

**Thursday
21 June 2018**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 21 June 2018

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON BILL [*LORDS*] (*BY ORDER*)

Second Reading opposed and deferred until Thursday 28 June (Standing Order No. 20).

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

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

National Citizen Service

1. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the cost-effectiveness of funding for the National Citizen Service programme. [905962]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): The National Citizen Service is a life-changing experience. The programme delivers good value for money for the taxpayer, and the most recent evaluation showed that the summer programme generated over £2 in benefits for every £1 spent.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. Does he think that the high pay of its senior administrators is in line with the spirit of the NCS?

Matt Hancock: I think the outcomes from the NCS are very powerful. It brings communities together and it is one of the most effective things that we have in making sure that people come together at a young age and understand our national life as a whole. Of course we are always seeking to improve its administration; the hon. Gentleman would expect nothing less.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give us the number of people who participated last year, and the number who are expected to participate this year? What is he doing to widen participation?

Matt Hancock: Just over 99,000 young people participated in the NCS last year. This year, the target is 100,000—so a little bit higher. We are looking to increase and broaden participation so that people from all backgrounds and communities get the opportunity to engage. In fact, engagement is very strong among the most disadvantaged groups.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): In reviewing the cost-effectiveness of the NCS, will the Secretary of State take into account the absolutely brilliant impact it has on so many young people? I have seen this for myself in Nottingham. Many young people who are disadvantaged or facing other challenges in life come together in the programme, and it makes a real difference to them.

Matt Hancock: Yes; the hon. Gentleman is a man after my own heart. The outcomes from the NCS are incredibly positive, and that will always be at the forefront of our minds.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When we conceived the NCS, the ambition was that it would be so good that it would become universal. Does that still hold?

Matt Hancock: I would like it to become universal, but we are not requiring it to be universal because we want people to want to be on the programme. However, I think the message is increasingly getting out there that this should be done.

Museums Sector

2. **Mr Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the museums sector. [905963]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Museums play an important role in our lives and in society. The Mendoza review of museums was published last November, and my Department is implementing its recommendations to improve support of the sector. The sector continues to be supported by more than £800 million of public funds.

Mr Seely: Will the Minister do all he can to support my campaign to encourage national cultural institutions to engage with the Island, for education and regeneration purposes? Does he agree that the Island, with its unique relationship with the arts and sciences over the centuries, should be a perfect partner for many of those institutions?

Michael Ellis: I very much agree with my hon. Friend about the benefits of the Isle of Wight. I visited it last year, and Osborne House is just one of its many attractions. Arts Council England South West has identified the cultural development of the Isle of Wight as one of its key activities for 2018 to 2020, and we support that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Happy midsummer's day to you, Mr Speaker, and to everyone else.

It is wonderful that we have free museums, but is it not a fact that not enough kids from lower income families go to them? Is it not time we did something about that? The school holidays are nearly here, and most of the things that kids want to go to in London are very expensive.

Michael Ellis: Of course, it continues to be our policy that museums are free to enter. People of all backgrounds can and do visit them, and they are very busy during the

holiday period. We always want to do more to increase access to museums, and that is a constant focus for me and my Department.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What are the Government doing to help the Glasgow School of Art, following its terrible fire?

Michael Ellis: I was struck by the awful tragedy of the fire at the Glasgow School of Art, and my heart goes out to everyone affected. It is my intention to visit it as soon as that can be arranged, and we are in constant discussions on the subject of how and if we can help.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on industrial heritage. I thank the Minister for meeting me to discuss our recent report. Does he agree that our museums need to give greater attention to the Royal Ordnance munitions factories in world war two, where so many women, including my grandmother, worked and made such a contribution to the war effort?

Michael Ellis: I enjoyed my meeting with the hon. Gentleman. Yes, indeed: there is a great deal to be gained by visits to ordnance museums and many other areas where women played an integral and key part during both world wars, and before and since.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's meeting with the hon. Gentleman must have been a culturally up-market affair indeed.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware, as will the Minister, of the tragic fire at the Glasgow School of Art and the Mackintosh Museum. We are extremely grateful for the comments that have been put on the record. Will the Secretary of State give his personal commitment to look at a fund for local traders and community members affected? Will he also join me in welcoming Glasgow's bid to host the new Channel 4 headquarters and agree that the presence of Channel 4 in Glasgow, with its wealth of talent and creativity, would send a strong message that the channel is indeed for everyone in the UK?

Mr Speaker: It is not a museum, but there is a bit of latitude, I suppose.

Michael Ellis: The issue of where Channel 4 goes is of course a matter for it. Glasgow's iconic landmark is well recognised. I know about Mackintosh's work because there is a Mackintosh property in Northampton that is highly regarded. We will be looking at this. All options are open with regard to the hon. Lady's point.

Mr Speaker: I call Andrew Rosindell. [*Interruption.*] Oh, what a shame—we were going to hear about more international sport being played in the UK. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is well, but I am afraid he is not here and we must move on.

Football Grounds: Safe Standing Areas

4. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential merits of introducing safe standing areas at football grounds in the English premier league and championship. [905965]

16. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What the Government's policy is on safe standing at football grounds. [905979]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): Over 1 million people watch football every week. We are grateful for the engagement of fans from across the country in expressing their views on safe standing, including 541 of the hon. Gentleman's own constituents who signed the recent petition. We are looking into any changes that may be needed, and we are in discussions with the football authorities and relevant stakeholders to ensure that we carefully review the evidence on this matter.

Jeff Smith: The truth is that we already have standing at practically every football ground in the country—it is just that it is on terraces designed for seats rather than standing, so it is less safe. The majority of clubs, and the leagues, are now calling for safe standing, so will the Minister let the clubs work with the safety advisory groups to design a system that works for them?

Tracey Crouch: It is only in the top two tiers of football that an all-seated stadium policy exists; the other tiers are allowed to have standing. However, we are working very closely with all the football authorities to look at this issue.

Liz McInnes: My local football club, Rochdale AFC, plays at Spotland stadium, which is also home to Rochdale Hornets rugby league club. If Rochdale AFC were promoted from league 1 to the championship, it would have to get rid of its standing area, to the detriment of the rugby league fans. Can the Minister explain why it is safe to stand watching rugby but not safe to stand watching football?

Tracey Crouch: There are variations in a number of policy matters between different sports, and standing is just one of them. Of course, I wish Rochdale well in its promotion attempts next season. It did not do so well last season, as I know from many of the lobby fans of Rochdale. We are looking at all the various issues. We are working very closely with fan groups and the football authorities to carefully review this.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): May I heartily recommend that the Minister meet Ian Bankier and the board of Celtic football club, which has successfully piloted a safe standing area? If Ministers cannot take up the offer that Celtic has made for any of them to attend an upcoming home game, might they meet Ian Bankier here, where they can hear at first hand about the success that this pilot scheme has been?

Tracey Crouch: I recently had the pleasure of meeting a member of the Celtic board, albeit by accident, in Westminster. I can assure my hon. Friend that members of the Sports Ground Safety Authority and my officials have already spoken to Celtic.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Only a few weeks ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) held a meeting in the House with over 30 football supporters' clubs, all of which unanimously called for the Government to listen to fans and introduce safe standing. Will the Government finally listen?

Tracey Crouch: As I have made clear in almost every answer I have given, we work very closely with bodies such as the Football Supporters' Federation and Supporters Direct. We are listening to the football authorities and we are looking at this issue more carefully. There are a number of complexities around safe standing, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman appreciates. This will be debated in more detail on Monday.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's comments and hope that she intends to fully involve supporters' groups such as Scunthorpe United's Iron Trust in her deliberations.

Tracey Crouch: I am always happy to listen to the Iron Trust.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the England team on their fantastic win in the World cup this week.

I have met safety authorities, supporters' groups, clubs and leagues, and they all have one thing in common: over the last three months, they have not heard from Government Ministers, which is why they are bemused at the rushed review announced more than two weeks ago. The Government need to stop taking football fans for granted and start listening. The Minister has an open goal. Will she make football safer by introducing safe standing? Is she going to listen?

Tracey Crouch: I have already said that I am listening to a number of people in football from across the board, including the authorities. We are looking at all the data and evidence and will make a decision in due course.

Problem Gambling

5. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce problem gambling. [905966]

11. **Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce problem gambling. [905974]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): We take problem gambling very seriously and have taken decisive action on fixed odds betting terminals. We are determined to tackle that social blight and have decided to cut the maximum stake to £2.

Alex Burghart: I thank the Secretary of State for his response and for what he has done in this area. Does he agree that online gambling is in many ways more dangerous than gambling in bookies? What steps will he take to tackle that danger?

Matt Hancock: In our response to the consultation, we set out significant further steps to strengthen the safeguards for online gambling. The Gambling Commission already has a whole series of requirements in that area. There is more to do, and we are getting on with it.

Michelle Donelan: As the Secretary of State knows, I am strongly supportive of the decision taken on FOBTs, but problem gambling is an issue in my constituency,

especially among the vulnerable. What more can the Department do to push gambling companies to better support addicts?

Matt Hancock: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support and for that of many Members across the House for the action we are taking on problem gambling. Clearly it is important to ensure that we tackle online issues as well. That is complicated by the nature of the technology, but the Gambling Commission is working hard to ensure that the right protections are in place.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I once again congratulate the Secretary of State on introducing the £2 maximum stake for FOBTs. Will he use his considerable persuasive powers to talk to his colleagues at the Treasury and get that implemented by April 2019, and not a day later?

Matt Hancock: Of course, this needs to go through Parliament, and there is a process that needs to be followed. In order to cover any negative impact on the public finances, the change needs to be linked to an increase in remote gaming duty, paid for by online gaming operators at the relevant Budget. There are steps that need to be taken, but the hon. Gentleman knows just how enthusiastic I am to get this in place.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): While I welcome the lowering of the maximum stake for fixed odds betting terminals, has the Secretary of State considered a reduction in the number of betting advertisements shown during football matches, which are watched by a massive number of impressive young men and women?

Matt Hancock: That issue has been raised, and we have looked at it. Working with the Gambling Commission, we want to ensure that we get the rules in this space right.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): When is the Secretary of State going to ban 16-year-olds from playing the national lottery and buying scratchcards on the national lottery, or is he more worried about who is winning the money than who is losing the money?

Matt Hancock: We put that issue into the review, and I am sure that my hon. Friend's consideration will be taken into account, along with others.

Sports-related Tourism

6. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote sports-related tourism in the UK. [905967]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): The Government have secured hosting rights, I am pleased to say, for a number of major sporting events. That includes the cricket world cup next year, Euro 2020 matches and the Birmingham Commonwealth games in 2022. We will use national and local tourism agencies to ensure that we take advantage of all opportunities.

Mark Pawsey: Rugby, the birthplace of the game, is proud that its visitor attraction, the World Rugby Hall of Fame, not only hosts an annual ceremony to induct the greats of the game but is a popular attraction for visitors from both home and rugby-playing nations

around the world, with 18,000 visitors already. How is the Minister's tourism strategy supporting such attractions? Will he accept an invitation to visit the World Rugby Hall of Fame?

Michael Ellis: I would be delighted to do so. My hon. Friend is quite right to draw the House's attention to the World Rugby Hall of Fame, which is one of the many excellent attractions in the United Kingdom. There was William Webb Ellis, of course—no relation, which may surprise you, Mr Speaker. The Government are committed to boosting UK tourism, particularly outside London, and the Discover England fund does that. I would be very happy to visit or to meet my hon. Friend at any time.

13. [905976] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): For the entire country to benefit from sports-related tourism, it is important that there is a fair distribution of cricket, for example. Half of all the test matches between 2019 and 2023 will be in London, meaning that Trent Bridge will not get an Ashes test in either of the next two series. Will the Minister sit down with the England and Wales Cricket Board, tell it to go back to the drawing board and make sure that we all benefit from world-class cricket, not just London.

Michael Ellis: The sports Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), and I do care a great deal about this, as does the Secretary of State. The reality is that we want to get as many events as possible outside London and across the country. We are always looking to do that, and we continue to do so.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Mr Speaker, if you were to attend the Astwood Bank carnival on 15 July, you would see the sport of Viking fighting and horseman stunts being contested on the field. This brings in 5,000 people from all over Worcestershire. Does the Minister agree with me that these local events are very important for our communities? Will he congratulate the organisers, and what more will he do to ensure their success?

Michael Ellis: I certainly congratulate the organisers of that event, and of course those of the many other events that take place around the country. I cannot accept every request to take part in all these events; nevertheless, I will do my very best.

Mr Speaker: It sounds like a most magnificent event, but I should gently point out to the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) that it is the men's singles final at Wimbledon that day.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): My constituency is famous for its sport and for its sporting venues. We would love more sports tourism, but the failure of the Government to invest in the redevelopment of our railway station, the dreadful service on the Great Western Railway main line from London and the refusal to devolve air passenger duty are preventing an increase in sports tourism. What is the Minister going to do to persuade his Cabinet colleagues to sort this out?

Michael Ellis: Actually, huge investment—an unprecedented amount—has gone into the railways. Our tourism figures are up—they are up vastly on previous years—and they continue to rise, so I do not accept the premise of the hon. Lady's question. We work very hard to encourage as much tourism as possible, including sports tourism.

Music Venues

7. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support live music venues. [905968]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The live music industry is a vital part of the UK's economy, contributing £1 billion annually. We have announced that the agent of change principle will now be included in the national planning policy framework, helping to protect music venues when new housing is built. We will continue working across Government, and with the industry and the Musicians Union, on a range of measures to support the live music industry.

Dr Huq: From Arcade Fire at Wembley to Lovebox at Gunnersbury Park, big gigs in west London are booming, but small venues are on the brink of extinction. The Spinning Wheel in Ealing is now a Sainsbury's and The Castle in Acton is earmarked to become student housing. What are the Government doing to protect our pubs from rocketing business rates, greedy developers and, now, the shortage of CO₂ that is threatening to take the fizz out of beer for fans?

Margot James: The hon. Lady mentions business rates. A £300 million rate relief fund is available to councils to provide flexible support to businesses, including music venues, which I accept cannot hike prices in order to protect themselves. I would draw her attention to successful small venues, such as Base Studios in Stourbridge, which has adopted a very entrepreneurial route and is thriving.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): As thousands of fans pour into Wales this weekend for the Ed Sheeran concerts, what would my hon. Friend say to a disabled constituent of mine who was left incredibly distressed after paying more than £450 more for her tickets, owing to the so-called drip pricing tactic that Viagogo continues to use? I really thought that the Government were making progress on this. Why are people still being ripped off?

Margot James: I assure my right hon. Friend that the Government are making progress. We have reformed the Consumer Rights Act 2015 to give more protection to consumers when they are purchasing from secondary ticketing sites. We have also brought in ban the bots legislation so that it is now illegal to use electronic means to secure more tickets than the number the original organisers state as a maximum.

14. [905977] **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Given that Coventry has the Ricoh arena, what are the Minister and the Secretary of State doing to ensure that the director-general of the BBC invests in Coventry at the same levels as in Hull?

Margot James: I am a great admirer of the Ricoh stadium, although I am not sure it would qualify as a small music venue. Coventry benefits, of course, from being the city of culture in 2022, and I am sure that that will galvanise a huge amount of effort in support of what the hon. Gentleman requires.

Artificial Intelligence

8. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the artificial intelligence sector throughout the UK. [905969]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The UK has a world-class ecosystem for AI, and the Government are determined to maintain our position at the forefront of those technologies. That is why we published a sector deal in April, bringing together Government, industry and academia to provide almost £1 billion of investment to support growth in that sector.

Alan Mak: The growing use of AI and big data can help Britain to lead the fourth industrial revolution. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that the benefits of those technologies are felt by people, communities and businesses across the entire country?

Margot James: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all his work in this area. We have a full agenda following the publication of the sector deal, which will ensure that the benefits of AI are effected across the country. Tech Nation now has an AI programme that will support ecosystems across the country.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): If we are to be a world leader in AI, we will need more computer scientists. This week, Roehampton University reported on the total collapse in the number of students studying ICT at GCSE level. Will the Minister set out her target for the number of students studying technology over the next year, and say what she will do to ensure that more girls in particular study ICT, because that is where the collapse is worst?

Margot James: I very much share the right hon. Gentleman's concerns. We must encourage girls to study science, technology, engineering and maths, not just computer science, and programmes have been designed to do just that. We have made progress by making computer science mandatory in schools, which is a good first step. I am sure we will build on that, and recover the lost students at GCSE level to which the right hon. Gentleman rightly refers.

Public Libraries

9. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support public libraries. [905970]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): Libraries support people, communities and society as a whole, by providing access to books and literature and, increasingly, to modern technology.

Peter Aldous: With today being Suffolk Day, it is appropriate to highlight the great work of Suffolk Libraries, which is a successful, industrial and provident society that provides a growing range of community services. Will the Secretary of State—a fellow Suffolk MP—work with it as it seeks to become more innovative, self-sufficient and resilient?

Matt Hancock: I commend Suffolk Libraries, which is a thriving public service mutual that, as my hon. Friend says, does a great job. Today could not be a better day to celebrate what Suffolk Libraries does, because Suffolk Day, on midsummer's day, celebrates everything that is brilliant about the county that is beautiful and full of wonderful people and great food. It is a great place to visit, a great place to live, a great place to be, and a wonderful place to represent.

Rural Broadband and Mobile Coverage

10. **Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve broadband and mobile phone coverage in rural areas. [905973]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): We are clear on the continued need to improve broadband and mobile connectivity in rural areas. Broadband UK's superfast programme has achieved 95% coverage, and continues to connect more rural premises. The broadband universal service obligation, implemented by 2020, will ensure that rural areas are not left behind.

Jeremy Quin: How is the Minister ensuring that new housing developments are fully equipped with broadband during the construction phase?

Margot James: We have an agreement with the Home Builders Federation that all new developments by members of that organisation will deliver full broadband to the premises as those developments progress. I regularly meet a barrier-busting taskforce to consider how we can build on that voluntary agreement—not all builders are members of the federation—so that all residents of new-build developments receive the full-fibre premises to which they should be entitled.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May I urge the Minister, when she is looking at mobile phone signals for rural communities, not to forget the south Wales valleys? The three and a half valleys that I represent, the Ogmore, Garw, Llynfi and Gylfach valleys, have massive problems with mobile phones signals, so please can she make sure she does not forget them?

Margot James: The valleys in south Wales, like the great rural areas of Scotland, present challenges, but challenges that will be overcome. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that they are an absolute priority.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Will the Minister look at the productivity lag that the broadband and mobile hotspots cause in our constituencies? Will the Department assess what could be achieved if we had greater broadband and mobile coverage in those areas?

Margot James: I certainly will look at the issues my hon. Friend raises. I am very aware of these notspots. We are working constantly with Broadband UK and mobile operators to close them in the shortest possible time.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Ofcom's figures show that 4G rollout across the whole of the UK is now at 52%, up from 38%. In Scotland, however, that figure is only 29%, up from 15%. When can we expect Scotland's coverage to catch up with that in the rest of the country?

Margot James: If we take coverage from at least one provider, we see that 50% of Scotland now has mobile coverage. I accept that that is obviously not enough, but that does provide coverage for indoor voice for at least 90% of Scottish premises. However, we still have a great deal more to do.

Hockey

12. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What steps he is taking to support hockey in (a) Northamptonshire and (b) England. [905975]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): Hockey is a fantastic sport and I am pleased that Sport England is continuing to invest in the good work that England Hockey is doing to promote the game at the grassroots across the country. We all know that the hockey women's world cup is taking place in London this summer. Given that the England matches are already sold out, I am sure it is going to be absolutely brilliant and inspire future generations.

Mr Hollobone: Will the sports Minister join me in congratulating Kettering hockey club and all involved at the club on the wonderful achievement of being named by England Hockey as its sports club of the year 2018?

Tracey Crouch: I will indeed congratulate Kettering hockey club on its award. It is an absolutely fantastic achievement. We need to remember that, quite often, hockey clubs and lots of other sporting clubs are run by dedicated volunteers who go on to inspire lots of people to get involved.

Wakefield: Ministerial Visit

15. **Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): What plans he has to visit Wakefield in the next 12 months. [905978]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Wakefield has a flourishing cultural sector, which is reflected in the high-profile work of local heritage arts and museum attractions, such as the Hepworth and the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. My predecessor, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), visited Wakefield in December 2017, some six months ago.

Mary Creagh: That is very good news, but may I encourage the Minister and his colleagues to make either a ministerial visit or a family visit to the Coal

Mining museum, which celebrates its 30th birthday this year; the Hepworth, which is launching its new surrealism exhibition by Lee Miller this evening—I will be hot-footing my way up there after these questions; or to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, where Her Royal Highness Princess Anne has just launched “The Coffin Jump” by Katrina Palmer, which celebrates the heroism of the women volunteers of the first aid nursing yeomanry in world war one?

