

Chris Green: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I am sorry, but I have only 60 seconds left.

There is a severe problem here. We need to look seriously at the results of the pilot. I would like the Minister to respond. It will not be good enough if all the Electoral Commission does is speak to the returning officers in those five areas and finds out who voted and who was turned away; we need to know much more than that. We need the breakdown of who was turned away and what their characteristics are, to see whether there are any particular trends. More importantly, we need to know not just who was turned away but who never turned up in the first place. People have suggested that there was no effect on turnout, but surely that was in part because there was a publicity campaign in those five areas, so people will have known that if they did not have photo ID, there probably was not much point in going to the polling station. Clear scientific research needs to be undertaken to find out whether that was the case before there is a further roll-out.

I plead with the Cabinet Office and the Minister to understand that there are much greater priorities in improving our electoral system than this. It is surely time, in the 21st century, that 16 and 17-year-olds should be able to vote. It is surely time to have automatic registration. And it is surely time that we piloted online voting, where there would be absolute security in who votes and absolute guarantees against personation and fraud.

5.15 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing the debate. I very much echo the concerns she raised.

It is deeply concerning that voters, some of whom have voted their entire lives, were denied a voice in last month's local elections as a direct result of discriminatory policies introduced by this Government. The Government present voter identification as a solution to tackle the specific issue of voter impersonation in polling stations. Electoral fraud is a serious crime and every allegation must be investigated fully. Indeed, isolated incidents of electoral fraud have taken place and it is vital that the police have the resources they need to prosecute.

However, the proposals outlined by the Government are clearly disproportionate. In 2017 there were 28 allegations of impersonation out of nearly 45 million votes cast—one case for every 1.6 million votes cast. Of those 28 allegations, one case resulted in a conviction.

None of the five English boroughs that took part in the pilots has experienced a single instance of impersonation in the past decade. The scale of electoral fraud in this country has caused many, including Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg, head of politics at the University of Liverpool, to describe voter ID as

“a solution in search of a problem”.

Does the Minister agree with that assessment?

The Government clearly recognise the flaws in their argument. When pushed, they claim that voter identification is designed to tackle the perception of electoral fraud. However, new research published today by the Electoral Reform Society shows that mandatory ID in polling stations is one of voters' lowest concerns—just 4% of voters believe ID is the most important priority for our democracy. The top issues for voters were: ensuring that elections are free from the influence of large financial donations, an accurate voting register and balanced media coverage. That shows just how out of touch the Tories really are. To quote Professor Toby James from the University of East Anglia:

“Concerns more often arise from accusations of fraud made by politicians in the media, rather than concrete cases.”

A concern shared by Opposition Members is that restrictive voter ID requirements could disenfranchise voters. Approximately 3.5 million electors do not have any photo ID, and 1.7 million lack even a bank account. That makes mandatory voter ID with no free provision a barrier to many people exercising their right to vote. There is also a significant financial barrier to obtaining ID. Only recently the Government pushed through unpopular proposals to increase the cost of adult passports from £72.50 to a whopping £85. In this context, it is deeply concerning to read a comment posted by Islington Conservatives on Twitter the day after the local election that, “Voting is not compulsory so ID doesn't need to be free”. Will the Minister condemn the statement made by her colleagues in Islington?

Article 3 of protocol 1 of the European convention on human rights, which was incorporated into UK law by the Human Rights Act 1998, protects our right to free elections, including the right to vote. Under the law, voting is a right, not a privilege, and voting rights are closely linked to the rights to freedom of expression and to freedom of assembly. It is therefore extremely misleading for the Government to argue that voting is like picking up a parcel from the post office, where some ID is required.

The European convention on human rights outlines that the right to vote is not absolute—conditions can be imposed, which is why it is lawful to have residency or minimum age requirements. However, these conditions must pursue a legitimate aim, be proportionate and not prevent free expression in choosing the legislature. As I said, the measures piloted last month are clearly disproportionate to the amount of voter impersonation in England, and therefore do not fulfil the legal requirement.

Chris Green: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Smith: I have no time.

I would also be interested to hear the Minister's response to today's intervention by Blackstone Chambers. According to Anthony Peto QC, the joint head of Blackstone, and fellow barrister Natasha Simonsen, schemes

“that restrict or discourage voting, or that inhibit voters,”

[*Laura Smith*]

are beyond the scope of the Representation of the People Act 2000. Those leading barristers concluded that the pilots were illegal because they were incorrectly imposed by ministerial diktat rather than through Parliament. The Conservative party appears to have completely disregarded the rule of law. Does the Minister agree that, following that intervention, it is impossible for her Government to justify their undemocratic and unlawful plans?