Michael Ellis: What a walking, living advertisement the hon. Lady is for her constituency and her area. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State visited it with his family recently.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): That's because there is nothing to see in Suffolk!

Michael Ellis: I did not hear that! We certainly value Wakefield and everything it has to offer. We will certainly keep it in mind for future visits.

Mr Speaker: We are now fully informed about the Wakefield situation and we are immensely grateful to the hon. Lady.

Topical Questions

T1. [905980] **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is the Department for all the things that make life worth living. This week, one moment that really made life worth living was Harry Kane's 91st minute winner against Tunisia. I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing the England team the best of luck on Sunday and beyond. In the past week, we have seen three records set in cricket, with Scotland beating England and the women's and men's England cricket teams both setting world records. We send our admiration and congratulations to them all.

Mr Sheerman: I obviously support the Secretary of State in what he says about the English teams, especially the women's cricket team, which was brilliant. Could I ask him to consider carefully our big towns, such as Huddersfield, which are not cities? Up to now, it has never had a consensus on becoming a city. Big towns such as Huddersfield really suffer from not receiving much money, which goes to cities. Is there some fund, or some way, in which the big towns could get their fair share of resources?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. Representing four towns myself, I entirely understand where the hon. Gentleman is coming from. We try to ensure that the funds that we supply through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport are available right across the country, whether that means vouchers for broadband, or the cultural development fund to improve the cultural life of an area. Huddersfield, like many other towns, is very welcome to apply for them all.

T2. [905981] **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Although we welcome the Gigabit voucher scheme, which was introduced by my right hon. Friend, may I ask him what steps he has taken to explore alternative methods of broadband delivery, such as TV white space, as in the project that is currently being trialled in Kinross-shire in my constituency?

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): We will certainly review the white space option. Fixed wireless solutions are already widely available in those hard-to-reach areas, but the universal service obligation will deliver high-speed broadband connectivity through wired or wireless technologies.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): One in five children in their last year of primary school are obese. What plans does the Secretary of State have to restrict further junk food advertising on television?

Matt Hancock: We are working with all stakeholders—the Department of Health and Social Care as well as the public service broadcasters—to take this question forward. Of course, it is not just a matter of advertising. To tackle obesity in this nation, we need a full spectrum approach that looks at all matters. Possibly some of the most important measures are those that encourage reformulation so that everybody benefits from eating healthier food.

Tom Watson: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, but as a former Digital Minister, he will know that children now spend more of their time online than watching TV. If he does not create a level playing field on advertising, will revenues not just flood from TV to targeted advertising on YouTube, a company that is less regulated and has proved itself many times over to be less responsible and less transparent than ITV and Channel 4? What is the Minister going to do about online junk food advertising?

Matt Hancock: As I said in my previous response, we need a full spectrum response. It is akin to the debate we had earlier about gambling advertising. This is not just a matter of TV. Increasingly, people are watching things through all the technologies available. We have to make sure that the response is appropriate to that.

T6. [905986] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): There is enormous potential in 5G mobile technology, especially to enable the delivery of our industrial strategy to the whole UK, so what will the Secretary of State do to ensure that our great towns keep pace with our cities?

Margot James: The Government want all of the UK to benefit from 5G, and the future telecoms infrastructure review will create the right policy and regulatory environment to support this aim. After these questions, I will be visiting one of the 5G test bed pilots that is already up and running in Guildford, so I can assure my hon. Friend that across the whole UK, towns as well as cities will benefit from our commitment to 5G.

T3. [905982] **Conor McGinn** (St Helens North) (Lab): Yesterday, the European Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee approved a draft of the proposed directive on copyright in the digital single market. Does the

Minister agree that we cannot miss the significant opportunity to address the transfer value experienced by the music industry, and will he assure the House that the Government remain committed to closing the value gap and ensuring that our great British creators, and those who invest in them, are properly rewarded for the use of their work?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. Property rights are the foundation of a market economy and intellectual property rights are the 21st-century version of that. The copyright directive is a good directive. We have to get the details right in its implementation, but it is a good step forward and I look forward to it becoming law.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): It is great to hear so many references to cricket this morning. I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, and the Secretary of State are well aware that the cricket world cup will come to England next year. It will include games between New Zealand and Afghanistan and between Australia and Pakistan, at the glorious county ground in Somerset—in Taunton, indeed. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that the event will attract the maximum number of international visitors, as well as home visitors, including, perhaps, the Secretary of State himself?

Matt Hancock: It is almost as if my hon. Friend had some connection with Taunton. [*Laughter.*] She certainly speaks well for it.

We are absolutely determined that when the cricket world cup comes to this nation next year we will gain the full benefit, including all the business people who will come here. I went to India with the world cup trophy itself to encourage Indian tour operators to send as many people as possible from that fine nation to this country, and that includes Taunton.

T4. [905983] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): In their election manifesto, the Tories promised:

“Our Universal Service Obligation will ensure that by 2020 every home and business in Britain has access to high speed broadband.”

No ifs, no buts. Can the Secretary of State confirm that that is still the Government's position, and that every home and business will be connected by 2020?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. We passed legislation to introduce the universal service obligation to ensure that everyone could have access to decent broadband by 2020. It has been harder in Scotland—we have been waiting five years for the Scottish National party Government to spend the £20 million that we promised them—but now we are just getting on with it and delivering directly to the people of Scotland.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking David Dimbleby for the role that he played for 25 years at the helm of “Question Time”, and does he agree that, in a year that marks 100 years of women's suffrage, the baton should be passed to a woman?

Matt Hancock: I think the whole House will want to congratulate David Dimbleby on his achievement as he steps down. While of course the job must be awarded on merit, I do think it is about time there was a woman at the helm of “Question Time”.

T7. [905987] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): We have with us here today pupils and staff from Wick high school, in my constituency, who have won a national first prize for inventing a very clever cycling safety device. What will the Government do to ensure that these pupils have the best possible access to state-of-the-art digital communications, so that they can make the very best of their future careers?

Matt Hancock: There is no greater enthusiast for digital technology than me, and I warmly welcome the pupils and staff from Wick high school. Of course, technology must be used appropriately in schools. There are many incredibly bright schoolchildren in the Visitors' Gallery, and I hope that they can make the most of all the digital technologies that are available.

Mr Speaker: Well done Wick, I think we should say. Splendid.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Cornish pilot gig rowing is one of the fastest-growing participation sports in the country, but it struggles to gain the recognition that it needs because it is registered under British rowing, which is a very different type of sport. Will the sports Minister meet me to discuss how we can secure better recognition for pilot gig rowing and support this excellent participation sport?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): You will be shocked to learn, Mr Speaker, that I did in fact do some gig rowing last year, when I was in Mousehole in Cornwall. I should be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss how we can promote it further.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Great Exhibition of the North, a summer-long celebration of the culture and science of the north, will open tomorrow evening in Gateshead, overlooking Newcastle. Does the Secretary of State agree that culture, science and engineering are essential parts of a vibrant economy, and will he tell us how that legacy will be ensured?

Matt Hancock: I am absolutely delighted that the hon. Lady has mentioned the Great Exhibition of the North, which will be launched tomorrow in Newcastle and Gateshead. I shall be going straight up there after questions, and the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), will be going tomorrow. It will be a brilliant celebration of everything that the north of England has delivered to the nation in the past and will deliver in the future, and the hon. Lady is a great example of that.

Mr Speaker: On the subject of the north of England, let us hear from north Yorkshire. Mr Kevin Hollinrake.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My report "Solutions for the fifteen per cent", which I have sent to the Secretary of State, makes a compelling case for the use of fixed wireless to deliver broadband to the hardest-to-reach areas. Will the Secretary of State meet me and colleagues to discuss how those initiatives might be implemented?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is also a great example of the future of the north of England, and I would be delighted to meet him to discuss these new technologies that are coming on stream that will help improve connectivity in Yorkshire.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): In Bristol, Bristol Plays Music and the Music Trust are developing a cultural curriculum with Bristol Old Vic and various other arts organisations. Will the Secretary of State or the Culture Minister, the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), visit Bristol when this curriculum is implemented, and will the Culture Minister support it being used in other schools across the country?

Margot James: I look forward to hearing more about that excellent venture. I recently met the hon. Lady at an excellent meeting with the Musicians' Union, and I admire her passion and share it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will be able to call all remaining questioners if they confine themselves to a short sentence each.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): John Rowbotham and his staff at the *Stirling Observer* play a crucial role in the life of the communities I serve. What is being done to support local newspapers?

Matt Hancock: The first thing we have done is fought off attempts to put more costs on to local newspapers, and now we have the Cairncross review, which I hope my hon. Friend will engage with, which is looking at how we can make them sustainable for the long term.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Two fires in the last three months have destroyed three listed buildings in Glasgow, and over 100 listed buildings in Glasgow are at risk, so will the Minister engage with the Treasury and ensure they restore VAT relief on the renovations of listed buildings in this country?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Of course tax is a matter for the Treasury, but we are always looking at ways to protect and conserve our historic and heritage buildings; they are crucially important to all of us and we will always look to do that.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Redditch is only about 20 miles away from Coventry which is due to be the city of culture. What are the Government doing to ensure that Redditch also benefits from this fantastic event?

Michael Ellis: The UK city of culture, Coventry 2021, is going to be a fantastic thing for Coventry and also for its environs, including my hon. Friend's area, and we know from Hull, and we will see in Coventry, the tremendous effects of the UK city of culture.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Fewer than 2% of people who have a problem with gambling receive help, yet this industry is worth £13.8 billion and only £10 million of it went into helping them. Is it not time for a levy?

Tracey Crouch: We already have a levy, but it is a voluntary levy, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman saw that earlier this week the Secretary of State visited the NHS gambling addiction centre and has pledged to work very closely with Public Health England to ensure we continue to fund help for those with gambling addictions.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Forced Marriages

1. **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the rate of prosecution of people responsible for forced marriages. [905990]

2. **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the rate of prosecution of people responsible for forced marriages. [905991]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Crown Prosecution Service takes forced marriage very seriously and the prosecution of these crimes remains a priority. In May of this year the CPS secured the first two convictions under the specific offence of forced marriage in England. These successful prosecutions send a clear message that forced marriage is unacceptable and that those responsible will be prosecuted.

Philip Davies: We all know that women are much more likely to be the victims of forced marriage than men, but the *Daily Mail* reported yesterday that police in south Yorkshire had made history by issuing the first ever order to protect a male victim of forced marriage. What is the Solicitor General doing to ensure that the CPS is also aware of male victims of forced marriage?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue, and I am happy to tell him that the legal guidance and protocol used by the CPS have been updated to include the experiences of male victims, to help challenge myths and stereotypes and provide details of any support services for them. Indeed, a section on male victims was included in the forced marriage training session held in December of last year, which is now being spread locally throughout CPS areas by forced marriage leads.

Rebecca Pow: Why is the CPS finding it so tough to secure female genital mutilation prosecutions?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to acknowledge the challenge facing prosecutors because these prosecutions are among the most complex referred to the CPS. They involve victims being hurt and coerced by members of their own families and communities, and therefore victims coming forward is a confidence issue. But the joint CPS and police forced marriage focus group is working hard to address the challenges faced when prosecuting these crimes.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): University of Nottingham research shows that victims of forced marriage quite often have learning difficulties. What special steps are the Government taking to support those very vulnerable victims?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady is right to acknowledge that among the complexities and the questions of confidence is the exploitation of a vulnerability or a particular disability, and that is very much part of the process that I outlined in my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). However, the intervention of the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) is helpful, and I will ensure that that focus is re-emphasised by the CPS.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Attorney General outline what support is given to the victims of attempted forced marriage to provide them with a new life and a fresh start? Is the CPS equipped to signpost victims to such funding, rather than just moving on after the prosecution?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about the aftermath of a prosecution, and work is ongoing between the CPS and the police not just to signpost, but to provide active support for victims after their horrific experiences.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Two prosecutions does not sound like much. What is the Solicitor General's estimate of the number of forced marriages in the UK each year?

The Solicitor General: With respect, it is difficult for me to estimate. Being realistic, prosecutions are not reflecting the number of forced marriages that exist, but we saw an increase in convictions between 2011-12 and last year from 23 to 32. We also now have over 1,500 forced marriage protection orders, which are designed to prevent the crime from taking place at all.

Public Legal Education

3. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What recent steps the Law Officers have taken to promote public legal education. [905992]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I have launched a new public legal education panel formed of leading organisations that promote the importance of teaching people about the law and their basic civil and criminal rights. As part of that, I am able to work closely with those involved in PLE, supporting initiatives to increase its profile and to reach more members of the public.

Eddie Hughes: I thank the Solicitor General for that answer, but what more can be done to inspire young people in Willenhall, Bloxwich and Walsall North to pursue a career in the legal profession?

The Solicitor General: I commend my hon. Friend for his interest in this subject and his passion for spreading opportunity in his constituency. My advice to him and to legal practitioners in the Walsall and Bloxwich area is that they should get into and work with our schools and take part in "lawyers in schools" sessions, which not only help to deliver PLE, but inspire young people into a future legal career.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I agree with the Solicitor General that public legal education is important, so how would he explain to the public what has gone wrong with prosecution disclosure? Who is responsible?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady makes a pertinent point. She will know that the Attorney General and I launched a review late last year ahead of some of the latest stories that have hit the headlines about the importance of disclosure. It has been a long-term issue, involving both the CPS and, notably, the police, but we are working closely to update and revise the guidelines to tackle the issues with which she and I are very familiar.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): In Scotland, public legal education begins at school, because human rights are part of the curriculum for excellence, and the Joint Committee on Human Rights recently heard evidence that that is part of the reason for Scotland's more positive public discourse about human rights. Has the Solicitor General had any discussions with his counterparts in the Department for Education about emulating Scotland's education example south of the border?

The Solicitor General: Once again, I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for raising an interesting dimension. I have not had those conversations, but I certainly want to. The curriculum in England and Wales—England in particular—already includes citizenship, of which PLE can be a part, but I will take on board her observations. I am grateful.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Public legal education is important for confidence in our criminal justice system, but failures in disclosure clearly undermine that confidence. Of the 3,637 cases that have been reviewed, disclosure concerns have been found in 47. How confident is the Solicitor General that there are not disclosure concerns in tens of further cases?

The Solicitor General: With respect, work has already exposed several deficiencies, but it would be an idle claim for me to suggest that that would be the sum total of it, because we are looking at a particular type of offence. My Department and the Attorney General's Office have been ahead of the curve on this, and it has been our priority for some time to tackle what I and the Attorney General understand from our days at the criminal Bar as a long-term issue.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Solicitor General talks about being ahead of the curve but, of course, there were warnings about disclosure two years ago. In July 2017, the "Making it Fair" report by the CPS inspectorate and Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary found that police scheduling was "routinely poor" and that there were failures to manage ongoing disclosure. Although I appreciate that action is being taken, is it not time that action was absolutely urgent?

The Solicitor General: We do appreciate the urgency, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for referring to that important inspectorate report. I remind him that the Attorney General and I asked the inspectorates to undertake that work, which has allowed a clear evidential basis for action to be taken now. It is urgent and we are getting on with it.

Child Sexual Exploitation

4. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the rate of prosecution of people responsible for child sexual exploitation. [905993]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Tackling child sexual exploitation is a priority for the CPS. Specialist lawyers with bespoke training continue to work closely with the police in order to bring stronger cases, and we prosecute those responsible for the sexual exploitation of children where there is sufficient evidence and it is in the public interest to do so.

Lucy Allan: The Solicitor General will be aware of a horrific case I have been raising in this place of a 13-year-old victim of a grooming gang. Multiple perpetrators were arrested but were not charged. Will he confirm it is his Department that is reviewing the case? When does he expect to be able to comment on it?

The Solicitor General: I commend my hon. Friend for her commitment to this vital issue, not just for her constituents but for the country at large. As she knows, it is an extremely complex and sensitive case. The CPS is looking at the matter, and the Attorney General and I are the Ministers who answer for that independent organisation. The CPS is taking the time to investigate the case fully, and then the Home Office will respond.

I know my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) has been in touch with the Home Office and is due to meet my right hon. Friend, the Home Secretary, as soon as possible. I am sure that constructive engagement will continue.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Spicer report on the sexual exploitation of girls and young women in Newcastle made a number of recommendations for the Solicitor General's Department. The report has yet to receive a response, particularly one that recognises the plight of young women. In my Adjournment debate last week, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) committed to a response. Will the Solicitor General do the same?

The Solicitor General: Yes, I will.

Cyber-space: International Law

5. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What the Government's policy is on the role of international law in relation to cyber-space. [905994]

7. **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What the Government's policy is on the role of international law in relation to cyber-space. [905996]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): Cyber-space is an integral part of the rules-based international order, and there must be boundaries of acceptable state behaviour in cyber-space, just as there are everywhere else. In my speech on this subject at Chatham House on 23 May, I underlined that hostile actors cannot take action by cyber means without consequence, both in peacetime and in times of conflict.

Alan Mak: Nation states can mount cyber-attacks under the cover of non-state actors to escape censure. Will my right hon. and learned Friend confirm that, if that happens, they should still be censured and subject to international law?

The Attorney General: I can confirm that, and my hon. Friend and the House will know that, where it is possible and appropriate to attribute these cyber-attacks to nation states, that is exactly what we do. He and others will recall the attack on, among others, a number of NHS institutions, which we were able to attribute to the North Koreans. We have done so again in relation to the Russians, and that is entirely right because nation states should be held to account for what they do.

Helen Whately: The World Economic Forum has listed cyber-attacks as the third greatest threat to global stability. Given that there are no borders in cyber-space, does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that we need to work to build international consensus on how international law is applied to cyber-space?

The Attorney General: Yes, I do agree. We should recognise the progress that has been made, difficult though it is. In 2015, 20 nation states agreed that the provisions of the UN charter should apply in cyber-space. Included among those 20 nation states were Russia and China, so we have been able to make some progress. In the end, every nation state takes responsibility for its own actions, and it is right that the UK gives leadership where it can.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It has been accepted by the NATO Secretary-General that cyber-attacks can, of themselves, trigger the collective defence provisions within article 5. What is less clear is the nature and extent of such a cyber-attack that would cross that crucial threshold. Given the potential repercussions, do we not need clarity on this as a matter of urgency?

The Attorney General: We do, and my speech was intended to deliver at least some of that clarity. My hon. Friend is entirely right, and I believe it has now been established that the provisions of the UN charter that mean states are entitled to defend themselves from armed attack also apply in cyber-space. If a cyber-attack is essentially equivalent to an armed attack in its effects, it seems to me appropriate that it should be treated as such. This country is entitled to respond by cyber means, or by other means that are necessary and proportionate.

Tackling Economic Crime

6. **Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con):** What role the Serious Fraud Office has in tackling economic crime. [905995]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The SFO is a key player in the response to economic crime and continues to operate independently, investigating and prosecuting some of the most serious and complex economic crime. I was pleased to announce earlier this month my appointment of its next director, Lisa Osofsky, who will shortly join the SFO to lead the organisation in its vital task.

Craig Tracey: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that answer. Will he confirm that, despite the availability of deferred prosecution agreements, the SFO

will still move directly to prosecute those involved in high-level economic crime, where it is appropriate to do so?

The Attorney General: Yes. Deferred prosecution agreements are a useful tool for the SFO, and they should be used where appropriate and where the corporate entity in question has co-operated fully with the investigation, but it remains the case that in the majority of the SFO's case load it proceeds to prosecution where that is appropriate and the evidence suggests it is the way forward.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Attorney General knows that all of us want a really effective SFO, but we know that without the right resources it leans too heavily on big accountancy firms. There have been rumours recently of a link with a whistleblower that are interesting and very worrying indeed, so will he look into this?

The Attorney General: If the hon. Gentleman gives me details of the case he has in mind, of course I will look into it. He will know that the SFO receives its funding in core budget and in blockbuster funding to deal with those extra-large cases that need additional funding. There has never been an occasion, and I hope there never will be, when the SFO has not been able to proceed for reasons of resources—that should remain the case.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I was glad to hear the Attorney General confirm that the SFO will continue to operate independently. What specific measures have been put in place to ensure that the new tasking power given to the National Crime Agency in relation to economic crime does not compromise either operational independence or the independence of the decision making on whether or not to bring prosecutions?

The Attorney General: I can say three things to my hon. Friend on that. First, both the SFO and the NCA believe this power will hardly ever be used. Secondly, in order for it to be used both my consent and that of the Home Secretary are required. Thirdly, it seems to us that this is sensible co-ordination in the fight against economic crime, but it will not affect the opportunity that the SFO will continue to have to investigate and, of course, to prosecute its own cases. This affects only the opportunity to investigate; it does not affect making decisions on prosecution.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Attorney General may be aware of correspondence I have been having with the Solicitor General about my constituent Alun Richards. There is a growing campaign across the House in relation to banking fraud, specifically in relation to Lloyds, rather than just the Royal Bank of Scotland. The SFO will not investigate. I understand it is independent but may I urge the Attorney General to give the organisation more teeth, in order to ensure that our constituents can get the money back, having been able to get the proof to say it was taken?

The Attorney General: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. As I suspect he knows by now from that correspondence, the issue here is primarily that the SFO

deals with a certain level of economic crime. It is not that economic crime that does not fall within that threshold level is not sensibly investigated and prosecuted by others. He will recognise that other agencies also investigate and prosecute economic crime, and we will want to make sure that they are properly resourced to do so. I hope that we will be able to find a satisfactory solution through those means.

Female Genital Mutilation

8. **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the rate of prosecution of people responsible for female genital mutilation.

[905999]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): FGM is a crime and it is child abuse. The CPS has introduced a series of measures to improve the prosecution of these cases, including appointing a lead FGM prosecutor in each CPS area.

Chris Green: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his reply. The French have had some success in arresting, prosecuting and imprisoning perpetrators of FGM. When are we going to bring justice for the British victims and have a serious deterrent for this abhorrent crime?

The Attorney General: I understand my hon. Friend's point entirely, and he will understand the frustration felt in the CPS and elsewhere at the fact that those cases

that have been brought to court have not resulted in conviction. He will recognise that every case is different and must be judged on its merits. As was said earlier, these cases are often difficult to prosecute. It is worth pointing out that we do not just respond to this behaviour by prosecution; there are also very important FGM prevention orders—civil orders that have criminal consequences if they are breached—and we have seen more than 200 of those since they were introduced in 2015.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The Attorney General speaks of prevention; he may know that my constituent, Lola Ilesanmi, is still threatened with deportation, and her daughter has been threatened with FGM at the hands of Lola's violent ex-partner if she returns to Nigeria. What is the Attorney General doing to work with the Home Secretary to prevent deportations, to prevent FGM and to prevent women and children from suffering from or being threatened by this abhorrent crime?

The Attorney General: I hope the hon. Lady will understand that I cannot comment on the individual case that she raises and its immigration consequences, but I can tell her that it is open to courts that are persuaded to implement a civil prevention order to make travel requirements part of that order. There is that safeguard, but I am afraid I cannot give her a clear answer in respect of her constituency case, which I know she will raise with the Home Office.

Defence Fire and Rescue Project: Capita

10.35 am

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the awarding of the defence fire and rescue contract to Capita.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am grateful for the opportunity to put on record the justification for the awarding of the contract. The defence fire and rescue project has been examining potential improvements in how fire and rescue services are provided to the Ministry of Defence, both here in the United Kingdom and overseas. The total value of defence fire and rescue operations is around £1.3 billion. We intend to award a 12-year contract worth around £400 million to Capita Business Services Ltd. However, this is open to possible challenges—the normal process ensues—following the issuing of the contract award decision notice and possible parliamentary challenges to the contingent liability.¹

The contract will deliver improvements in the safety of military and civilian firefighter personnel, and improvements in the equipment and training available to them. It will deliver savings that will be reinvested into the defence budget while sustaining our ability to support operations around the world and to support local authority fire services, should that be required at times of heightened national need. In doing so, it will ensure that our personnel, airfields and strategic assets worldwide continue to be protected from the risk of fire.

I assure Parliament that the proposed contractual arrangements have been subject to the fullest range of testing and scrutiny across Government to ensure that the services will be delivered in a sustainable and resilient manner. Safeguards are in place to ensure that there is no break in service provision. Capita is a strategic supplier to the Government, and the Cabinet Office maintains regular engagement with the company, as with all strategic suppliers.

Fire risk management will remain a defence responsibility after the award of the contract. In no circumstances will there be any compromise to our personnel's safety. Over the course of the bidding for the contract, Capita's financial status has been analysed by the MOD's cost-assurance and analysis service, and we have in place the necessary contingency plans to ensure that the contract is managed accordingly. We will actively manage the contract to provide early warning of any performance concerns so that they can be addressed thoroughly.

Following a competitive bidding process, Capita's bid was deemed to deliver the best technical solution and the best value for money for defence. Robust evaluation and modelling processes were undertaken to test the deliverability of the proposed contracts to ensure that all risks were identified. As well as the full assessment of the proposal, we have a contract that clearly defines the obligations for the contractor. A performance mechanism has been developed to make sure that Capita is incentivised to ensure that delivery targets are clearly defined.

I should be clear that this is not the first time that contractors have been used in this way—several sites, including Porton Down, are already using contractor fire service capability. In addition to offering significant financial savings that can be reinvested in defence, the

project aims for the delivery of sustainable and agile defence fire and rescue services that meet the requirement without compromise.

Fabian Hamilton: I am extremely grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I was very eager to hear the Minister's justification for awarding such a crucial contract for the defence fire and rescue service to Capita.

I think that we would all agree that it would be extremely worrying if a situation were to arise whereby this contract could not be delivered or was not delivered to the standard required. The risks, I am sure the Minister agrees, are simply too great for that to be allowed to happen.

The Minister's Department received advice as recently as 7 June that Capita represents a 10-out-of-10 risk, so how was the decision made to give the contract to Capita? The Minister has already touched on that. His Department has said that all its suppliers are

"subject to robust assessments ahead of any contract placement."

What consideration, if any, was given to the advice that the Ministry of Defence has received on the financial health of the company?

We know that Capita has a record of poor performance for delivering Ministry of Defence contracts. It was stripped of the defence estate contract, and the less said about its Army recruitment contract the better. In spite of that, the Government have knowingly chosen to give Capita another contract. What specific measures has the Department put in place to monitor the delivery of the contract and to take penalty action for poor performance, if necessary?

The Government's written statement told us that

"the contract duration is 12 years",

which is a considerable amount of time for a company associated with extremely high risk. The fire service is vital to the safety of our armed forces, to their families and to key defence assets. Will the Minister tell us what arrangements will be in place if Capita is unable to deliver the contract for its full duration?

A number of defence fire workers will be very worried indeed about this news. The significance of the workforce, and their role in protecting MOD staff and families, and the Department's infrastructure—both overseas and at home—cannot be overstated. What assurances can the Minister give us about the future of these workers and their pensions? What help will be provided for them if redundancies do occur?

Is it not time to accept that this Government's ideologically driven approach to outsourcing public services at any cost has simply failed? We must end the racket of outsourcing and deliver solutions that benefit taxpayers and service users alike.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. I appreciate his interest in, and concern about, these important matters. If I may, I will probably write to him in more detail, because he set out a series of questions, but I will give him an overview now to reassure him that the bidding process was absolutely robust.

I did go to some length in my opening remarks to reassure the hon. Gentleman that we were looking at a number of companies—Serco, Babcock and QinetiQ,

1. [Official Report, 25 June 2018, Vol. 643, c. 4MC.]

[Mr Ellwood]

as well as an in-house offering—to ensure that we have a robust system that meets our responsibility to eliminate any problem related to fire. The actual bid process itself was competitive. There was robust evaluation modelling—it involved not just the MOD, but the Treasury, the Cabinet Office and indeed the three services—to make sure that we have the necessary processes in place to manage what will be an umbrella organisation.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the way in which our fire service is conducted means that we have responsibility inside the wire. There is also civil capability, and RAF and naval personnel are cap badged to provide fire capability, too. We also lean occasionally, when required, on local authorities, and that relationship will continue, but overall control will come from Capita itself. Having said that, the actual responsibility will be managed by the Defence Fire Risk Management Organisation, which, as I have said, will continue to scrutinise the performance of Capita itself.

The hon. Gentleman is right to raise concerns about the workers themselves. Just under 600 civilian workers will be transferred across. I absolutely hope that this will not lead to any changes. If there are any, I hope that they will be done through redundancies. We are looking for investment in new machines, new technology, new capability and new safety measures, which will hopefully be welcomed by Members on both sides of the House.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Minister said that personnel would be safer; will he explain how?

Mr Ellwood: Short and to the point, as ever. As I just mentioned, there will be investment in new technology—we need investment in new fire service vehicles—as well as training methods, collaboration and response times so that we can respond to any fire at any time. These changes will make the work of the fire service personnel safer.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Scottish National party Members have always been very concerned that these vital services were ever thought appropriate for privatisation. Our added concern is that the protection of national and defence strategic assets has been given to a company with such a chequered past. Indeed, on the day of the announcement, Capita's chief executive was appearing before the Public Accounts Committee to answer questions about the company's poor delivery of services to the NHS. Will the Minister therefore explain why the Government felt the need to privatise these services, when not even the US Department of Defence does, and how a company with such obvious shortcomings could be considered the best option for delivering this contract?

Mr Ellwood: I can only repeat what I said earlier: there was a robust bidding process and it was deemed that Capita offered the greatest contract we could have. Concerns have been raised about Capita in other areas—recruitment, for example, has been mentioned—but I am convinced that the necessary scrutiny is in place to provide the best deal and the necessary support for our fire service.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the Minister say a bit more about the savings he talked about being reinvested in defence, which I am sure most of us in the House would be very glad to see?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for that question, although it almost tempts me down a rabbit hole that I have occasionally gone down before. While I support the increase in the budget for the health service, I must reiterate that the UK's defence posture is such that we must invest in our armed forces as well. Having said that, there is an obligation—a requirement; a duty—on the armed forces and the MOD to make efficiencies and savings, without affecting risk, and this is one area where we can do that and reinvest the savings in defence.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): We have had 12 years of debate about what should happen to the contract—12 years of uncertainty for the workforce—and now we have a 12-year contract. It seems to me and the unions that key parts of the work currently delivered by the defence fire and rescue service, such as the checking of fire extinguishers on site, are not included in the contract. Capita does nothing for nothing, so this will not save money. What is the Minister doing to ensure this provides value for money?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady follows these issues very closely, and I pay tribute to her for her interest and expertise in this matter, which the House greatly appreciates. I agree that, for various reasons, this has taken too long. The contract process was run in accordance with the Defence and Security Public Contracts Regulations 2011, but it has taken too long for various reasons, some of which I have covered, including the number of stakeholders that had to scrutinise and agree the bidding process, and confirm the successful bidder. I take her point on board, however, and we will make sure as we do the evaluation that her concerns are met.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I welcome the fact that safeguards are in place and that the delivery of the contract will be monitored. Will the Minister reconfirm that the contract represents value for money and will also result in improvements and savings to the Department?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point. This is not just about savings; it is about the responsibilities of our defence fire service, which not only has the duty of looking after our airfields, ports, ships and bases, but has the responsibility of being on standby to help its civilian counterparts in extreme cases. It is important that we can invest in the necessary high-tech machinery and fire service capability. That is what will lead to savings in the long term.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Prospect, the union that represents staff in the MOD fire and rescue service, including in Devonport in my constituency, has said that any projected savings cannot be delivered without increasing the risk to defence. Will the Minister respond to that concern?

Mr Ellwood: I would need more detail even to respond to that very broad statement. The analysis done in the MOD, and the analysis that has been done by the Treasury and the Cabinet, says exactly the opposite. As

always, I am happy to discuss the hon. Gentleman's concerns for Devonport; he did not mention Plymouth this time.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Can the Minister provide some assurances about fair terms towards subcontractors? BST Electrical in my constituency fell victim to the Carillion scandal because of Carillion's obscene 120-day payment terms. Will the Minister assure me that that sort of invidious practice will not continue under Capita?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend's question gives me licence to confirm that the shadow of Carillion hangs heavy over all Government Departments, if we are fair. Any new contract—with Capita or anyone else—needs to be sufficiently robust that we do not fall foul of some of the problems that Carillion experienced, including through its relationship with small and medium-sized enterprises, which my hon. Friend mentions.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): There is a case for outsourcing when the company has specialist expertise. What specialist expertise does Capita have in military fire services? Does the Minister think that it is now time for freedom of information legislation to apply to companies that are, in effect, doing public sector work, so that we can know, for instance, what contingency plans there might be in case Capita goes belly up?

Mr Ellwood: May I welcome the fact that the right hon. Gentleman's party—if he is speaking on its behalf—recognises the importance of the private sector in such cases? However, as the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) said, this should not apply at any cost or under any circumstances. A series of Governments—not just Conservative or coalition, but also Labour—have outsourced responsibility for firefighting from the armed forces over the past few decades, so it is very important that the necessary robust processes are in place to ensure that these contracts are met. We have around 60 contracts with Capita. Its responsibility is not to run the day-to-day things. Many people providing the fire service capability will continue on. This is about the management and organisation that Capita brings.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many alternative bids were there, and was Capita's bid the cheapest?

Mr Ellwood: Capita's bid was the best. Three other organisations also bid.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Given the fact that this company has earned the highest risk rating of 10 out of 10 and, worryingly, a health score of three out of 100, how will the Minister convince the House that this is not a case of penny wise and pound foolish at the expense of our defence fire and rescue service?

Mr Ellwood: As I said in my opening remarks, there was a very robust bidding process, which was scrutinised by a number of Departments. It does not just stop there. We do not simply slide the contract across and call it a day. We will continue to scrutinise the process, and any issues will be raised. I hope that the hon. Gentleman's concerns will be met.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing multiple times but expecting different results. I think that this may be the case given the absolute failure in Army recruitment, whereby Capita has not met the already woeful threshold of 82,000. What is the Minister doing to grip that issue before rewarding failure again with this fire service contract?

Mr Ellwood: We are wandering into a very different subject, which is related to this matter only because of the company involved. The challenge that we have with recruitment is that the gene pool of people from which we are recruiting is of a particular age group and a particular level of fitness. In this day and age, that is a very competitive environment; it is not just Capita that is going out and doing recruitment. Capita works very closely with all three services. But, yes, it is a tough environment—I do not doubt that—and we need to do more to attract the brightest and best to be in the most professional armed force in the world.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Given Capita's highest risk rating, will the Minister please give us a full list of the MOD's Capita contracts?

Mr Ellwood: I will write to the hon. Gentleman with more information on that matter.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): A constituent of mine, Mr Rob Rigby, is the national secretary of the Unite branch representing these workers, and I can assure the Minister that the workers are not particularly happy about this announcement. If the contract is going to be such a success, why is the Minister excluding all the bases in Cyprus?

Mr Ellwood: I did not quite hear the end the hon. Gentleman's question. I think it was to do with the agreement in Cyprus; is that correct?

Gareth Snell: I asked the Minister why he was excluding the bases in Cyprus.

Mr Ellwood: Particular terms and conditions will apply to our overseas bases, and there will be contracts in place. I think that nine airfields are already running under privatised contracts, so the question mark over a particular airfield may be subject to existing arrangements.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I try again with the Minister? I do not understand how a company that scores 10 out of 10 for risk in an internal document produced by the MOD can be awarded a contract.

Mr Ellwood: In the bid that was put forward, the expectation that is made here is for managing our fire risk capability, and it is in those circumstances that Capita is being judged. We do not step back and take a look at the numbers and the bits and pieces in other areas; it is particularly for this aspect of it. The concern that the hon. Lady raises must be taken into account by ensuring that there is robust scrutiny of the effectiveness of the contract as it ensues, and I will be happy to come back to the House to report on the success or otherwise of the contract with Capita. I give her that guarantee.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The workforce undertake a complicated pattern of working through their shift arrangements. Will the Minister guarantee that that will not fundamentally change? Many of the workforce travel long distances to work and are on site for days on end. Will he guarantee that that will continue?

Mr Ellwood: I hope that I speak on behalf of the whole House in paying tribute to the incredible bravery, commitment and determination of all our emergency services. There are specific harmony guidelines in place to ensure that they are able to meet their requirements, see their families and do their duties, and I am sure that they will be continued under this new contract.

Business of the House

10.56 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will be:

MONDAY 25 JUNE—Debate on a motion relating to a national policy statement on airports.

TUESDAY 26 JUNE—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft European Union (Definition of Treaties) (Canada Trade Agreement) Order 2018 followed by motion to approve European documents relating to EU trade agreements: EU-Japan economic partnership agreement followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill followed by remaining stages of the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 27 JUNE—Second Reading of the Offensive Weapons Bill.

THURSDAY 28 JUNE—Debate on a motion on improving air quality followed by debate on a motion on the role and effectiveness of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 29 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 2 July will include:

MONDAY 2 JULY—Estimates day (day 1). There will be a debate on estimates relating to the Ministry of Justice, Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

TUESDAY 3 JULY—Estimates day (day 2). There will be a debate on estimates relating to the Department for Education and Her Majesty's Treasury that relate to grants to the devolved institutions.

At 7 pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

WEDNESDAY 4 JULY—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill followed by remaining stages of the Ivory Bill.

THURSDAY 5 JULY—General debate on the principle of proxy voting followed by business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 6 JULY—Private Members' Bills.

I was delighted to launch EqualiTeas this week in Parliament, celebrating 100 years of some women getting the vote. I wish the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and all those taking part in the Great Exhibition of the North all the best for a successful 80 days of amazing exhibitions, artwork and live performances. As we approach the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush on 22 June, we reflect on the huge contribution made by the Windrush generation to rebuilding the country following the war. Finally, I am sure the whole House will welcome the introduction of the Voyeurism (Offences) (No. 2) Bill this afternoon. I should like to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for her excellent work on this matter.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I note that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is away on Committee business and I welcome the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) to these proceedings.

I am pleased that we have the business for the next two weeks. It is very interesting and very important, but there must be some mistake; I am sure that the Leader of the House will notice that there is a mistake. On 5 July, it is Back-Bench business.

The Secretary of State for Health wears the badges to remind everyone that he is the Secretary of State for Health. The Government make a big announcement just before the Brexit vote and then they do not schedule a debate on the 70th anniversary, celebrating 70 years of the NHS. I wonder whether that is because it was a Labour Government who innovated the NHS, a Labour Government who enacted it, and there have been record levels of investment by Labour Governments since 1997—nothing from the Government. There is no Brexit dividend because the Minister confirmed yesterday that the money will come from taxes. Does the Leader of the House agree with the Minister? Will she schedule a debate in Government time to congratulate the NHS because the shadow Health Secretary has many unanswered questions following the statement?

The Government criticise, as the Prime Minister did yesterday, the health service in Labour Wales, yet since 2010 they have cut back the block grant and reduced the capital grant by 10% and the revenue grant by 6%. They are also thwarting economic growth by stalling on a decision on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. When will the Government make a statement on the decision on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon?

I note and welcome the Government's move, under Standing Orders 57 and 9(6), to present the Voyeurism (Offences) (No. 2) Bill and introduce the Second Reading of the Bill—there is a business of the House motion at the end of the day—but can the Leader of the House confirm that the Bill will have all its stages before the start of the festival season? My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) has asked that question. With regard to the Edinburgh festival, I hope that the Bill will apply to everyone—men, including men in kilts, and women. It is good to see that the Government are using Standing Orders, but it is a pity that they have not applied that to money resolutions on private Members' Bills.

Despite the written statement by the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, hon. Members wanted to include the “meaningful vote” in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, because it appears that the Government are flouting conventions; they are changing the convention on Committees of the House. They gave themselves a majority on the Selection Committee, even though, by convention, they should not have a majority without an overall majority in the House.

Yesterday, I was standing right next to my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) when he asked, as late as 3 pm, whether the Government were nodding through. He was told that the Government were not, which resulted in hon. Members being forced to attend to vote when they were sick. I gave evidence to the Procedure Committee mentioning this process and its members nodded in agreement, as this is a convention that is based on trust. It seems that the Government do not trust Members on their own side and told them to be here. All the trust and conventions that enable us to carry out our work here appear to have broken down. I thank the Doorkeepers, who, when I asked for a wheelchair, found one and delivered it in time for my hon. Friend

the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) to vote. Can the Leader of the House ensure, through discussions with the usual channels, that the nodding through process will continue to be the convention in the House and that Government Whips cannot break it at their whim?

This Government appear to lack moral authority. They have lost their place in the world as a moral force. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) asked the Prime Minister: what does it take to withdraw the invitation to the President of the United States, whose policy is to separate children from their parents and make them sleep under foil? The Prime Minister could have telephoned the President and told him that this is barbaric and inhumane. This country was one of the founding framers of the European convention on human rights and the League of Nations and the birthplace of Mary Wollstonecraft, Tom Paine and others. The policy may have changed, but can the Leader of the House ask the Prime Minister, on behalf of the citizens of the United Kingdom, to tell the President that that was not and never will be acceptable?

Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary on behalf of four-year-old Gabriella Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who had her birthday last week and has been separated from her mother, when we will see the release of Nazanin? Today marks 810 days of her imprisonment on spurious charges.

Finally, I want to send Heidi Alexander all good wishes for her new post. She will use her talents in Mayor Khan's office, and we welcome the talents of her successor. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who was the candidate support, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) will continue her parents' tradition of brilliantly serving our country.