The Windrush scandal demonstrated that it can be difficult for some communities to provide official documentation. This is the same hostile environment all over again, and it is shutting our fellow citizens out of public life. The Government were also warned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and more than 40 leading charities and academics in two separate interventions that voter ID requirements have a disproportionate impact on ethnic minority communities, older people, trans people and people with disabilities.

I have to start winding up, because I am running out of time.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): You have run out of time.

Laura Smith: I will wind up really quickly.

Does the Minister seriously believe that the Government are making voting accessible for everyone? The Labour party believes in a democracy for the many, not the few. We want everyone's voice to be heard, no matter what their background, which is why we call on the Government to abandon their dangerous plans.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): May I first thank the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for requesting the debate, and everyone who has taken part in it?

Haven't we heard some big words from Opposition Members? We have heard "disenfranchised," "discriminatory" and "voter suppression" banded about. Last time I looked in the dictionary, disenfranchisement meant not having the right to vote. We have one of the largest electoral registers this country has ever seen. Having every opportunity to cast a vote, with carefully designed safeguards and a safety net, is not disenfranchisement, it is not voter suppression and it is not discriminatory. Let me get that out of the way at the start.

The success of the pilots highlights that a reasonable and proportionate measure was taken. Voter turnout remained steady in all the trial areas—indeed, in one area there was a notable increase. The overwhelming majority of people cast their vote without a problem. I pay credit to the returning officers in the pilot areas, who were undeterred by some ill-informed and regrettable scaremongering in the run-up to polling day. They delivered successful awareness-raising campaigns to ensure that voters knew the requirements in their area. It is of course returning officers' duty to ensure that registers are as accurate and complete as possible, and it is absolutely their duty—and it is in everyone's interest—to get people on the register and get them out to vote.

While I am on the subject of legal duties, let me answer a point made by the hon. Members for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) and for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith). The powers to make such pilot schemes are contained in section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000. The hon. Gentleman, perhaps mistakenly, suggested that no Act defined such a scheme. That is simply wrong; it is in the Representation of the People Act, which enables changes to be made to the rules regarding the conduct of elections. That Act was of course fully debated and passed by Parliament.

As we have heard, the estimates by the Electoral Reform Society, which is a political lobby group, of the number of people who were turned away from polling stations were wildly exaggerated. I really wonder why hon. Members should trust the survey that the society published today when the facts so clearly speak against its record. Data from returning officers in all five participating local authorities show that 340 electors who were asked to return to the polling station with the correct ID did not return. That represents just 0.06% of the electorate and 0.14% of votes cast. I have of course put those data in the Library.

The experience in Northern Ireland, where paper ID has been required since 1985, and photo ID since 2003, shows that once that requirement has become established, voters find it easy to be part of that reasonable idea. Indeed, the responsible Minister at the time—a Labour Minister—was clear that no one would be disenfranchised by those measures.

Despite repeated claims by the Opposition, many of the people I spoke to about the pilots before the elections, as others will have done, thought they were a common-sense approach. Some—particularly people from Austria, Canada, the Netherlands and the many other countries where showing ID is a normal part of the voting process—were surprised that we did not already need to take ID to the polling station. It is clear to me that people value their vote individually and want collective confidence, which is what the scheme is about.

I read what the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge wrote in some recent articles about electoral fraud, and about voter ID in particular. I am shocked that she does not seem to think that electoral fraud of this type could influence elections. Do those stolen votes not count? Do they not undermine confidence in the very process that puts us in this place and gives us the privilege of being here? Does not any type of electoral fraud threaten the resilience and integrity of a democratic system and the confidence that people have in it? What level of fraud would be palatable? How many voters is it okay to silence and have robbed of their vote? Electoral fraud is real. By definition, it is difficult to detect if it is done effectively.

Jim McMahon: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Chloe Smith: I will not. I have to conclude, and the hon. Gentleman and others have had their chance to contribute.

Voter ID is of course just one element of efforts, which I hope command cross-party support, to protect and sustain the electoral system, which should be precious to us all. I thank the hon. Member for Poplar and

Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for coming along to express his support for voter ID. Indeed, he explained that he would go further and do more to protect the voting system. That is why we at the Cabinet Office, in partnership with the independent Electoral Commission and Crimestoppers, are working to ensure that people feel encouraged to report electoral fraud if they see it. I marvel at how the rest of the Labour party cannot bring themselves to support such efforts.