Andrea Leadsom: First, I share the hon. Lady's excitement on behalf of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is at the highland games. I said to him yesterday that I was a bit suspicious he might be nursing a hangover from attending the Rolling Stones concert on Tuesday night, which I was pleased to also be at; we had that in common. He told me that he was in the backing group for the Rolling Stones once—absolute respect; that is amazing. I hope he has a great time at the games, and I welcome the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) to his place.

The hon. Lady asked about the NHS and made some claims. I am sure she will be delighted to welcome the announcement of a growth in health funding of 3.4% on average each year, taking it up to £20.5 billion per year by 2023. That is superb news for the NHS.

In terms of the Brexit dividend, at the moment, the United Kingdom gives between £8 billion and £10 billion each year to the European Union that we do not get back in either a rebate or payment for things such as farming or structural funds. When we leave the EU, we will not be making those net contributions of £8 billion to £10 billion each year, so the truth is that there will be money available for other priorities. The Opposition can say, “Well, that's all spent because of what happens to the economy,” but that is for another day. What happens to the economy is business as usual. The fact is that money currently paid to the EU will not be in the future.

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

The hon. Lady asked about Swansea bay. We want to ensure that the UK has a diverse, secure and affordable energy mix for not just the next few years but generations to come. She will be aware that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy continues to consider value for money with the Welsh devolved Administration and will make an announcement soon on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon.

The hon. Lady asked about the withdrawal Bill and suggested that there is some kind of confusion over what has been agreed. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union outlined in his letter to the Chair of the Procedure Committee:

“Under the Standing Orders of the House of Commons it will be for the Speaker to determine whether a motion when it is introduced by the Government under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is or is not in fact cast in neutral terms and hence whether the motion is or is not amendable.”

I hope that that clarifies it.

The hon. Lady asked about nodding through. She is right that the convention is for Members to be nodded through when there is reasonable notice and serious illness. I was particularly sorry to see that the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) was forced to come and vote here while she was unwell, but the fact that she had to come all the way from Bradford when she was so unwell is clearly a matter for her party. It is simply not right to accuse the Government of putting her in that position when the first notice the Government were given was just before midday. Her party should have sorted out an arrangement in much better time. I am not personally privy to those discussions, but communication clearly needs to improve, and that should be resolved privately.

The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) talked about moral authority and the issue of separating children—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. We cannot have side discussions. There is clearly considerable unhappiness about the matter, but it cannot be resolved now, and the Leader of the House should be able to proceed with her answers.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The hon. Member for Walsall South raised the serious point about children being separated from their parents, and she is right to do so. It is appalling and absolutely wrong, and I was certainly relieved to see the Executive order signed yesterday by the President of the United States. However, we must not mix that up with the importance of the relationship we have with the United States, one of our key strategic relationships. It is important that we continue to deal with the office of the presidency of the United States, regardless of what our views are on particular decisions.

The hon. Lady mentioned Gabriella Zaghari-Ratcliffe's fourth birthday. I absolutely agree that it is appalling that this poor child continues to be separated from her mother. I absolutely assure the hon. Lady that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary does everything he can to continue to raise this matter and to plead for the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is a delusion of Whiggish modernists that they know the worst of mankind has been consigned to the past. Cicero said, “Know thyself,” and in our time in this place, some local authorities are holding what have been dubbed “Dickensian” paupers’ funerals. The relatives of the deceased are banned from them. They are even prohibited from receiving their loved ones’ remains. Will the Leader of the House ask a Minister to come to make an urgent statement confirming that statutory guidance will be issued assuring that all those who grieve are treated with decency and dignity? You know, Mr Speaker, that when Mozart died, his body was cast into a mass paupers’ grave. If his work was the rhythm of heaven, these paupers’ funerals are now the rhyme of hell.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a very serious issue. He will be aware that every local authority in the UK has a statutory duty to make arrangements for these so-called paupers’ funerals, when a person has died in circumstances where the family cannot be traced or when no funeral arrangements have been made for that person. He is right to point out that these are no frills funerals and there are limitations to the involvement of families, unless the families get involved in arranging, for example, for a religious minister or a civil celebrant to be present at the funeral. I encourage my right hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can ask Ministers directly about what more could be done.

Mr Speaker: I think the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) will get such a debate. As the Leader of the House says, he has raised an extremely serious matter, but it is no bad thing that he has done so, characteristically, with the eloquence of Cicero.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is at the royal highland show, a large gathering full of braying animal noises and dubious atmospheric conditions—he is missing the House of Commons already.

I should say that SNP Members fully support the voyeurism Bill, but upskirting and, indeed, upkiltling has already been outlawed by the Scottish Parliament, so I do not know how much we will be able to participate in the proceedings if they fall under the English votes for English laws procedure.

The participation of Scottish Members in legislation has been a bit of a hot topic. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill has completed its parliamentary stages in the face of the Scottish Parliament's refusal to grant a legislative consent motion. Will the Leader of the House confirm what the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Minister for the Cabinet Office have not confirmed, which is that the Bill will not be sent for Royal Assent until agreement has been reached with the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament, because those are the terms of the Sewel convention? If she cannot do so, will she tell us when the Privy Council will be meeting to grant Royal Assent, because my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the Leader of the SNP Members, may like to attend those proceedings?

We are grateful to have notice of two weeks of business—it is a refreshing change—but I notice that no Opposition day is scheduled during the next fortnight. Given that the last SNP Opposition day was in November, I think the third party in this House is a bit overdue another one.

In that context, will the Leader of the House tell us whether the Government policy on voting on Opposition days has changed again? We went through the Lobbies twice on Tuesday, after months of Government abstention, and I do not know why the Opposition parties should have to find arcane parliamentary procedures simply to force the Government into the Lobby. If they disagree with a motion, they should have the guts to put it to the House.

Finally on Divisions, surely it is time for change. The sight of seriously ill Members being pushed through and of heavily pregnant Members being forced through the Lobbies is totally unedifying to this place. The usual channels, nodding through and so on simply will not cut it any more. As I said to the Leader of the House last week, it is simply not safe, and it is time for change, so when will we have a proper review of the voting procedures?

Andrea Leadsom: I welcome the hon. Gentleman who is replacing the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire. First—the hon. Member for Walsall South asked me about this but I did not answer—the Voyeurism (Offences) Bill will, of course, include upkilling. That might not be a matter for the hon. Gentleman in Scotland, but it will be in England in future.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Sewel convention, and he will be aware that the Government have followed the spirit and letter of the devolution settlement at every stage of the process. The Sewel convention states that the UK Parliament will not normally legislate in areas of devolved competence without the consent of the Scottish Parliament, and perhaps the hon. Gentleman should look again at the statement by the Scottish Minister for UK Negotiations on Scotland's Place in Europe, who said that these are “not normal times”. The Government continue to seek to collaborate with the devolved Administration, but it is important that no nation of the United Kingdom can be allowed to have a veto, thereby undermining the UK single market, which is worth £46 billion to the Scottish economy.

The hon. Gentleman asked about an Opposition day for the Scottish National party, and that will be considered and announced through the usual channels. He asked also about the policy on votes on Opposition days, but, as he is aware, I have been clear that there is no policy for such votes. If there is a decision by the House to support a motion but the Government decide not to vote, they will come forward with a statement within 12 weeks to set out clearly how they intend to address the issues that were raised and agreed on by the House. There will be a clear response whether or not the Government vote, and in the meantime the Government continue to take part fully in every Opposition day debate.

The hon. Gentleman asked about electronic voting. He will be aware that that is a matter for the House. Procedures are reviewed on an ongoing basis, but that issue is not something the House is currently considering. On issues of pregnancy and nodding through MPs, I

tabled a debate on proxy voting for 5 July because I believe it is vital that new parents have the opportunity to form that secure early bond with their babies, and we must facilitate that. All Members should have the opportunity to discuss and debate how we do that, and to give their views. Let me be clear that all those who are currently pregnant and imminently expecting babies have been offered a pair. That has been committed to, and will continue to be available.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Everyone should have a roof over their head, and the Government are tackling homelessness with a range of measures. Last week Wiltshire was awarded an additional £312,000 to tackle the issue. May we have a statement in the House to summarise the range of measures that this Government are taking to tackle homelessness?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. No one should ever have to sleep rough, and the Government are taking significant action. We are working to halve rough sleeping by 2022, and to end it completely by 2027. Some new measures include a £30 million fund for 2018-19, targeted at those local authorities that have high numbers of people sleeping rough. More than £600 million is available for use by local government to prevent homelessness, instead of just responding to it. Our new rough sleeping team is made up of homelessness experts who can provide ideas on what more can be done, and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 takes a completely different approach to trying to eliminate this appalling problem.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the Regulator of Social Housing's regulatory notice that was issued yesterday to Knowsley Housing Trust, highlighting its failure to keep fire safety information up to date, thereby putting tenants at risk? Such a debate would give me the opportunity to urge those in senior executive and board positions in that organisation to take responsibility for their part in those failures, and to consider their positions.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise that concerning issue. I had the great pleasure of campaigning for the seat of Knowsley South back in 2005, and I well remember some of the housing in Knowsley that could be liable to the risk of fire if not properly protected. He will know that the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 applies to all non-domestic premises and to those areas used in common in multi-occupied residential buildings. Under that order, the responsible person must undertake, and regularly review, the fire risk assessment and put in place adequate and appropriate fire precautions.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): May we please have a debate about how councils deal with Travellers? This week, we have had an enormous invasion in Taunton, which affects my constituency because it is a joint council, at a company called Summerfield. They mucked up the park and ride in another part of the town and have now set up home in the council's old headquarters, which is costing £11 million to refurbish. We must have a debate on this situation, which is getting worse across councils. May we have time to discuss this thorny issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I am aware that many hon. and right hon. Members frequently raise the problem of Travellers. My hon. Friend will be aware that we recently had a debate on this very problematic area. The Government are looking at whether there is in fact a weakness in the regulation or whether more could be done to enforce what are already very strong rules around Travellers.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I was disappointed with what the Leader of the House said about the nodding through problem yesterday, because it did not marry with my understanding of the facts of the situation in terms of how I was supporting my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah). I am, however, pleased that the right hon. Lady announced a debate on proxy voting on 5 July. Will it include consideration of the Procedure Committee's report on this issue? If not, why not? While considering the Procedure Committee's work, she might look back at the report on private Members' Bills, which, had it been accepted, would have prevented the fracas around upskirting on Friday.

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that it is vital that we enable new parents to spend the critical early periods of time with their new baby. I am absolutely supportive of that. In response to the hon. Gentleman's specific question, yes the debate is deliberately timed. As he will recall, I asked the Procedure Committee last November to look into proxy voting. I was delighted with the Committee's work in producing a report. My Government response to it is due on 15 July. I wanted to have that general debate, so that the constitutional implications of proxy voting, as opposed to other forms of formalised pairing, for example, and who should operate proxy voting if it were to be introduced and so on, can be properly aired in this place before I give a considered response to the work of the Procedure Committee, for which I am very grateful.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My right hon. Friend has already rightly mentioned the importance of the early bond between parents and babies. Unfortunately, in Staffordshire we are seeing a reduction in the number of health visitors, who are absolutely key to that. I know that the county council and the NHS have been working hard to try to resolve this, but does the Leader of the House agree it is important that we have a debate on how vital health visitors are to assist parents and work with them as they create that bond with their children?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. We must do everything we can to support those critical early days. I am delighted that the Department of Health and Social Care is committed to providing continuity of carer, through a continued midwifery team that the mother and father-to-be get to know during the course of the pregnancy, and committed to training many more midwives with mental health qualifications to support vulnerable parents. He is right to raise the issue of health visitors, who provide such invaluable support in the early days. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate, so he can raise the issue directly with Ministers.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and, in particular, for her good wishes for the Great Exhibition of the

North, the 80-day festival celebrating the whole of the north of England and all it has to offer. The launch event is tomorrow evening and I will be attending, if I am spared that long.

A significant number of Back Benchers are waiting with applications for debates in this House through the Backbench Business Committee. I very much welcome the general debate on proxy voting on 5 July and the half-day of Backbench Business on that day, but I hope the Leader of the House can find a way of securing 12 and 19 July for the Backbench Business Committee. The anniversary debate for the tobacco control plan will take place on 19 July if we are allocated that time. Lastly, I note with interest that the Leader of the House attended the Rolling Stones concert on Tuesday evening. I hope it is not the last time and that she got some satisfaction.

Andrea Leadsom: Watching Mick Jagger doing "Jumpin' Jack Flash" was pretty impressive actually—I was thinking that I am not sure I would even remember the words, let alone how to jump around on stage like that. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his bids for Back-Bench time. Of course, they will always be very carefully considered, and we always do seek to give Back-Bench time in response to reasonable requests. I am sure that he will be spared and wish him the most successful Great Exhibition of the North; I hope he sincerely enjoys it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is clearly excellent news that the NHS is going to get additional funding, but can I urge my right hon. Friend to stage a debate in Government time so that we can explore not only what the priorities will be for the national health service, but how savings can be made by using such opportunities as International Yoga Day, which is today? I remind colleagues that there are sessions in Victoria Tower Gardens at 2 o'clock, and at 4 o'clock and 6 o'clock in Committee Room 14, to celebrate.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend does a good job of promoting his own events, as I am sure you would agree, Mr Speaker. He will be aware that the House has had a number of recent opportunities to debate matters relating to health, including an Opposition day just before the recess. We have had very good Westminster Hall debates on the 70th anniversary of the NHS and on raising standards of infection prevention and control. We have Health and Social Care questions next week, and I encourage him to ask Ministers directly then what can be done so that all Members can discuss what the health priorities should be as we approach the 70th anniversary.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for finally scheduling the debate on the Government's serious violence strategy. How will she ensure that the Government keep the House updated on how the strategy is progressing?

Andrea Leadsom: Again, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, because she has played an enormous part and made a huge contribution to the Government's work on the serious violence strategy. She will be aware that we will be bringing forward the Offensive Weapons Bill, which will seek to make it even more difficult for people to access things such as knives and corrosive substances. That will be a very important part of this, but specifically on the serious violence strategy, there will continue to

be regular meetings of Ministers, different community groups and the police, and I am sure that Ministers will come to this place to keep the House updated on the progress against their targets.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Nicki Regan and Ashleigh McArthur of Zoo Hair & Beauty in Stirling on being named Britain's bridal make-up specialists of the year? Zoo Hair & Beauty is a small business success story. May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of the enterprise economy, and specifically on small and medium-sized businesses such as that of my award-winning constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating his constituents at Zoo Hair & Beauty. What a fantastic tribute. I am sure that all of us love a good wedding and we will all be queuing up, if we know of anyone, to seize their services. I am absolutely delighted on their behalf.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate, to be led by the Treasury, on the mythical Brexit dividend? This would enable the Chancellor to set out in clear and simple words, for the benefit of serial offenders such as the Foreign Secretary, why any Brexit dividend has been more than washed away by the ongoing payments that are going to be made to the EU and a slowdown in the UK economy, and that any increase in NHS investment will come from tax increases and not the so-called Brexit dividend.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is a bit of an Eeyore on this subject, is he not? Let us be honest. He asks for a Treasury Minister to come and set out what is happening to the economy. He will no doubt be delighted to know that employment is at a record high, real wages are up, the OECD has upgraded growth forecasts for this year and next, and a business survey shows that we remain the No. 1 destination for foreign direct investment in Europe. He will also no doubt be delighted to know that our day-to-day spending is in surplus for the first time in 16 years, and our net borrowing is at its lowest for over a decade. As for his point about the Brexit dividend, I am sure that his maths is good enough for him to work out that when you stop paying between £8 billion and £10 billion net for something, that money is then available to you. He may choose to say that it will all be eaten up by a slowdown in the economy, but that, if I may say so, is his crystal ball gazing.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware that today is the summer solstice, but she may not be aware that it also marks the end of the great British asparagus festival, held largely in my constituency. Does she agree that the best asparagus in the world comes from the Vale of Evesham—it even has EU protected status—and may we have a debate in Government time to celebrate great British farming and great British food produce?

Andrea Leadsom: I can certainly agree with my hon. Friend that he thinks that asparagus grown in the Vale of Evesham is the best in the world. Perhaps I can leave

it there, so as not to offend any other Members. I absolutely join him in applauding the superb British food produce and great British farming. No doubt he looks forward, as I do, to the introduction of the agriculture Bill later in the Session.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): One of my constituents paid to park, but mistakenly gave the wrong car registration number. Excel Parking refused to accept his reasonable explanation. That is bad practice on the part of Excel and its director, Simon Renshaw-Smith. May we have a Government statement about it, and action by the Driver Vehicle Licensing Agency to deal with this modern-day Artful Dodger?

Andrea Leadsom: I think we can all give examples of constituents who have been treated very badly after making genuine errors, and I am very sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman's constituent's problem. Transport questions will take place on 5 July, and he may wish to raise his specific point then to see what more can be done by Ministers to ensure that companies are fair to those who make genuine mistakes.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Maternity services at the Horton hospital and Chipping Norton are of paramount importance to my constituents in west Oxfordshire. May we have a Government statement on future services, so that my constituents can be assured of their bright future?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure my hon. Friend will welcome the news of the Prime Minister's commitment to increase funds for the NHS by £20.5 billion a year in real terms by 2023-24. I know that he cares deeply about services at the Horton and in the wider Oxfordshire area, as indeed do I and my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has recently reviewed the concerns raised by Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and has asked the NHS locally to work with stakeholders—including us as local MPs—to address them.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Leader of the House said that an announcement about the Swansea bay tidal lagoon would be made "soon", which I do not think is good enough for the thousands of manufacturing and highly skilled technical jobs across south Wales and the west country. Moreover, renewable energy is the energy of the future: it will power our future manufacturing industries. May we have a debate in Government time about the renewable energy industry?

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Lady will know, we are ensuring that the UK has a diverse, secure and affordable energy mix. We are looking carefully at the potential to harness the UK's natural resources to make our energy mix sustainable and affordable for the future. Through competition and innovation, the leadership that we have shown has resulted in dramatic reductions in the cost of renewable energy projects. Over the last two years, for example, the cost of offshore wind has halved, which means that we can secure a larger amount of electricity generation for every pound of bill payers' money. That is absolutely essential. The UK is doing incredibly well in renewables, in both European and world terms.

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

As I have said, Ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy continue to look at the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project with Welsh devolved Administration Ministers, and they will come forward as soon as they can.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The menopause is a natural stage of life that affects every woman, and also every man who lives or works with a woman, but I have not heard it talked about in this place since I have been a Member. May we have a debate on this extremely important issue? More specifically, how can we encourage clinical commissioning groups to implement the important guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, so that every woman can have the treatment that she needs to enjoy this stage of her life?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important and valid point. I was interested to hear yesterday of a report that found that in our 50s we enter perhaps the most happy time of our life, which those suffering under menopause might challenge. I encourage my hon. Friend to raise this at a future Equalities questions, and ask Ministers if something on it could be forthcoming for this Chamber.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Countries including Israel and Spain have relatively recently introduced legislation to prohibit organ tourism in China in response to persistent and credible reports of systematic state-sanctioned organ harvesting from non-consenting prisoners of conscience in the People's Republic of China, including Falun Gong practitioners and other religious and ethnic minority groups. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate or statement on this important matter?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a horrific issue by which I am sure all hon. Members will be appalled. I encourage him to raise it at Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs questions next Tuesday, when he can ask Ministers what the UK can do to try to put a stop to this appalling practice.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The Mandarin Oriental hotel and the Glasgow School of Art both recently suffered devastating fires while undergoing renovation. Will my right hon. Friend consider making a statement about what lessons have been learned from that, so that when hon. Members move out of here, that is not the moment when this place goes up in smoke?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and he will be aware that in this place not only are we looking very carefully at the programme for the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster, but we are also looking on a daily basis at the current health and safety risks, including fire risks, and strong steps are being taken now by the House authorities to minimise the risk of fire. I had a recent exchange of letters with the chief executive of the House which I placed in the Library, but my hon. Friend is right to raise this point and I will certainly consider it further.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to previous questions, the reality is that ending nodding through was done unilaterally with no notice whatsoever.

As the nearest thing that the parliamentary Labour party has to a shop steward, I must tell the Government that they will be putting people's lives and health at risk if this system continues.

Andrea Leadsom: The convention is for Members to be nodded through when there is reasonable notice and where there is serious illness. Yesterday at 11.55 am Labour asked for six Members to be nodded through. The Government made efforts to make what arrangements they could in that short time provided. As the hon. Gentleman will know, this is a usual channels matter for my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip and the Opposition Chief Whip.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Several constituents have recently come to me to request help with reconsiderations and appeals of Department for Work and Pensions decisions to stop their benefits. Many of these constituents have trouble filling out the forms because of learning disabilities. When may we have a debate specifically about the accessibility and appropriateness of DWP appeal procedures?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a serious point relating to her constituents, and she might wish to raise it directly with Ministers at the statement to follow on universal credit.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Dorset and Somerset are now reorganising their local government, which in the south-west leaves Gloucestershire and Devon as the only authorities yet to undergo reform towards becoming unitary authorities. Will the Leader of the House ask the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to instigate a debate so we can see how we can follow suit in Gloucestershire, let alone Devon?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We have sought to ensure that local communities make these decisions for themselves, but I encourage him to take this up directly with HCLG Ministers so that he can be advised by them on what steps he can take.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Leader of the House has this morning confirmed that the Government will lay their version of my Voyeurism (Offences) Bill before Parliament. I thank the Government for moving as swiftly as they have this week and hope we will now secure this uncontroversial but essential change in the law. I thank everybody for the cross-party support this matter has received. I hope the House will later today unanimously support the Government's motion to continue our important work on Second Reading. The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) has asked this question but it was unanswered, so I will ask it again: can the Leader of the House confirm the timetable for Second Reading, Committee and remaining stages in the Commons of the Bill, and will she do everything she can to ensure that the Bill progresses with the full support of both Houses?

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady on behalf of the whole House for her assiduous work. She will realise that the Bill has cross-House support, and the

Government were pleased to bring it forward in Government time as urgently as possible. As for her specific question, I will write to her with an indication of when we expect the Bill to achieve all its stages.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I draw the Leader of the House's attention to my early-day motion 1401.

[That this House congratulates the Year 6 students of South Hetton Primary School for using their Go Givers class project to create a PPP Campaign to raise the issue of period problems and poverty; commends the Year 6 students at that school for collecting donations of sanitary items to create pants packs to help women and girls who are homeless or in poverty to meet their sanitary needs; also thanks the local community for donating to the campaign that will continue until the end of the summer term; believes access to sanitary products is a basic human right and welcomes the initiatives in Scotland and Wales to provide free sanitary products to low income families; and calls on the Government to adopt a similar initiative for England to end period poverty in the UK.]

Does the Leader of the House agree that the Government should be doing more to address period poverty? Will she join me in commending the work of year 6 staff and students at South Hetton Primary School in my constituency and their efforts at raising awareness of the issue by creating "pants packs" to help families who are unable to afford proper sanitary products?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising an issue that does not often get mentioned in the Chamber. It is vital that all girls and young women are able to provide themselves with proper sanitary protection, and being unable to deal with menstruation is humiliating for a young person. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate to ask Ministers directly what more we can do to ensure that no girl or young woman needs to suffer the absolute embarrassment of being unable to afford sanitary protection.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My two young constituents Somer and Areeb Bakhsh are 15 and 13 years old respectively, and I was delighted to present them with academic excellence awards at Springburn Academy just a couple of weeks ago. Unfortunately, they face deportation to Pakistan because their family's asylum application was rejected on the basis that they are a Christian family and would not face persecution in Pakistan, despite clear death threats being made to them. Will the Leader of the House call for a statement from the Immigration Minister on the threats facing religious minorities in Pakistan?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important constituency matter, and I congratulate his two young constituents on their academic excellence awards. On his specific point about the threat of deportation, I encourage him to communicate directly with Home Office Ministers, who will be able to look into it for him.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): One of my constituents recently had a visa refused. They sent all the supporting documentation to UK Visas and Immigration, which looked at it and replied to say that my constituent had sent only one payslip, yet the reply included all the payslips that my constituent had sent in.

That is not an isolated incident. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Minister responsible for UKVI makes a statement to the House on these screw-ups and how they can be avoided?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises another important constituency point. There can be no excuse for administrative errors that cause people real problems. She will be aware that the Immigration Minister will be here later today for a statement, so she may want to raise that point directly with her, or if she wants to write to me, I can take it up with the Minister on her behalf.

Mr Speaker: I can only assume that "screw-up" is a technical term that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) has devised to describe the situation that displeases her.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): My constituent Yaser has been living, working and training as a GP in south Manchester for nine years, but he has been told that no local surgery can afford to sponsor his visa renewal application. As a result, he will be forced to go back to Canada in August instead of serving the community in which he was trained. May we have a debate on what more we can do to support GP surgeries in recruiting much-needed doctors from abroad?

Andrea Leadsom: We are all incredibly grateful to those who come here from other countries to work in our health service and provide us with so much support. The hon. Gentleman raises another important Home Office issue, so I encourage him to raise it with the Immigration Minister during the statement later today, or if he wants to write to me, I can take up the matter on his behalf.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Scotland's Bravest Manufacturing Company, located on the site of Erskine Hospital in my constituency, is a social enterprise that proudly provides employment opportunities for veterans. The Scottish Government's veterans fund has provided substantial financial backing, allowing it to recruit more former servicemen and women. Can we have a debate on employment opportunities open to ex-service personnel and on the struggles many face in attempting to secure employment?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We all know that life can often be quite difficult for veterans of our armed forces, and we know homelessness and a lot of other problems can ensue. I commend his constituency's social mission to try to improve the work prospects for veterans. I recommend that he seeks an Adjournment debate to raise directly with Ministers what more can be done to provide for our armed forces personnel as they leave the services.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Antisocial behaviour is the top issue in my constituency, and it is one I have raised with the Leader of the House on a number of occasions. Today BBC Radio Humberside is running a story about the aggressive begging, shoplifting, drug taking and drunkenness on Newland Avenue in my constituency. With a background of cuts to addiction services, cuts to police budgets, cuts to council budgets and the houses in multiple occupation by vulnerable

[Diana Johnson]

people who do not get the support they need, can we please have a debate in Government time? I do not think this perfect storm is just in Hull; I think it is in many constituencies across the country.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises the issue of antisocial behaviour quite frequently, and she is right to do so. I am very sorry to hear about the problems her constituents in Hull are experiencing. She will be aware that, including from council tax, there will be up to £450 million of additional investment in policing in 2018-19. It is for police and crime commissioners to look at how they can best deal with the challenges faced in their local communities, but I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so she can raise the particular issues facing Hull.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure the Leader of the House knows that Coventry will be the city of culture in 2021. Having said that, library budgets are being cut and it does not look very good for libraries in the city of culture to be cut as a result of Government cuts. She will know that libraries are often a gateway for people to learn about culture in the first place.

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the city of culture status that Coventry will have, and I applaud him for raising the issue of libraries. He will know that, right across the country, there is a transformation in libraries. Many are coming under community ownership, as local authorities seek to improve the use of local funding. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so he can raise the issue for Coventry directly with Ministers.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): A more enlightened US President, John F. Kennedy, once said that

"the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened."

Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss the US Government's decision to abandon the United Nations Human Rights Council, so cynically announced on World

Refugee Day, and to allow Members to register their abhorrence at the Trump Administration's decision to detain children and babies in camps, separate from their parents, on the US-Mexico border?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said, the separation of babies and children from their parents is absolutely unacceptable, and we were all glad to see the executive order that was signed yesterday. On the decision of the United States to withdraw from the Human Rights Council, the UK's position is that we want to see reform of the Human Rights Council but we are committed to working to strengthen it from within. Our support for the Human Rights Council remains steadfast. It is the best tool the international community has to address impunity in an imperfect world and to advance many of our international goals, so we deeply regret the decision made by the United States.

Valerie Vaz: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I ask the Leader of the House to correct the record, because she seemed to indicate that pairing and slipping arrangements were available, but they were not? As I said, I was there when such an arrangement was requested for a certain hon. Member—I do not want to go into too much detail about individuals—but it was not granted. A pair was available for only one hon. Member who was about to give birth. The Leader of the House may want to take advice on this and perhaps write to me, but will she correct the record, because what she said earlier was wrong?

Mr Speaker: I think the Leader of the House wishes to respond.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely stand by what I said, which is that pairs had been committed to for all those who are in late stages of pregnancy. It is a convention for Members to be nodded through where reasonable notice is given and where there is serious illness. Yesterday at 11.55 am, Labour requested that six Members be nodded through. The Government made efforts to make what arrangements they could in the short time provided. This is a matter for the usual channels, but I stand by what I said.

Universal Credit and Welfare Changes

11.50 am

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): This Government are delivering the biggest changes to the welfare state in a generation. We are building a benefits system fit for the 21st century, helping more people into work by providing tailored support and more financial support for the most vulnerable. These changes are designed to reflect not only the technological age we live in, which is having a significant impact on work and communications, but people's working lives. We are providing extra support for childcare costs, and offering flexibility to look after children or elderly parents. Our reforms take into account flexible working, self-employment, multiple jobs, the gig economy and societal changes, particularly the growing awareness of mental health conditions, which is strongly linked to the changing pace of life and the barrage of constant communications.

We are succeeding in our aim to reshape the system and provide for the most vulnerable. So far, we have supported nearly 3.4 million more people into work since 2010—that is more than 1,000 people a day every day since 2010—producing a record rate of getting people in work and the lowest unemployment level since the 1970s. We are also spending £54 billion on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions—this is up £9 billion since 2010. We are also supporting a record 600,000 disabled people who have entered work over a four-year period.

Universal credit is a brand new benefits system. It is based on leading-edge technology and agile working practices. Our strategy is based on continuous improvement, whereby we are listening, learning and adapting our delivery as the changes roll out across the country. The result will be a tailor-made system, based on the individual. This is a unique example of great British innovation, and we are leading the world in developing this kind of person-centred system. Countries such as New Zealand, Spain, France and Canada have met us to see UC, to watch and learn what is happening for the next generation of benefit systems. Let us not forget that we are introducing this new system because the legacy regime it replaces was outdated, not only in terms of an ageing IT infrastructure that was built in the 1980s, but in the way it trapped people in unemployment and disincentivised work.

Today, I am updating the House on the changes we have made to UC as a result of this iterative approach we are taking. That is why last autumn we abolished the seven waiting days from the application process; we put in place the two-week housing benefit run-on to smooth the transition for an applicant moving to UC from the previous system; we ensured that advance payments could be applied for from day one of the application process, for up to 100% of a person's indicative total claim; and we extended the recovery period for these advances to 12 months. Extra training was given to our work coaches to embed these changes.

Prior to that, we also changed the UC telephone lines to a freephone number to ensure ease of access for claimants inquiring about their claim. Earlier this year we reinstated housing benefit for 18 to 21-year-olds, and ensured that kinship carers are exempt from tax

credits changes. Just last week, we announced changes to support the severely disabled when they transition on to UC; within our reforms, we want to ensure that the most vulnerable get the support they need. These proactive changes were made to enhance our new benefits system.

Our modifications to UC have been made alongside significant changes to personal independence payments, to reflect the Government's support for disabled people and all types of disabilities—unlike the system before UC, which focused on physical disabilities. In fact, within week one of my entering this job, I took the decision not to continue with the historic appeal regarding a High Court judgment on the PIP-amending regulations, in order to support people suffering from overwhelming psychological distress. We have committed to video recording PIP assessments so that everyone involved can be sure of their fair and reviewable outcome, and earlier this week we announced a more practical approach to the assessment of claimants with severe degenerative diseases. Those patients who receive the highest awards will no longer be required to attend regular face-to-face interviews repeatedly to verify their difficult and debilitating circumstances.

Let me turn to the report on universal credit published last week by the National Audit Office, which did not take into account the impact of our recent changes. Our analysis shows that universal credit is working. We already know that it helps more people into work, and to stay in work, than the legacy system. Universal credit has brought together six main benefits, which were administered by different local and national Government agencies. Once fully rolled out, it will be a single, streamlined system, reducing administration costs and providing value for money for all our citizens. The cost per claim has already reduced by 7% since March 2018 and is due to reduce to £173 by 2024-25—around £50 less per claim than legacy cases currently cost us to process.

Beyond the timespan of the NAO report, we have greatly improved our payment timeliness: around 80% of claimants are paid on time, after their initial assessment period. Where new claims have not been paid in full and on time, two thirds have been found to have some form of verification outstanding. Verification is a necessary part of any benefits system and citizens expect such measures to be in place. We need to ensure that we pay the right people the right amount of money.

Upon visiting jobcentres, the NAO observed good relationships between work coaches and claimants. The results we are seeing are thanks to the exceptional hard work that our work coaches put in with claimants day in, day out. UC is projected to help 200,000 people into work, adding £8 billion per year to the economy when it is fully rolled out. Those are conservative estimates, based on robust analysis that has been signed off by the Treasury. At a user level, we know that 83% of universal credit claimants are happy with the service that they receive.

In conclusion, we are building an agile, adaptable system, fit for the 21st century. We want people to reach their potential, regardless of their circumstances or background, and we will make changes, when required, to achieve that ambition. I commend this statement to the House.

11.57 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement, but the Opposition believe that she should have come to the House on Monday to make a statement about both the damning National Audit Office report that was published last Friday and the Government's decision, announced last Thursday, to put back the target for the completion of universal credit by another year—the sixth such delay. Rather than taking pride in not continuing with the appeal on PIP regulations, the Secretary of State should reflect on her Department being forced three times in the past year by legal challenges to review payments to disabled people.

Universal credit is the Government's flagship social security programme, and the NAO report on it that was published last Friday is damning indeed. It concludes that universal credit is a major failure of public policy: it is failing to achieve its aims and, as it stands, there is no evidence that it ever will. The report suggests that universal credit may cost more to administer than the benefits system that it replaces, and concludes that it has not delivered value for money, that it is uncertain whether it ever will, and that we will never be able to measure whether it has achieved its stated goal.

The Trussell Trust recently reported that food bank referrals have increased by 52% in areas where the full service of universal credit has been introduced in the past year, compared with 13% across the UK as a whole. In Hastings, food bank referrals went up by 80% following the roll-out of the full service. The Department for Work and Pensions does not measure whether claimants are experiencing hardship; is it not time that the Secretary of State woke up to the realities of poverty in the UK and instructed her Department to do so? Some 60% of claimants have asked for advanced payments, showing just how high the level of need out there is.

The Secretary of State says that universal credit is based on leading-edge technology and agile working practices. However, the National Audit Office report says that 38% of claimants were unable to verify their identity online and had to go to a jobcentre to do so. It makes no sense to accelerate the roll-out of universal credit at the same time as rapidly closing jobcentres. The NAO report reveals that a significant number of people struggle to make and manage their claim online. The Department for Work and Pensions' own survey found that nearly half of claimants are unable to make a claim online unassisted, and that a fifth of claims are failing at an early stage because claimants are not able to navigate the online system.

The Government claim that the introduction of universal credit will result in 200,000 more people finding long-term work than under legacy benefits. They repeatedly cite evidence from 2014-15, but that was before the cuts to work allowances were introduced and covers only single unemployed people without children. If one looks at the range of claimants in areas where universal credit has been rolled out, there is no evidence that it is helping more people find long-term work. Delays in payments are pushing people into debt and rent arrears on such a scale that private and even social landlords are becoming increasingly reluctant to rent to universal credit claimants.

The NAO report also points out that 20% of claimants are not being paid in full and on time, and more than one in 10 are not receiving any payment on time. The

people who are most at need from the social security system are the ones most likely to have to wait for payments. A quarter of carers, over 30% of families who need support with childcare and, most shockingly of all, two thirds of disabled people are not being paid in full and on time. The report points out that the Department does not expect the time limits of the payments to improve over the course of this year, and that it believes that it is unreasonable for all claimants to expect that they will be paid on time because of the need to verify each claim. Does the Secretary of State find the expectations of her own Department acceptable? She has made some claims that things have improved greatly since the closure of the report, so will she substantiate that by putting that information in the Library?

The impact of universal credit on some of our most vulnerable people is clear. Universal support is supposed to help people, but funding is severely limited and provision is patchy. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of it? Is she satisfied that her Department is doing enough to support people who are struggling?

Universal credit was supposed to offer personalised support to claimants, but stressed and overloaded staff are often failing to identify vulnerable claimants. The DWP is aiming to increase the workloads of work coaches fourfold and of case managers nearly sixfold as the Government try to cut the cost of universal credit still further.

The NAO is very clear that the DWP should not expand universal credit until it is able to cope with business as usual. The Government must now listen to the NAO, stop the roll-out of universal credit, and fix the flaws before any more people are pushed into poverty by a benefit that is meant to protect them from it. Universal credit is having a devastating impact on many people and will reach 8.5 million by 2024-25. The Secretary of State must now wake up to the misery being caused by her policy.

Ms McVey: First off, this was the earliest time that I could come to the House to make an oral statement. I sought to make a statement as soon as possible, which is why I am here today. Obviously, everyone will know what has been happening this week in the House.

On the legal changes that I have made, let me say that I took them from day one. I took them immediately. No one was forced to do that; I actually took the changes on myself with the rest of my team and also with Conservative MPs who came and told me what they would like to do. I also went out to visit various groups up and down the country. I felt that that was the best thing that we could do.

When this system is fully rolled out, it will be £50 cheaper per claim. It is an automated system and it is a personal tailored system. For those who cannot get access, or who are not sure about the IT and how to support it, we have given an extra £200 million to local authorities to support people—to help them with IT and to help them with debt—not that we would ever recognise that from the scaremongering of the Opposition.

Labour talks about poverty figures, but, compared with 2010 when it was last in office, there are now 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty. Rates of material deprivation among children and pensioners

have never been lower, inequality has fallen and remains lower than in 2010, and according to the latest figures, out this week, inequality, because of our benefit and tax changes, has fallen by two thirds in the last year. I wish the Opposition would keep up with the rapid changing of things.

We are helping more people into work. More than 3.2 million more people are in work—1,000 jobs every day since 2010. How much evidence do the Opposition need, for heaven's sake? The support is there, and now the advances. It was key we made those changes in the last Budget. We knew if people were having difficulty with the benefit, which was there to support them, we had to make those changes—the advances, the two-week run-on for housing benefit, stopping the waiting days—and now we find out that 4% of people are moving into work in fewer than six months and that 50% spend more time looking for work. That is the reality.

Please allow me, Mr Deputy Speaker, to mention some of the real people I have met and spoken to and what they are saying about universal credit. Shafeeq, who was homeless, got an advance that got him temporary accommodation and put him in a better place to look for work. He said it

“helped me out a great deal and I'd have been lost without it”.

He is now in a job. Lisa said an advance payment helped her to secure a place with a childcare provider. She is paying it back over 12 months, which she says means a great deal to her. Gemma, a lone parent, said,

“it's amazing being able to claim nearly all my childcare costs back, it's a real incentive to go out to work – I'm going to be better off each week”.

Ben in Devon had a work coach, who helped him to progress in work from day one. Ryan from Essex had a lack of work experience and confidence, and his work coach helped him through universal credit. I will end it there—with the people receiving the benefit.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. The NAO report is, to be frank, a shoddy piece of work. It has simply failed—[*Interruption.*] Genuinely; anyone who reads it—I do not know if anyone on the Opposition Benches has bothered—will realise that it fails to take account of a series of issues, not the least of which are that the Treasury signed off annual recurring savings of £8 billion and, more importantly, that the changes last November and December have made a huge difference to people's lives. I urge her to carry on and to tell the Public Accounts Committee to ask the question: who polices this policeman? This piece of work does it no credit at all. Will she now apply her efforts to universal support to make sure that every council area delivers the extra bit that is supposed to go alongside universal credit?

Ms McVey: My right hon. Friend has done more than most people in the House to support people into work, and I thank him for his question. He emphasises the point about universal support—the £200 million for local councils—to help people with debt management and IT. That is one thing we are definitely doing. Equally, he raises an important point about the NAO report. I am sure that Opposition Members have not read it. It does not say stop the roll-out; it says continue with the roll-out and do it faster. Please read about stuff before talking about it!

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. The NAO report was damning in its criticism of universal credit, and I am honestly surprised that anyone on the Government Benches could stand up and say they do not agree with it. This is what it does: it audits things. That is its role. I should not be surprised, though, because the Government have form. When the UN published its report on the rights of disabled people, a Minister stood up and said, “Problem? What problem? There's no problem here”. They are trying to do exactly the same thing with this report.

The NAO in its report says it is not clear that universal credit will ever cost less to administer than the existing benefits system and that the Department will never be able to measure whether universal credit actually leads to 200,000 more people being in work.

Universal credit is pushing families into poverty and hardship. In addition to this report, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report has damningly criticised the sanctions regime, setting out how dreadful it is for individuals. A Trussell Trust report refers to the number of people needing to visit food banks in the areas where universal credit has been rolled out. Universal credit will be rolled out in my constituency later this year, and I am worried for my constituents. I expect what many other Members have seen: a massive increase in the number of people who are facing financial hardship coming through my door. My office, in Scotland's third city, already refers one person to a food bank every fortnight because of the actions of this Tory Government. The Government can no longer bury their head in the sand. They need to own up to these failings and make changes to improve the system.