At the moment, it is easier to vote in someone else's name than to collect a parcel at the post office, so doing nothing would be wrong. We cannot allow a crime to happen until it reaches a certain level. It is doubly unfortunate that the Labour party continues its scaremongering, especially given that the previous Labour Government introduced photo ID at polling stations across Northern Ireland in 2003. Although today's Labour party might not think doing that is an acceptable step to protect our voting system, constituency Labour parties think it is good enough for them, as they routinely insist on ID. Doing one thing and saying another seems unprincipled to me. On top of that, Opposition Members came here to quibble about the numbers. This is not about statistics; it is about the principle. Why do they disagree with the principle of tackling electoral fraud?

Electoral fraud is not a victimless crime. The Electoral Commission stated in its 2013 review:

“The majority of people in communities affected by electoral fraud are victims rather than offenders. The people who are likely to be the victims of electoral fraud can be described as vulnerable.”

In his report on electoral fraud, Sir Eric Pickles explained clearly that it was

“local residents who lost out from the crooked politicians who bullied them and wasted their money. The law must be applied equally and fairly to everyone.”

I remain committed to ensuring that equality is integral to everything we do in elections policy. I met the EHRC earlier today, and we share common ground on ensuring

that whatever we do has the rights of electors and the fairness, equality and inclusivity of our electoral system at its heart.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge made repeated reference to photographic ID. I think she knows that was not helpful. That is not what the pilots required. Let me put on the record that no one needed to purchase ID documents to be able to vote in the pilots. Local authorities provided alternative methods free of charge, to ensure that everyone who was registered had the opportunity to vote.

The Government will reflect on the voter ID evaluation that the Electoral Commission publishes in July. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) will find that the Electoral Commission has published the list of the data that it will use in that evaluation. We will use that as an opportunity to review, among other things, how the awareness-raising campaigns operated and what could be improved.

I say again to the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge that I am grateful to her for bringing forward the points she made and for staying in touch with residents in one of the important pilot areas, but her arguments are not convincing. This really is a simple matter of principle: do we or do we not believe in stamping out electoral fraud? I do.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Ellie Reeves, you have 10 seconds if you want them.

5.29 pm

Ellie Reeves: I thank everyone who took part in the debate. Let me point out a couple of things: 7.5% of the electorate do not have any form of photo ID, and a system that left 154 people in Bromley unable to vote is a clear example of disenfranchisement.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 6 June 2018

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):

I attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 28 May. The Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

Current affairs

The HRVP updated Ministers on EU activity on DPRK, Yemen, the Somalia partnership forum with Sweden on 25-26 June and the recent AU-EU College meeting. Ministers were briefed on the outcome of the MH17 investigation.

Iran

The Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) discussed Iran. Ministers underlined the importance of preserving the JCPoA and welcomed the steps already taken by the European Commission to protect European companies that have engaged with Iran following the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions. The FAC commended all efforts, notably those of the HRVP and the E3 Foreign Ministers (France, Germany and the UK) to ensure that Iran continues implementing the agreement. Ministers also discussed the EU's concerns around Iran's ballistic missiles programme, its role in regional conflicts, and the human rights situation. Ministers stressed the need to continue engaging with the US, a long-standing partner and ally, on all issues, including Iran.

Venezuela

Ministers exchanged views on Venezuela, following the recent elections and adopted conclusions setting out the EU's concerns.

Gaza

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the situation in Gaza and the US embassy in Israel's move to Jerusalem. Ministers agreed on the need to act immediately to avoid further loss of life, including by improving humanitarian access. They also stressed the importance of a political process, and re-confirmed the united EU position on the need to find a two-state solution, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Council discussed the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Ministers stressed the importance of a credible, legitimate, consensual and inclusive electoral process leading to elections in December 2018. Ministers agreed that a smooth handover of power was crucial and co-operation with the region was critical. Ministers also expressed their concern over the dire humanitarian situation, in the light of the recent Ebola outbreak.

Post Cotonou agreement

Ministers reviewed work on the Council decision authorising the Commission to open negotiations on the future partnership between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries (post-Cotonou

agreement). The Council asked EU Ambassadors to continue work on finalising and adopting the negotiating mandate under the leadership of the Bulgarian presidency.

Chemical Weapons

Under any other business, Ministers were updated on the international partnership against impunity for the use of chemical weapons meeting in Paris. Ministers supported the UK proposal for an extraordinary meeting of the conference of state parties.

Members agreed a number of measures without discussion:

The Council approved an extension of EU restrictive measures against the Syrian regime until 1 June 2019;

The Council adopted conclusions on enhanced EU security co-operation in and with Asia;

The Council adopted conclusions on strengthening civilian common security and defence policy (CSDP);

The Council adopted the EU's annual report on human rights and democracy 2017 and the European Court of Auditors report on election observation missions;

The Council agreed to opening a European Union delegation to Panama;

The Council adopted conclusions on an EU position on combating the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons (SALW).