Ms McVey: We have said quite clearly that this report is out of date and does not take into account the significant changes that we have made. The changes in the Budget were worth about £1.5 billion and the ones that are coming in are worth several billion pounds, but the report does not take that into account. Genuine people who get support from work coaches are saying, “It has transformed our lives.” I invite the hon. Lady to visit a jobcentre and meet the coaches in her area to see how revolutionary this process is. If she does not agree, she knows as well as I do that her party has considerable powers in Scotland to change the welfare system. Should Scotland wish to do that it could, but it is not doing so.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Like a number of Members, I am disappointed that the NAO report does not take into account the changes that the Department made in response to last year's recommendations from the Work and Pensions Committee. I believe that the changes made by the Secretary of State were part of a test-and-learn environment, which is essential to the future success of universal credit. Will she commit to continuing with test and learn? In doing so, will she look at the Committee's recommendations on universal credit and self-employment?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend has spent considerable time investigating what we do, and providing solutions and support. He is right that this is a test-and-learn process. Indeed, I ensured that that would be the focus, and it is what we will do for people, whether they are self-employed or disabled. Let me quote various charity

[Ms McVey]

groups that have agreed with exactly what we have done. When I made the decision—along with the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse)—to offer the housing element of universal credit to 18 to 21-year-olds, Shelter said that it was “thrilled”. The chief executive of Citizens Advice, Gillian Guy, said that the Budget changes would

“make a significant difference to the millions of people who will be claiming Universal Credit”.

If only the NAO had read her words and produced its document accordingly.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I cannot believe what I am hearing from the Government. They are in absolute denial, and not just about this report. In the past six months, there have been not one, not two, but three High Court decisions or tribunal rulings saying that the Government’s actions with regard to PIP and, most recently, with regard to severely disabled people transitioning on to UC, are discriminatory and unlawful—they have been made to change. But yesterday, the Minister for Disabled People said in a Westminster Hall debate that there was nothing unlawful or discriminatory about the Government’s actions. Does this not reflect what the UN called a “disconnect” between the “lived experience” of disabled people and this Government’s policies? What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that the implementation of all her policies recognises these judgments?

Ms McVey: Again, I ask the hon. Lady to read the Court judgment. I had already made the decision on the disability premium. The Court did not ask the Government to alter the severe disability premium—we won on that point of law—so I ask the hon. Lady to digest the judgment properly. We have put in an extra £9 billion of health and disability funding to support people. In the last couple of years, we have got an extra 600,000 disabled people into work. That is what this is about—supporting the most vulnerable and helping more people into work. We have seen 3.2 million people move into work, including 600,000 disabled people. The hon. Lady should stop scaremongering. Should people have difficulties, I ask her to assist them so that they can get the best support for what they need. That is what Government Members are doing, and the figures reflect that.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): The Work and Pensions Committee went to Marylebone jobcentre this morning to see work coaches, who were genuinely excited about the UC roll-out that took place yesterday. I hope to find the same thing in my constituency tomorrow morning. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the key to making this work is for work coaches to have the necessary skills, training, time and access to outside support so that they can give claimants the support that they need to get ready for work?

Ms McVey: That is exactly right. Work coaches have received—and will continue to get—more training. People are talking about work coaches with a renewed enthusiasm because of the support that they are getting. Darren from Wales, who was put on a confidence course—we were utilising our flexible support fund—said:

“My...work coach was fantastic...helped me turn my life around...fulfilling a lifelong dream”.

That is what this is about—turning people’s lives around. I urge hon. Members to visit jobcentres and meet work coaches, who feel liberated for the first time ever because they are helping people into work.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I hope that the Secretary of State has read and digested her very own Department’s “Universal Credit Full Service Survey” of more than 1,000 claimants. Its results are as damning, if not more so, than the National Audit Office report. The survey shows that 40% of claimants are in real financial hardship after nine months on universal credit. Only half felt better off with more work, and only half could claim unassisted. In the light of that report and all the other evidence before us, will the Secretary of State please listen to the National Audit Office’s recommendation that the programme should not expand before it can deal with higher claimant volumes? Some 100,000 people a month are moving on to universal credit this year, and there will be 200,000 people a month next year. This will affect 4 million families from the end of next year, and 40% of them must not be in hardship.

Ms McVey: This is the same report that actually says that people are getting into work quicker, staying in work longer, progressing in work better and getting £600 more a month through our support. It is also the same report that focuses on the 16-hour benefit rule, that shows that people were locked out of work under the legacy system, and that shows that our plans will enable people to work 113 million extra hours a year because they are not locked on benefits.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and her Ministers for listening to suggestions to improve universal credit and welfare assessments. I specifically mention the introduction of video recording for work capability and PIP assessments. Will she update me on the roll-out of video recording?

Ms McVey: I thank my hon. Friend for doing so much in this area. She often meets me to talk about ideas that she thinks would make considerable improvements, and one of her suggestions was video recording. We want to give people confidence in the system and to get transparency in the system, which is why we have said that we will implement the idea. Over the summer we will be testing and learning by working with disabled people and asking them, “Do you feel more confident with this? Is video recording what you want?” We have made a commitment to improve the process through recording.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I, too, was at Marylebone jobcentre as part of the Work and Pensions Committee’s inquiry into benefit sanctions. Given that the Secretary of State seems open to suggestions, may I suggest that she reviews the policy whereby a claimant can be sanctioned if they refuse a zero-hours contract? Could it not be counterproductive in the fight against poverty to move people from out of work into low-paid, insecure work?

Ms McVey: Yes, of course I will listen to what is best with sanctions, because the key aim is not to give anybody sanctions, but to help people into work—that is what we need to do. Since benefits began, there has

always been some form of sanctions regime that says, “If you’re not living up to our expectations, this is what will happen,” but that is minimal on jobseeker’s allowance, and even less on employment and support allowance—less than 1%. We want to make sure that we get people into work, and if the hon. Gentleman has suggestions, I will meet him.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): We have heard a lot of huffing and puffing from Opposition Members, but they are not offering many solutions. Given that the National Audit Office has said that the Government should continue with universal credit, and that one of its criticisms was that that had not been rolled out quickly enough, does my right hon. Friend think that the Opposition’s solution of pausing universal credit in any way reflects the National Audit Office’s report? Will she continue making improvements to universal credit? I know that my constituents are grateful that she is looking at the issue regarding payment dates and assessment periods. I urge her to continue to look at the improvements that my constituents have suggested to her, rather than pausing universal credit, which would go completely against what the NAO has said.

Ms McVey: I thank my hon. Friend. I went with him to his local Trussell Trust to see what other changes we should be looking at, and one of them involved the payment system for people in work. Remember, this is the first time we have ever had a benefit system supporting people in work. Beforehand, it was always for people who were out of work. I pledged to look at that, and the team is doing so. As I said, we are supporting people.

What my hon. Friend says about the Opposition is quite right. The NAO did not say that we should stop universal credit; it said that we should carry on and, if anything, proceed more quickly. But remember, this is the Opposition who said that our changes in 2010 would result in 1 million more people being unemployed. How wrong they were, and how wrong they are again!

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The NAO says that universal credit is expensive, massively delayed and over-complex, and that the Department will never be able to provide evidence that it helps more people into work. The Secretary of State says that everything is tickety-boo, and that this is a personal, tailor-made system based on the individual. Perhaps I could encourage her to meet my constituent, Augustin, who did not meet the minimum income floor and expected earnings under universal credit and has been made homeless as a result. She could meet him at my local food bank, which has seen a tripling in the number of children it supports as a direct result of universal credit roll-out. Will she meet him?

Ms McVey: A couple of things, starting with the minimum income floor: this was brought in for when people had set up a business and were getting paid below the minimum wage in order to support them and to help them to improve their business case, but so that if that was still not working, we could then say, “How do we help you to become employed, because self-employment is obviously not working for you?” That was why the minimum income floor was brought in. If anybody has been made homeless through this, I will meet them. We have advance payments and support,

and our work coaches work with homelessness charities to achieve the exact opposite of that. In fact, I can tell the hon. Gentleman about countless cases where they have stopped people being homeless, but if that has not been the case for his constituent, we need to listen and get that changed rapidly.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I entered politics to enable people to get on in life and to open doors to opportunities. Does my right hon. Friend agree that universal credit is a fantastic example of doing that, given that it makes work pay and it is forecast to help 200,000 more people into work than jobseeker’s allowance did?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is right. She came into Parliament to help the most vulnerable in society and to help people into work. That is what Conservative Members do, and it is what Opposition Members want to do, but our solutions and ways of doing things are working. I reiterate that an extra 3.2 million people are in work since 2010. Universal credit has come about because the world has significantly changed, even in the past 10 years. Think about technology, automation and people online—the world has changed. We have to deal with the gig economy, with flexible working hours, with part-time and multiple jobs, and with the difference in working life for people who have caring responsibilities for children and adults. That is what this system takes into account; the legacy system could not do that.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): There might be 1 million more people in work, but there are also 1 million more people on poverty wages. Food banks used to be the exception to the rule, but they have now become part of the rule. More importantly, I have constituents who I listen to—not the Secretary of State—who are on the personal independence payment but are facing assessment delays and do not know when they will be paid. The process can take weeks and sometimes months, which creates great distress and can add to their illnesses and disabilities.

Ms McVey: Let me clarify that there are 3 million more people in work, not 1 million more. We listened to what MPs and local charities said, and we brought in extra support for anybody who needs money straightaway. That is why there is now a 100% advance straightaway, and it is why, when people move from one system to another, there is an extra two weeks of housing benefit to help them. We are adapting to change so that we make this work.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I also thank the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who visited Stirling last week and held a roundtable meeting with representatives from the Stirling citizens advice bureau, our local food bank—Start Up Stirling—and Stirling Women’s Aid. It was a very useful meeting, but it was also an example of the engagement of this team of Ministers and their commitment to listening, for which I commend them. Will my right hon. Friend spell out what steps are being taken to improve claimants’ experience of the application and assessment process, especially disabled claimants and those with special needs?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend talks about the commitment and engagement of all our Ministers and the Department, and about what work coaches do on a daily basis with local charities to get this running as smoothly as possible. I have talked about the extra £200 million going to local councils as part of grant funding, and 98% of councils have taken up that money in order to make the process easier for people, whether they are people with disabilities or those who cannot use IT. This is what we are doing to make the journey easier, and he is right to champion those people who need support.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): We have heard that the Secretary of State is keen to meet disability groups and disabled people, and that is fantastic, but perhaps she could tell us how we will improve the situation in which payments to disabled people are always late, never on time and never in full. This is borne out by our casework, and by some of the cases we heard about during my Westminster Hall debate yesterday.

Ms McVey: The hon. Lady says that payments are always late, never on time and not in full, but that is absolutely not correct—[*Interruption.*] If I did not hear her right and she referred to two thirds of cases, she is still wrong. We need to make sure that people get support, and we know that they do. There is an extra £9 billion of support, whether that is financial support because people need it, or support to get them into work. We know that there are 600,000 more people in work in the last few years, and we are helping even more through Access to Work. Please look sometimes at the positive news and help your constituents a little bit more by focusing them on that additional support.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): May I assure the Secretary of State that I, too, have been to my local jobcentre and spoken to the staff there? I have heard that this is the best system to help people for 30 years—that comes from the horse's mouth in Redditch.

I used to work in the software industry, and the point about this system is that it is agile. A system on this scale cannot be built in the way that the Opposition suggest; that is not how technology operates. The benefit of this system is that it can learn on an individual basis. The staff in the jobcentre said that there was a different experience for every single claimant, and that is how the system responds. The idea that we should stop it flies in the face of any kind of technology learning—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but I want to get everybody in. Questions must be brief.

Ms McVey: It was lovely listening to my hon. Friend—my learned friend, who knows so much about technology—because those words needed to be heard. As I said, this is at the leading edge of technology. Great Britain is leading the way. Countries that are coming to see us range from Sweden to the United States, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, Canada, Cyprus, France and Denmark. They all want to know how it works to take it back home to their countries.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): When the former Secretary of State was assuring the House that universal credit implementation was going well, it was the National

Audit Office that told us what was really happening. Its reports have never been shoddy and have never been scaremongering. They have embarrassed Ministers—that is true—but they have proved to be truthful. The Secretary of State will recognise many of the findings of this latest NAO report in warnings given by Opposition Members when she was in the Department four or five years ago. The central flaw, of course, is the very long wait that people have before they are entitled to receive cash. Her predecessor, who was in the job for only a short time, managed, greatly to his credit, to reduce the waiting time from six weeks to five. Will the Secretary of State commit to build on that progress and reduce the waiting time significantly further?

Ms McVey: I have heard the warnings from the Opposition before. I heard the warnings even about work experience and sector-based work academies—“Oh, we couldn't do that for our young people.” We did, and youth unemployment dropped by over 43%. I have heard the warnings, and I appreciate that the Opposition do not like the way we do things, but the way we do things provides results—hence 1,000 more people in work every day since 2010.

I do agree with the right hon. Gentleman that my predecessor made significant changes in how we were rolling out this system. We have to make sure that waiting times are reduced as much as possible, but two thirds of those longer waiting times are due to a lack of verification. We need the verification to know whether people are legally entitled to benefit.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I would like to pick up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), because he is right. The National Audit Office report says that the universal credit roll-out is slow, yet Opposition Members want to slow it down even further or even pause it. In noting that obvious tension, does my right hon. Friend agree that the pace of the roll-out, and the test-and-learn approach, mean that the system is continually improving and that people will always have the opportunity to get into work and be better off in work?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is, again, correct. The NAO made it clear that the pace could do with speeding up. It also said that we should continue with universal credit, far from what the Opposition are saying. It said that we should speed up the pace and carry on going, and that progress had been made in what we are doing. I say to Members: please read the report.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Having visited the DWP offices in Stanley and Chester-le-Street in my constituency, can I agree with one thing that the Secretary of State said and say thank you to the staff for their work? However, a real fear has been raised with me by constituents who have poor IT skills. What more can we do to support these individuals and also to expand access to IT, because many libraries have been closed or have introduced restricted hours, which is a stumbling block for a lot of those individuals?

Ms McVey: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for mentioning work coaches in such a positive way, because they are doing a significant amount of work, and I hear only praise wherever I go. The system needs to give

people support, whether with IT or debt. Support is definitely there for IT—£200 million has gone to local authorities. The jobcentre can point claimants in the right direction, so I ask them please to go via the jobcentre in these situations.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Last week, I met a constituent at my surgery who had received just £11 for four hours' work as a result of less generous earnings disregards and a sharper clawback of council debts than under legacy benefits. What estimates has the Secretary of State made of those features in terms of the continuing employment benefits that she has talked about? Can we help her to approach the Chancellor, as he prepares his autumn Budget, to ask him to put money into the universal credit system to improve the earnings disregards and to lower the rate at which other debt is recovered?

Ms McVey: The hon. Lady has a great deal of knowledge in this area. I am more than happy to meet her so that we can ensure that we have continuous learning and continuous improvement. I am looking closely at the debt repayment that she talks about. I am very much focused on that at the moment. I would love to meet her.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Despite what the right hon. Lady says, some 40% of individuals are still not able to access claims because of verification failures due to a lack of IT. In rural areas such as mine, it may be six to 10 miles to the nearest town or jobcentre. What steps can she take to improve verification for individuals who cannot access computers and cannot easily get to a jobcentre or town?

Ms McVey: The right hon. Gentleman raises a fair point on how we get that connection. What we are really focusing on now, as we continue with this continuous improvement, is outreach work to the people who are most in need or most isolated, maybe in a rural community, to help them to get the support they need. That is a part of our continuous improvement.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Hull is one of the cities that is to see the roll-out of universal credit later this year. We already have high levels of poverty, homelessness, and people using food banks. Following the publication of the report, what other measures does the Secretary of State plan to introduce to make sure that, when universal credit is rolled out in Hull, it is more successful than it has been so far?

Ms McVey: We will make sure that it continues to be successful where it goes, with more people in work more quickly, staying in work and getting progress in work. On average, people will get £600 a month more in work through the extra support that the work coaches are getting. I ask the hon. Lady, too, to go to a jobcentre to find out what is going on and how we are helping people.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am very disappointed that the Secretary of State is blind to the hardship that is being caused by this policy. Last night in my constituency, a number of constituents, including

two of my staff, were involved in trying to raise money for the East Durham Trust food bank through a sponsored run. That food bank was completely depleted. May I respectfully point out to her that it is depleted because of the policies of this Government, particularly the introduction of universal credit, delayed PIP appeals, and sanctions that have been applied to my constituents?

Ms McVey: I am certainly not blind to hardship. We all come into this House trying to prevent hardship. Conservative Members believe that poverty and hardship are prevented by getting people into work and supporting them in work to allow them to fulfil their dreams, hopes and ambitions. That is what we do. As I said, we have provided significantly more money for the most vulnerable, particularly for those with disability and health conditions. We want to support people into work and reduce poverty.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): As a former member of the Public Accounts Committee, I am very conscious of how much that Committee—and, indeed, the House—relies on National Audit Office reports. I remind the House that the Department does agree with the NAO on the veracity of those reports. Where there are issues, then the Department can follow them up in the Public Accounts Committee.

May I ask about the habitual residency test, which is connected with universal credit claims? I have a constituent who has been refused advance payment due to a delay in her partner's residency test, and it is not clear when that will be completed. It would be helpful to understand the timescales for the residency test. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether, if the partner fails the residency test, an entirely new claim will have to be made?

Ms McVey: We do not agree with all the conclusions in the NAO report because it did not take into account the impact of the changes. We agree with some of the conclusions, such as the fact that we should continue with the roll-out and speed it up and on the progress made. The habitual residence test ensures that someone is legally entitled to a benefit. Verification was increased in 1994 and tightened in 2004. If someone fails the habitual residence test, they can reapply three months later when they can show that they have links to the country.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I assure the Secretary of State that I have read the NAO report in full, because I like to know what I am speaking about. I also like to know the lived experience of my constituents in Blaydon, where the full roll-out of universal credit happened just before Christmas. The NAO report certainly does reflect the problems that my constituents face with late payments and delays caused by all kinds of things. In particular, I would like to refer to the problems that some constituents with disabilities are having. A local voluntary organisation came to talk to me recently about problems that a deaf person is having, even with support, in claiming universal credit. Will the Secretary of State look at the provisions for people with disabilities, to ensure that they are able to claim easily? Does she intend to follow any of the recommendations in the NAO report?

Ms McVey: We agree that it is important for people who are the most in need to get the most support. That is what we are doing. We are training more staff in

[Ms McVey]

different areas, including in disability needs, and working with various charities to ensure that that happens. However, I give another example. Caroline talks about access to work and mental health support. She has had bipolar disorder all her life but has now finally found a system that is helping her into work and listening to her. That is what our work coaches are about. We are helping more disabled people.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Last week in Prime Minister's questions, I identified that the waiting time for appeals is 41 weeks for PIP and 30 weeks for ESA in the Gloucestershire area. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that universal credit appeals do not create further delays, so that people can try to get some justice?

Ms McVey: I heard the hon. Gentleman raise that last week. I want to reassure him that we are working with the Ministry of Justice to increase the number of judges and the number people on tribunal panels. We are also recruiting 150 presiding officers, to ensure that we understand what is going on and make the system smoother and quicker. We obviously need to ensure that that happens for PIP, for ESA and, should we need it, for UC.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What an utterly contemptible and triumphant statement we have just heard from the Secretary of State. With the brassiest of necks, she boasts of changes to universal credit that Opposition Members have continually called for, many of which this Government were dragged through the courts before making. Universal credit will be rolled out across Renfrewshire in September. Can the Secretary of State please pause the roll-out and fix the multitude of problems we have heard about today before the people of Renfrewshire are made to suffer the consequences?

Ms McVey: If the hon. Gentleman has been calling for some of the changes I have just made, surely he should be celebrating those along with me, because we have listened. It is about getting this right for the citizens, not just opposing for opposing's sake.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): As the result of a freedom of information request, I know that my constituents who are now on personal independence payments but previously qualified for disability living allowance are losing £2 million a year. What will the Secretary of State do to address that obvious failure?

Ms McVey: More people now are getting more money on PIP than they ever got on DLA. Every year from 2010 right the way through to 2022, more people will be getting more support and there are higher rates of support.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Universal credit will be rolled out in my constituency in July. I already deal with lots of constituents who need help getting the benefits they are entitled to, due to unnecessary barriers put up by the DWP. The reality is that half of

claimants are unable to make a claim for universal credit online without assistance. What real assurance can the Secretary of State give my constituents? I have heard little today that gives us confidence in the roll-out.

Ms McVey: We are making it a much simpler system, by taking six benefits and turning them into one. Instead of the hon. Lady's constituents having to get housing benefit from the local council, get tax credits from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and also go to the DWP, they can get it all under one roof, because it is streamlined. If she would care to go into a jobcentre with her constituents, they could see how it now works.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I appreciate you giving me the opportunity to ask a question, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I was unavoidably detained and missed the early part of the statement.