[HCWS738]

TRANSPORT

EU Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

I will attend the only formal Transport Council under the Bulgarian presidency (the presidency) taking place in Luxembourg on 7 June.

The Council is expected to reach a general approach on a proposal to revise the current regulation on safeguarding connectivity and competition in international air transport, which is intended to provide protection against subsidisation and unfair pricing practices in the supply of air services from non-EU countries. The Government places great importance on effective competition and liberalisation as a key enabler of international connectivity and considers that the proposed general approach is satisfactory.

Following this, the Council will be considering a general approach on a proposed directive on port reception facilities. The proposal aims to achieve a higher level of protection of the marine environment by reducing waste discharges at sea, as well as improved efficiency of maritime operations in port by reducing the administrative burden and by updating the regulatory framework. In negotiations, the UK has been generally supportive of the aims of the proposal but required clarification and consideration of the impacts to ensure that the final directive does not disproportionality impose additional or unnecessary burdens. We have also been successful in securing compromise and flexibility within the proposal, to ensure that the improvements to the directive do not unduly burden small ports and small ships.

Next, the Council will consider a number of files in phase one of the mobility package (published in May 2017). Firstly, the presidency will give a progress report focusing on proposals designed to improve the clarity and enforcement of the EU road transport market (the 'market pillar'), and proposals on the application of social legislation in road transport (the 'social pillar').

The Council is expected to reach general approaches on two of the proposals in the Package. The first of these is a proposal to revise the current directive on the

European electronic road tolling service ('EETS'). The UK views the proposals for a revised EETS directive favourably. The proposal contains provisions that will assist the enforcement of toll and road user charge collection. The second is a proposal on goods vehicles hired without drivers, which is intended to make it easier for undertakings to hire vehicles registered in a member state other than that where the undertaking is established. This is not a matter with significant practical implications for the UK given the relative rarity of operators hiring goods vehicles in this way in the UK. We are content for both of these general approaches to be agreed.

Following this, the presidency has prepared two progress reports on proposals from phase two of the mobility package (published November 2017). The presidency will provide an update on the state of play thus far on proposals to amend the current directive on combined transport, which aims to encourage and facilitate modal shift away from the roads and on to alternative means of transport and reduce congestion, and the proposal to broaden the scope of the current directive on clean and energy efficient vehicles, where the UK is leading the transition to cleaner road transport.

Next, there will be a progress report on the proposed revision to the regulation on rail passengers' rights and obligations. The UK shares the commission's objective of strengthening the rights of rail passengers. We therefore support in principle the proposal's aim of standardising and improving passenger rights, including by improving access for people with disabilities or reduced mobility.

Under any other business, the commission will present phase three of the mobility package (published May 2018), followed by information on the action plan for military mobility, and an update on the implementation of the EU cycling strategy. The delegations from Sweden and Greece will then provide information on automated and connected driving and functioning of the fair competition framework in the aviation sector within the EU, respectively. The commission will then provide information on the state of play for EU summer-time arrangements, and finally, the Austrian delegation will present the transport work programme of their forthcoming presidency of the Council of the European Union.

[HCWS737]

Contingent Liability

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

I have today laid before Parliament a departmental minute describing a contingent liability relating to a blight agreement between me, as Secretary of State for Transport, and Heathrow Airport Limited (HAL).

If the proposed airports national policy statement is designated, land in the location identified as potentially suitable for the development of the north-west runway scheme becomes blighted. Owners of qualifying land (predominately owner-occupiers of private housing) within that location would be able to serve a blight notice on the Secretary of State, which if valid would, in effect, both authorise and oblige the Secretary of State to purchase the land.

In order to avoid my department having to cover the cost of blight claims I, as Secretary of State, have entered into an agreement with HAL under which HAL assume the financial liability for successful claims. In the event the proposed NPS is designated, the cost of meeting blight claims will need to be met by my Department if the agreement were for some reason ineffective to transfer liability.

The maximum estimated contingent liability for the blight claims is £160 million, though actual gross liability is likely to be much lower, c. £5 million to £20 million, as most owners of qualifying property are thought likely to wait for the more generous offer of 125% from HAL, available following the granting of any development consent.

The Treasury approved this liability and the chairs of the Public Accounts Committee and the Transport Committee were notified of this contingent liability by letter of 16 May due to the confidential nature of the contingent liability at that time. A period of fourteen sitting days beginning on 21 May has been provided for issues or objections to be raised, and final approval to proceed with incurring the liability will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

[HCWS739]

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