Listening to the Secretary of State's answers, it appears that she agrees with anything positive the NAO report says, but the whole stream of things that the NAO says are a real problem with universal credit are completely dismissed out of hand. That is unwise. I powerfully and fiercely supported the £3 billion per annum that was put into universal credit under the coalition, despite putting caveats on the record about some issues with universal credit. Does she agree that, if that £3 billion per annum were still within universal credit, work really would pay, and it would be a substantially successful benefit?

Ms McVey: We have said that the NAO report sadly was out of date and therefore has not taken into account all the changes that have been made. That is unfortunate, because it means that the report is not a true reflection of what is happening. It is unfortunate that the hon. Gentleman was not here for the statement, but if he reads it in *Hansard* tomorrow, he will have his answers on how well the system is working.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): It is exceptional to take a point of order now—normally it would come after statements—but as it relates to this, I will.

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Secretary of State, in response to my question, incorrectly said that the Government had not been found to have acted unlawfully in relation to universal credit as it applies to severely disabled people. I have looked up that judgment. I was at court 28 when the judgment was handed down this time last week, and it is absolutely the case that, for severely disabled people transitioning on to universal credit, the Government were found to have acted unlawfully and in a discriminatory way. I would appreciate it if the record were corrected.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Would the Secretary of State like to respond?

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): I would. If the hon. Lady read and were, supposedly, at the judgment—[*Interruption.*] I am giving her a get-out clause. On many of the points, the Government

won. They were questioned on how moving area had impacted on people with the severe disability premium. It was not about the fundamental change that I have made to help half a million disabled people by giving transitional protection to people with the severe disability premium, which is different.

Debbie Abrahams: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. There were two judgments. The one that I just referenced, about severely disabled people transitioning on to universal credit, was upheld, and the Secretary of State needs to recognise that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will leave it at that, because it has certainly been put on the record and heard. I want to move on to the ministerial statement.

EU Settlement Scheme

12.48 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the new settlement scheme for resident EU citizens and their family members.

Securing the rights of citizens has been our priority in negotiations with the European Union. We have delivered on this commitment and reached an agreement with the EU, which was published in March as a draft legal text. This guarantees the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and of UK nationals living in the EU. Under this agreement, EU citizens living in the UK, along with their family members, will be able to stay and continue their lives here, with the same access to work, study, benefits and public services that they enjoy now. Close family members living overseas will be able to join them here in future.

EU citizens make a huge contribution to our economy and to our way of life. They are our friends, our family and our colleagues, and we want them to stay. I am therefore delighted to be publishing today further details about the EU settlement scheme. This will provide the basis for EU citizens resident here, and their family members, to obtain their new UK immigration status, consistent with the draft withdrawal agreement. I will place in the Library of the House a statement of intent setting out in detail how the scheme will work, and how simple and straightforward it will be. The document includes a draft of the immigration rules for the scheme.

We will engage with our stakeholders on the details set out in the statement of intent. These include the user groups that we have established to help us develop the scheme, involving EU citizens' representatives, embassies, employers and others. We look forward to hearing their views, and will make improvements where we can.

It will be straightforward for EU citizens residing in the UK to obtain status. If they have lived here continuously for five years, they will be eligible for settled status. Those who have lived here for less than five years will generally be granted pre-settled status and be able to apply for settled status once they reach the five-year point. Applicants will not need to show that they meet other detailed requirements of current free movement rules. This means, for example, that stay-at-home parents, retired people and students can all be eligible.

Irish citizens enjoy a right of residence in the UK that is not reliant on our membership of the EU. The Government are committed to protecting these rights, and are working closely with Ireland to maintain these bilateral arrangements for our respective citizens. Irish citizens will not need to apply for status under the scheme, but may elect to do so if they wish. Their family members who are not Irish citizens or British citizens will be able to obtain status under the scheme without the Irish citizen doing so.

Negotiations on similar agreements on citizens' rights with the non-EU European economic area states and Switzerland are progressing. While the details of those agreements are being finalised, the statement of intent confirms that we intend that the settlement scheme will be open to other EEA citizens and Swiss citizens, and their family members, on a similar basis as for EU citizens.

[*Caroline Nokes*]

The scheme set out in the statement of intent will deliver on our commitments to a straightforward process. We are designing the online application form so that it is short, simple and user-friendly. It will be accessible by computer, tablet or smartphone. Assistance will be available for those who need it to complete the online application process. The views of the user groups on the support that may be needed by vulnerable groups will help to ensure that we make the right additional provision for them, through the involvement of community groups and others.

There will be three core criteria that people will need to meet to be granted status under the EU settlement scheme: proving their identity, showing that they are resident in the UK, and declaring whether they have criminal convictions. First, applicants will need to prove their identity and nationality. For those who wish to complete the application entirely online, there will be an app that will allow EU citizens to confirm the relevant details remotely either using their own mobile phone or tablet, or at a location established for them to use the app or be helped to do so. Alternatively, they can send us their identity document by post, and a dedicated team will check this and return it to them as soon as possible.

Secondly we will establish that the applicant is resident in the UK and, where appropriate, their family relationship to an eligible EU citizen. Where possible, the application process will help the applicant to establish their continuous residence here, and whether it amounts to the five years generally required for settled status, on an automated basis using employment and benefit records. This will keep any documentary evidence the applicant is required to provide to a minimum. We recognise that some applicants may lack such evidence in their own name for various reasons, and we will work flexibly with applicants to help them evidence their continuous residence in the UK by the best means available to them.

Thirdly, we will check that the applicant is not a serious or persistent criminal and does not pose a security threat. It is right that we do what is needed to protect everyone who lives in the UK, but we are not concerned with minor offences, and these provisions will not affect the overwhelming majority of EU citizens and their family members.

Throughout the process, we will be looking to grant applications, not for reasons to refuse them, and caseworkers will be able to exercise discretion in favour of the applicant, where appropriate, to minimise administrative burdens. A range of user-friendly guidance and support, including a customer contact centre, will be in place to help applicants through the process.

Subject to parliamentary consideration of changes to the fees regulations, applications will cost £65, with a reduced fee of £32.50 for children under 16. There will be no fee for children in care. The process will be particularly straightforward for those who already hold a valid permanent residence or indefinite leave to remain document, which they will be able to swap for settled status free of charge. Those granted pre-settled status will be able to apply for settled status without paying a further fee.

EU citizens and their family members do not need to do anything immediately. There will be no change to their current rights until the end of the post-exit

implementation period on 31 December 2020. The deadline for applications under the scheme, for those resident here by the end of 2020, will be 30 June 2021.

We plan to start opening the settlement scheme later this year. I do not underestimate the scale of the challenge in successfully processing what may exceed 3.5 million applications, but the Home Office already issues about 7 million passports and 3 million visas each year, so processing applications on the scale required is not new to us. As is now standard for the launch of new Government services, there will be a private beta phase from the summer to enable us to test the system and processes, followed by a phased roll-out from late 2018, so we can test them at scale and ensure that they work effectively. The scheme will be open fully by 30 March 2019.

The statement of intent I have published today marks an important point in our preparations for the EU settlement scheme, which will enable EU citizens and their family members to continue living here in much the same way as they do now. We have engaged with EU citizens at every stage of the development process, and will continue to do so. We will also continue to expand our communications to ensure that EU citizens are aware of the scheme and how it will operate, and to ensure that they are reassured that they will have plenty of time in which to apply for their new UK immigration status. The EU settlement scheme will provide a straightforward way of enabling those who have made their lives in the UK to stay here. We want them to do so. I commend this statement to the House.

12.57 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. We, too, value the contribution of EU citizens as our friends, neighbours and colleagues. Their rights must be protected after Brexit. They have already waited two years from the Brexit vote to be given some assurance and guidance on their status in the UK. From speaking to EU citizens, I know that the stress and anxiety of not knowing if they will be allowed to remain and of not being able to start the process have been significant. There has been uncertainty for UK citizens in Europe as well. The Home Secretary criticised the EU27, but we were previously told this matter is for the future relationship. Which is it?

I have a number of questions for the Minister. First, may we have more details on the criteria for settled status? How will the rights of other EEA and Swiss citizens be enforced? On the criminal checks, what exactly will be the threshold, and how far back will offences be considered relevant? As we have seen with highly skilled migrants, the Government have been picking up on very minor tax errors to refuse applications. Will she confirm that this practice will stop, and that it will not apply to EU citizens? Which court will adjudicate when, inevitably, incorrect decisions are made in the processing of applications or when legal challenges are made to those decisions, and is that acceptable to the EU? For Irish citizens, the mixed messaging is concerning. They do not “have” to apply, but they could. Will the Minister clarify that?

My second point concerns how vulnerable people will be reached and protected. The Migration Observatory has identified a number of groups who may fall through

the cracks of a settled status system, especially people who are older or disabled, and those with language barriers. What plans does the Minister have to identify and protect victims of domestic abuse who rely on their partner for status? We heard at the last Home Office questions that the UK Government had made contact with only two libraries in Scotland. Does the Minister have any advance on that number?

The Minister said that the scheme will be accessible by computer, tablet or smartphone, yet we heard this morning that it is still not working on iPhones. Will that be fixed, and will the system work on all tablets and computers? She said that locations will be established for people to use the app or be helped to do so. How many locations will there be, and what will be their geographical spread?

Thirdly, can the Department handle the demands of registering 3 million people? The Home Office has a 10% error rate in immigration status checks. Is the Minister confident that the system being introduced will be robust and efficient enough to deal with those applications, without it crashing or large numbers of incorrect decisions being made in the process? The Home Affairs Committee has outlined serious concerns that Brexit will drain resources from an already failing system. Are new staff being recruited from outside the Department or are they being reassigned? How long will they take to train, and how much experience will they have to deal with complex cases?

The Minister said that a dedicated customer contact centre will help people through the process. Has that centre been set up, and will it be staffed by Home Office or outsourced staff? Will information be passed to immigration enforcement if somebody discloses that they do not have the right to be in the UK legally? After Windrush and the 100 letters sent in error to EU citizens last year, many people are understandably nervous about coming forward, especially if they are vulnerable and/or afraid that they will not meet the criteria. Telling them that Home Office staff can exercise discretion will be of little comfort.

Fourthly, will the Minister commit to rolling back the hostile environment, so that another 3 million people are not subject to such unjustified and punitive policies? In the practical application of an ID scheme for upwards of 3 million residents of this country, how is it possible for authorities to insist on the production of ID by a minority of the population? Surely that will lead inevitably to a requirement for all citizens to carry ID. Finally, the Minister said that she will publish the draft immigration rules for the scheme. Should we still expect an immigration White Paper before the summer, and if so, what will be its scope? When will we get the Government's proposals on the future of migration post-Brexit?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman has raised a large number of points, and alongside him I recognise that post referendum there have been anxieties for EU citizens living in the UK. That is why we are bringing forward details of the settled status scheme. We want to continue our work with—among others—the 3 million group, to allay those fears. It is crucial to me and the entire Government that we send the clear message that EU citizens living here are welcome. We recognise the contribution that they make to our communities, and we want them to stay. That is why we have brought

forward details of the scheme, and I commend to the hon. Gentleman the statement of intent that contains many of those details.

The hon. Gentleman raised specific points about vulnerable people, and he was right to do so. We all have anxieties about the most vulnerable in our society, who may well need assistance. UK Visas and Immigration already has assisted digital schemes, and we want to roll those out to community groups and organisations that already work in local areas, so that support is there for people who may find a digital process difficult. He mentioned iPhones and the chip-checker. The digital application will be available on any computer, tablet or smartphone, but the chip-checker is currently available only on Android. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Home Secretary has recently raised that matter with Apple, because of course we would like the chip-checker to work on everything. There will, however, be facilities for those who wish to carry out the process on their smartphone—that process can be saved at every point, and people can then verify their documents in a contact centre or through many of the partner organisations with which we are currently working.

The hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned that 3.3 million EU citizens live in the UK. That is why we are moving to a private beta testing mode—we need assurance that the system will work, and then to have a phased roll-out. That is very important. We must also reflect that EU citizens have every right to be here, and they will continue to have those rights until the end of December 2020. For two and half years people will be able to register, and we will encourage them to do so. Importantly, this is the first publication of the scheme, and it gives the statement of intent. We then have a long period before the scheme launches next spring, so that we can be confident we have it right. I do not pretend that this is not a learning process; this is the largest exercise on this scale, and we are determined to listen to our partner organisations, and to citizens groups, to ensure that we make this a success for those EU citizens, who are so important to us.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome the statement by my right hon. Friend—I think it is generous, and indeed it is. It is worth reflecting that within the criteria she laid out, we will now begin the process of ensuring that we do not have people in the UK with criminal records that could affect British citizens, which we have had to put up with for some time under European Union rules. As someone whose sister has lived and worked for pretty much all her life in Italy, can I ask whether the Minister is aware that Guy Verhofstadt at the European Parliament recently chastised other countries for failing to make the same kinds of arrangements, and with the necessary pace of change, alongside the changes that we have brought forward?

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about criminal record checks, and all applicants aged 10 or over will be checked against the UK's national police database and watch lists. Applicants over 18 will be asked about their criminal history in the UK, and indeed overseas. My right hon. Friend has raised a significant point: this is an important, clear offer to EU citizens, which sets out the process that we

[Caroline Nokes]

wish them to go through over the next few years. The Home Secretary has made the point that it is important that UK citizens who live in other EU states should have the same confidence, and we will continue to work with the EU and other member states to reinforce that message. I accept that 1 million British citizens live in the EU, compared with the 3.3 million for whom we have responsibility to see through the registration process in this country. Nevertheless, 1 million is still a significant number, and I will continue, in engagement with our European neighbours, to reinforce that point.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance notice of her statement. When witnesses from the 3 million group, which represents the 3 million EU citizens living in the UK, and witnesses from Irish in Britain, gave evidence recently to the Exiting the European Union Committee, they said that the Windrush scandal had dented their confidence in the Home Office, and raised anxiety about their new status. Those of us who sit on the Joint Committee on Human Rights and have had a chance to see some of the Home Office files on the Windrush generation have very real concerns about process in the Home Office. Many of us will have been approached by constituents—I was approached by a constituent at a social event last Friday night who wished to express concern about his status as an EU citizen. Does the Minister agree that the absolute principle should be that no EU citizen living in the UK should suffer as a result of the Brexit outcome, in which of course they had no vote? Will she consider waiving the registration fee, as the Scottish Government are going to do for public sector workers and have suggested the British Government should do across the board?

There are potentially significant numbers of people who could fall through the cracks. If just 5% of the estimated 3.3 million EU citizens living in the UK do not register by the deadline, there will be a population of nearly 200,000 left without status. Will the Minister tell us what will happen to EU citizens who do not apply in time?

What conversations has the Minister had with the Scottish Government about the detail of the scheme and how it is to be implemented? The Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for external affairs in the Scottish Government, Fiona Hyslop, and the Welsh Government's Cabinet Secretary for Finance have written to the Home Office stating it would be unacceptable for more burdens as a result of the scheme to be placed on local authorities without first speaking to the Scottish and Welsh Governments. Will she confirm that that letter, unlike recent missives from the Scottish Government, will be replied to and that there will be proper liaison with the devolved Administrations in this respect?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her question. We have been clear from the start that the devolved Administrations should be fully engaged in the process. We have held separate sessions with the devolved Administrations about the design of the settlement scheme and they are also involved in regular conversations with local authorities about communications with EU citizens across the country.

The hon. and learned Lady rightly raises the concerns of her constituents. I am sure that every Member will have had constituents come to their surgeries to talk about not simply the process but status after we leave the EU—I know that I have. It is really important that we all reiterate the Prime Minister's message, which is that we want them to stay. They have contributed a great deal to our country and we wish them to continue to do so.

On fees, we have set out very clearly that the agreement reached with the EU allows a fee up to the cost of an equivalent document for UK nationals. The fee of £65 to apply for status under the settlement scheme is in line with the current cost of obtaining a permanent residence document. To charge a lower fee than the current fee EU citizens are charged for permanent residency would of course disadvantage those who have already paid that fee.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I welcome today's announcement, which will allow EU citizens to apply for settled status in the easiest way possible. May I suggest that the Home Office consults with community groups, such as Cheltenham's Polish Tara, to ensure that when the scheme is rolled out it is as user friendly as possible?

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend, who is right to emphasise the need for the scheme to be as user friendly as possible and the importance of consultation. We are already undertaking extensive communications work with various communities across the UK and will continue to do so. We recognise the importance of encouraging EU citizens living here to register in a timely manner before the deadline, and of ensuring they understand that we are introducing a streamlined process and seeking to make it as easy as possible.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Immigration Minister for these further details today, which the Home Affairs Committee asked for and looks forward to scrutinising in more detail. Guy Verhofstadt, before the Committee yesterday, urged other European countries to do more to provide more information about the arrangements.

On the status of children whose parents may not register them, or who may be in care and may reach June 2021 without being registered, can the Minister say whether this means that after that date they will not be lawfully resident here? Does she worry that that will mean they have lost legal rights? What action is she taking to prevent children who have grown up here and lived here for many years losing their legal rights?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Lady raises some important points, in particular about children. She referenced children in the care system. As I set out in my statement, there will be no fee for them. Local authorities clearly have a significant responsibility to ensure that children in the care system are registered in a timely manner. We will have a proportionate response to those who have not registered before the end of June 2021. We will be working extremely hard to ensure that as many are registered as possible. For those who are here lawfully and have been resident for the required five-year period,

we have to ensure that our response takes on board the comments of all people to make sure that no child is disadvantaged.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The Minister will know that proportionately my constituency has more eastern European immigrants than any other in the country, so I welcome the scheme and the phased roll-out, which I hope means we can get it right. As a result of that high level of immigration, I have had a number of visits from European ambassadors. Can she reassure me that she will work with ambassadors and embassies, so that we provide information to communities through as many avenues as possible and get this right?

Caroline Nokes: Since coming into this role, I have had the opportunity to engage with a range of ambassadors from across the EU. I will certainly continue to do so. I am very conscious that a significant part of this is about communications. We have already started our communications plan, but that will ramp up significantly over the course of the next few months. It is crucial that EU communities, wherever they live in the country, have the opportunity to know what the scheme is about and to understand it. Today, I have published an op-ed piece in a Polish newspaper. There will continue to be significant engagement with foreign newspapers.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I thank officials from the Home Office and the Department for Exiting the European Union for briefing members of the Exiting the European Union Committee last week on how the arrangements were being developed. Will the Minister confirm that the Government's offer of settled status will apply to the 3 million-plus EU citizens in all circumstances? If, heaven forbid, no deal were reached, will those citizens who have already been granted settled status, under the roll-out timetable that the Minister has reported to the House today, keep it? Will the Government keep the scheme open to all the rest who have not yet applied, so they can remain in the United Kingdom even if there were no deal?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. I commend the work of the many Select Committees who have sought over the past six months to summon me before them, including his own. We are not anticipating failure. That is an important part of this: we have confidence that there will be a deal. We have reached an agreement with the EU guaranteeing the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and of UK nationals living in the EU, and we do not expect that issue to be reopened. I take very seriously the commitment we have made to those EU citizens and I regard that as absolutely of prime importance.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I have been very frustrated about some of the mischief from some parts, which has caused concern for my constituents who are affected. I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, but will she set out for the House what discussions are being had with the European Union about the rights of British citizens living in the EU?

Caroline Nokes: I can always rely on my hon. Friend to ensure there is never any mischief from Corby. This is absolutely crucial. We have set out, both in previous

announcements and commitments and today in our statement of intent, what we are seeking to do for EU citizens living here. I would like to reassure him that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I, when engaging with officials, leaders or ambassadors across the EU, are reiterating the point time and again about how important it is that UK citizens living in EU members states are extended the same rights and have it made clear to them how they should secure them.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Minister provide clarity on EU citizens who are married to UK citizens, but who currently may not be resident in the UK? I have a number of constituents whose husbands or wives work abroad and the residency test is not always met. Will they have to apply through a new system to have residency at a future date if they are married to a British citizen?

Caroline Nokes: We are very conscious, where there are durable relationships of the type the right hon. Gentleman describes, that it is important that that is clearly affirmed for them. We have set out in detail in the rules how we are going to address those different situations, including where UK citizens are married to EU citizens who may be living abroad and where EU citizens living here may have non-EEA partners or spouses. They will have an extension of the rights set out in the withdrawal agreement and the statements we have previously made. We will, of course, be providing further detail in due course.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): EU citizens in my constituency would be forgiven for thinking, if they had listened to Opposition Front Benchers, that this process is so complicated that they would be required to recite the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which we know that only the Solicitor General can do. On that basis, and to reassure them, will my right hon. Friend confirm that all that EU citizens have to do is prove their identity and residence and declare that there are no criminal convictions? When she does that, will she welcome all those EU citizens in my constituency to do just that, because we want them to stay?

Caroline Nokes: The EU citizens living in Bexhill and Battle are very important to us, as are all citizens currently living here as well as those who will arrive during the implementation period. My hon. Friend is right: as I have set out, EU citizens will be asked to demonstrate their identity and residency and to declare any criminality. I got rather anxious that this might provoke the Solicitor General into reciting the entire withdrawal agreement, but I am somewhat relieved that he does not appear to want to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her statement. The agri-food sector in my constituency is very important. Workers from the EU make up large proportions of the workforce in Mash Direct and Willowbrook Foods, to give just two examples. She has outlined how the scheme will work for those who have lived here for five years, but for those who have lived here for under five years, and are in special circumstances, will she ensure that in Northern Ireland—as indeed in all the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—we have enough staff to help applicants to fill

[Jim Shannon]

in the applications with the necessary details and facts? Also, with a 12.5% shortfall of workers to harvest crops, will there be a seasonal scheme that helps them?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman returns to a common theme of seasonal agricultural workers and indeed, the importance of EU citizens working in many parts of the UK who come here on a seasonal basis and may well not have been here for the required five years. As I set out in my statement, EU citizens who have been here for less than the five-year period will be able to apply for pre-settled status. Once they have accrued the five years, they will be able to apply for settled status, but there will be no additional cost. He makes an important point about those who might find the process difficult. We are determined not only to make it as simple and streamlined as possible, but to put in place contact centres to provide the required assistance to people who need it.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I welcome today's announcement, which will give clarity, reassurance and peace of mind to my constituents and their friends who are affected. I also reiterate the point that some colleagues have made: we need to push for a reciprocal agreement, so that UK citizens living in the EU also get the benefit of this announcement.

Caroline Nokes: The message from the House this afternoon is very clear. We have made significant progress in publishing the scheme and are determined to have a process that is up and running and has been through private beta testing very shortly. It is incumbent on our EU friends and neighbours to make sure that they do the same for British citizens who are living in other EU states.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), asked a number of questions. I was carefully ticking them off and I am not sure that the Minister, whose statement I welcome, clearly answered them. I will drill down on one—the criteria. The European citizens in my constituency say that they may have to move between European countries and here when they have family obligations. Some may not have worked or have ever claimed benefits. She mentioned flexibility, but I know that there will be citizens in my constituency right now who will unfortunately not feel reassured and would like to know more about the detail of how those criteria will be assessed, so that they are consistent with the principles of respect for family life.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for the question. We are determined to make sure that a whole range of evidence is clearly set out in the statement of intent for those who may not have worked—for those who have been here for the required period but cannot evidence it through Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs or Department for Work and Pensions records. That includes a wide range of evidence, such as mortgage statements, tenancy agreements and utility bills. We will certainly be encouraging case workers to be flexible and understanding and appreciate that some individuals may not have those documents in their own name, but in a partner's name, and evidence of a durable relationship will suffice.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement and particularly its emphasis, because it is vital that we continue to say how welcome EU citizens are in the UK and how valued they are for their contribution to our country. Will she say more to reassure UK citizens living in EU countries about the reciprocal arrangements, because UK citizens—my constituents—tell me that they are concerned about that as well?

Caroline Nokes: In discussions with the EU, ambassadors and heads of member states, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is reinforcing that message at every point. There has been significant investment in time and resources to make sure that we have a scheme and a process that will work. We need our European friends and neighbours to reciprocate.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): There was plenty to welcome in this statement, but the Minister ducked the fundamental question about what happens to the tens, if not hundreds of thousands who will inevitably miss the cut-off date. What will their status be and what did she mean when she referred to a proportionate response?

Caroline Nokes: We are absolutely determined to work to make sure that as many EU citizens as possible are registered ahead of the deadline, but we will give a reasonable period in which to apply. For those who miss the deadline and have a good reason for doing so, we will of course have a response that is both pragmatic and takes into account individual circumstances, should people have been, for whatever reason—whether through ill health or mental illness—prevented from applying. We will further discuss these issues with stakeholders over coming weeks to make sure that we get it right.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm how somebody who has obtained settled status will be able to evidence that if they are asked to do so in future by a landlord or employer? If that involves a document or a card, will that document last forever, or will they have to renew it after a certain point?

Caroline Nokes: Individuals will receive a digital status, which they will be able to provide to employers and landlords through the online digital service. We already have evidence of this working through our digital right-to-work checks, which were introduced earlier this year.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Over 20% of my constituents are EU citizens, and despite the warm words, about two thirds have reported negative experiences linked to their nationalities since the referendum. A local dentist I met this week said that the day after the referendum, a patient said that he and his nurse would be sent back where they came from—she is Lithuanian and he is a British citizen of Kurdish descent. I want to ask a very specific question. Irish and Polish citizens have rights that predate our membership of the European Union under legislation that is no longer compatible with immigration legislation. Will that be reviewed so that those rights are preserved?

Caroline Nokes: We have been very clear that in the case of Irish citizens, who have a relationship with us that dates way back to the 1920s, we are absolutely upholding those rights. The hon. Gentleman mentions

those awful incidents where EU citizens were negatively impacted by the outcome of the referendum, and they encountered the sort of incident that he describes. We are seeking to send a very clear message from this Government, and from UK society, that we recognise the contribution that EU citizens make to this country. We want them to stay. This sets out very clearly their rights and how those who have been here for five years will immediately be eligible for settled status. Those who have been here for less than five years will be able to apply for pre-settled status and accrue the five years. We are pleased to make this really important step, because we wish to give a significant message of reassurance to those people who have been living and contributing here for many years.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I thank the Minister for her statement. She is absolutely right. Many of my constituents who are EU nationals have brought their concerns to my surgery.

I have a very simple question. Do settled status and pre-settled status give EU citizens the same right to use the national health service as UK nationals?

Caroline Nokes: Yes.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Minister say a little more about the situation of children? I know that parents are concerned about it. Children will not be able to provide utility bills or employment records, and better-off parents will probably not have received any benefits for them. What other evidence would the Government find acceptable to demonstrate that a child has the right to settled status, and where will they look for that evidence?

Caroline Nokes: Obviously there will be a significant link between many children and their parents' status, but we will accept evidence from educational institutions, and from healthcare professionals who have encountered

people during their stay. Similarly, if adults cannot provide records from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, evidence of university or college attendance will suffice.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): A significant number of my constituents are EU nationals. What provision is there for those who need to take a break in their residency to go and look after a relative who is ill? How will that affect their settled status?

Caroline Nokes: There is provision in the rules for people to leave the country for up to six months in any 12-month period. However, in cases of illness or, perhaps, pregnancy, when people choose to return to a different country—perhaps to have a baby—we will certainly accommodate such absences, with a view to granting rather than refusing, and doing so in a sympathetic and flexible manner.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Are there any posts that EU citizens in the UK will have to give up in April next year? I am thinking of, for instance, local councillors.

Caroline Nokes: It is not the intention that any EU citizen who benefits from either a service or a post will have to give that up. What we are saying to EU citizens is “We wish you to stay here, and to continue to live as you do now.”

BILL PRESENTED

VOYEURISM (OFFENCES) (No. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary David Gauke, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Penny Mordaunt, Secretary Matt Hancock, the Attorney General, Andrea Leadsom, Rory Stewart, Lucy Frazer and Edward Argar, presented a Bill to make certain acts of voyeurism an offence, and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 25 June, and to be printed (Bill 25) with explanatory notes (Bill 25-EN).

Backbench Business

Refugee Family Reunion

1.32 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House notes that 18 to 24 June is Refugee Week; further notes that many families throughout the world have been torn apart by war and persecution; welcomes the fact that the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No.2) Bill was given its Second Reading without opposition on 16 March 2018; and calls on the Government to support the provisions of that Bill.

It is a great privilege and pleasure to open the debate. I thank its co-sponsors, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). Refugee Week is an important time at which to consider these issues and, indeed, the contribution that refugees make to societies around the world, although many left their own lands in very difficult circumstances. Many, of course, did not want to leave, and many now wish to return home but, sadly, will not realise that dream.

Last night, an event was held at Speaker's House to mark Refugee Week. Indeed, yesterday was World Refugee Day. It was a fantastic event. The National Theatre, in co-operation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, organised a number of sketches and another performances. The aim was to convey in a more engaging manner, and sometimes with humour, the feelings of refugees and the difficulties that they experience, and the choice that they have had to make to flee their homelands. Celebrities were present, including the actors David Morrissey, Cate Blanchett and Colin Firth—"Colin", as he is now known to Nikita Harkin from my office, as she had to accompany him to Speaker's House. It was great to see that people who were probably some of the most fortunate in our global village had the empathy, the social responsibility and the simple concern to give of their time to press the issues of refugees, in particular as UNHCR special ambassadors.

A great point was made by the right hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow), whom Members may well know better as Mr Speaker himself. He observed that the presence of celebrities was invigorating, but also reminded people that there was a "we" as well as a "me" when it came to the issue of refugees in our world. Such events are important, as are debates like this. I know that this debate will be watched by not just many people who work with refugees, but refugees themselves who are looking for hope and some changes, and perhaps some warm words from the Government, which I am sure will come at some stage.

An unprecedented number of people—68.5 million—have been forced to flee from their homes, and 22.5 million of them have become refugees. Amazingly, 50% of those 22.5 million are under the age of 18. I have become more aware of this subject as a result of my private Member's Bill, the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, which had its Second Reading on 16 March. The more one delves into the subject, the more one finds out, although I do not think that anyone—even a refugee—can really be an expert, because everyone has a different story.

The refugees who may be watching the debate should know that they are definitely not alone, and I know that from the organisations that worked on my Bill with me. Jon Featonby of the Red Cross has been fantastic. I am also grateful to James Bulman and Laura Padoan of the UNHCR, Seb Klier of the Refugee Council, Lucy Wake of Amnesty International, and Sam Nadel of Oxfam.

I have mentioned those people as individuals, and also to gain further recognition for their groups. The Red Cross, the UNHCR, the Refugee Council, Amnesty and Oxfam are not just abstract bodies; they are bodies that contain dedicated people who are working very hard to make the lives of others better. I consider that laudable. I wish that I had the abilities, and perhaps the time and the inclination, to do the same. Sometimes in life one thinks to oneself, "There are definitely people who are doing better things with their lives than I am with mine."

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I echo the hon. Gentleman's praise for the people who are making that contribution, but does he recognise that throughout the country, in civil society, a huge body of people are making a contribution in every one of our towns and cities? He will know, I think, that Sheffield was the country's first city of sanctuary, making the positive statement that we welcome those who flee persecution and war. Does he agree that that sanctuary movement, which has now been taken up by many other towns, can make a very positive statement to refugees?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: That is fantastic, and Sheffield can be very proud. Becoming the first city of sanctuary is one of the proudest badges that any city can wear, and it is something for all other towns and cities to emulate. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the contribution is not made just by organisations, as is clear when we drill down further in society. I think that the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), who was present for my Bill's Second Reading on 16 March, is very pleased by my mentions of her city. The tabloid newspapers often tell us that there is overcrowding in the south-east, or a lack of welcome for refugees, but in fact the people of Canterbury have been very welcoming, which is a great credit to them. However, I am sure that they are not alone. The hon. Gentleman has made a great point about the city of Sheffield. Many people—in charity shops, for instance—are doing whatever they can to make a better life for the refugees who come to the United Kingdom, and that is very welcome.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that organisations such as Bath Welcomes Refugees in my constituency are not only supporting refugees, but raising their profile and our awareness of the terrible fate that many face in countries across the world, and making us more sympathetic to their cause?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Yes, and the more we are aware of and we see the big tide of support for refugees, the quieter the more mean-minded voices become. I think it was the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) who mentioned in a previous debate that when we drill down with the public—and engage with and talk to them about refugees, and are not afraid of the arguments—we see that, despite what

some in the media would like to say, the public do come on board, and that in fact they are doing that anyway. We need to catch up in our public discourse and debate with what members of the public are doing in Sheffield, in Canterbury, in charity shops in Stornoway, Orkney, Shetland, Land's End or wherever, or in Ireland and other countries. People are doing this everywhere, and people do have an understanding of, and sympathy towards, refugees.

When I was dealing with my private Member's Bill, it became clear to me that it gave hope to people, even when it had completed just its first stage in Parliament. That brought home to me the responsibility I had. First, I had to deliver the bad news that we were only through the first stage, because there are many stages for Bills to go through, and that it therefore might not become law. We must still wait for a money resolution. I am sure that the Home Office will be generous and make sure we do have that money resolution, but we must then get the Bill through Committee and guide it through the Lords. There are therefore other steps to take, and in addition to that—this is probably strange for Opposition Members to think about—we do need parliamentary stability, because if we have another election in the next wee while, that private Member's Bill will be gone, which will affect refugees who are looking for hope.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab) *rose*—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Of course there are possible solutions to that, and one of them might come now.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) for giving way, in part because it gives me an opportunity to practise my pronunciation of his constituency.

Will the hon. Gentleman join me in redoubling efforts to encourage the Minister to commit today to urging her colleagues to bring forward that money resolution? After all, if the Government do not like the Bill, they can always vote it down at a later stage, but to block it due to the lack of a money resolution, particularly in Refugee Week, would feel very frustrating.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady's pronunciation of my constituency was excellent. Some Members might feel they are a bit of a refugee in this Parliament when trying to say the name of my constituency, or indeed they might think I am the refugee. Either way, the hon. Lady's point is absolutely on the money.

I hope that the Home Office will take this point on board. I have had some discussions with Government Whips about the money resolution, and the lights so far have been going green. We have yet to move on to the Home Office itself, but that is coming, and I am hoping for further green lights.

In 2012, legal aid was taken away from refugees, but that did not happen in Scotland. Moreover, if Scotland were independent, I am sure we would be in line with other European countries, and I hope that the UK as it is at the moment ensures that child refugees have the same rights as adult refugees. That is what my private Member's Bill tries to do. Some Members have expressed a strong concern about children being sent ahead as anchors, but that does not stack up at all, given the

rights that adult refugees have anyway and the fact that that does not happen in other European countries. Anyway, who uses members of their family as bargaining chips?

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his speech. He is right to draw attention to children's rights. Does he agree that we have an absolute obligation to allow children to be reunited and to bring in their parents and family members because we have signed and ratified the UN convention on the rights of the child, which states:

"States Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child"

How can it be in the best interests of a child for them not to be able to bring their parents and other family members to live with them?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: That is absolutely correct; I could not have put it better myself. I thank the hon. Lady, who is co-sponsoring this debate, for that invaluable intervention pointing out our international obligations.

I agree that it is in the best interests of children to be with their parents, and I must make a remark about the utter revulsion and disgust many of us feel about what is happening in the United States of America, with migrant children being taken from their parents. I am at a loss as to whether that is stupidity or evil—I cannot decide which, but it is certainly not a good situation. I think that all of us know that when children are being ripped from their parents in such a way, we do not need quotations. The American Administration have used biblical quotations, but we all know in our hearts that that is wrong. We do not need to quote and counter-quote, and make arguments about this. If those in the Administration of the United States of America do not know in their hearts that there is something very wrong with that, there is something wrong with their moral compass, and I do hope that that all changes.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I am sure everybody in the Chamber thinks what has been happening in the US is abhorrent. Would not the best reaction from this Government be to set an example on family reunification, and to take away the threat and anxiety of young people, in particular, who fear being sent out of the country when they approach their 18th birthday? If I was not in the Chamber, I would be at the weekly refugee lunch that Refugees Welcome puts on in Hammersmith. Voluntary organisations are doing a fantastic job, as the hon. Gentleman says, but we need leadership from the Government.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I thank the hon. Gentleman for missing his lunch to be here. He makes a fantastic point about the fear that people feel. When we speak to and get to know refugees, what we learn can seem almost mundane, given the big picture we are trying to sort out legally, but when we drill down to the personal level, we see that people are not sleeping at night due to fear and worry. Their fear might not even be for themselves; it might, as I know from one case, be fear for a sister in a refugee camp in Sudan. The fear is that the sister will

[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

try to do what her brother did and go through the Sahara with people traffickers, when he saw unspeakable things happening to women. The fear is of the sister being so desperate in the refugee camp that she will jump from that frying pan into a very horrible fire.

I have talked about my private Member's Bill and what an independent Scotland would do, but I hope the Government will take these matters forward in an immigration Bill. It would be to their great credit if they did, and that could mean that my private Member's Bill would be seen as redundant in the next few months. I know that an immigration Bill is coming. [Interruption.] I see a smile from the Minister. Perhaps it is a rueful smile, but we might see some progress in that Bill. I am sure that the Minister and many members of the Government agree. Indeed, there is now a new broom at the Home Office—we have seen some fantastic things happening.

I give credit where credit is due: the *Financial Times* pointed out a week last Monday the difficulty in getting doctors to come in, and by the following Friday that seemed to be resolved, much to the benefit of doctors themselves. Everybody in the health service was a winner, and the Government are getting the credit. If we could now also sort out the issue of work visas for crews of fishing boats on the west coast of Scotland, that would be fantastic. Everybody in Scotland wants that to happen; we are just dealing with a person or two in London who does not let it happen, but it is damaging our economy. Interestingly, these migrant workers would not be included in the migration figures, and boats would be back fishing and there would be processing going on. But I digress; that was more of a personal conversation between me and the Minister. Some of my constituents at home will be pleased that I have raised this matter, however, and they will see the link between all these issues.

I know that many Members want to speak, and it was flagged to me that some wanted to intervene—most of them have done so. When working with refugees we become aware of many things, and the point made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside that I mentioned earlier was very valid: the public are absolutely onside when politicians are courageous enough to make a case, and do not run for the quick populist hit of just talking numbers, but instead start talking about human beings.

I am coming to the end of my remarks, but I want to give the final word to a refugee who recited a poem last night at Speaker's House. Being from Scotland, and particularly Gaelic Scotland, I know of the poets who have communicated to people in many ways that speech makers and any number of orators cannot. I am thinking back into history of Alasdair mac Mhaighstir, Somhairle Maclean and Iain Lom, who Max Hastings credited as being perhaps the first war journalist ever. Iain Lom was hiding behind a rock at the battle of Inverlochy in 1645 when Alasdair Mac Colla came up and asked what he was doing behind a rock. Iain Lom said, "Well, if I get killed today, who is going to be praising your heroism tomorrow, Alasdair?" There is a great deal to be said for poets generally, but the poet last night absolutely blew my socks off. He was fantastic at communicating his issues among the other refugees I met in Speaker's House last night. Some of them consider themselves to have been refugees all their lives. I have

tried to think of "refugee" as a temporary status before the person becomes a welder—like Yohannes from Canterbury, whom we spoke of on 16 March—a doctor or another productive member of society.

I met a woman from Somalia who, although she was a refugee, dreamed of going home. I asked her whether she would maintain her language skills and pass them on to her children and she said she would, which is a good thing. People in Gaelic Scotland—probably also in Wales and, indeed, in England—are pleased when migrants go off to countries such as Australia and New Zealand and maintain their language skills. We in Gaelic Scotland are very pleased when people come back from Nova Scotia, Ceap Breatainn in particular, and have maintained their languages. If we want that as a set of values for ourselves, surely we could allow, enable and help refugees to maintain their culture and language. Wearing my Chair of the International Trade Committee cap, it is important that we have such skills in the UK going forward, so that when those countries become more prosperous and trade with us, we can trade with them using citizens who still have those language skills.

I want to indulge the House awhile with J. J. Bola's poem from last night because—with the greatest of respect to today's speakers—he puts into words what it is like to be a refugee much better than any Member here today could and certainly better than I could. He asked me to point out that he was a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the dictatorship has led to 6 million people being killed and many more displaced. I think he said last night that he arrived in the UK at the age of six. I will finish off with his words because they are worth thinking about. He wrote:

"imagine how it feels to be chased out of home. to have your grip ripped. loosened from your fingertips something you so dearly held on to. like a lovers hand that slips when pulled away you are always reaching.

my father would speak of home. Reaching. speaking of familiar faces. girl next door

who would eventually grow up to be my mother. the fruit seller at the market. the lonely man at the top of the road who nobody spoke to. and our house at the bottom of the street

lit up by a single flickering lamp

where beyond was only darkness. there

they would sit and tell stories

of monsters that lurked and came only at night to catch the children who sat and listened to stories of monsters that lurked.

this is how they lived. each memory buried.

an artefact left to be discovered by archaeologists. the last words on a dying family member's lips. this was sacred.

not even monsters could taint it.

but there were monsters that came during the day. monsters that tore families apart with their giant hands. and fingers that slept on triggers. the sound of gunshots ripping through the sky became familiar like the tapping of rain fall on a window sill.

monster that would kill and hide behind speeches, suits and ties. monsters that would chase families away forcing them to leave everything behind.

i remember when we first stepped off the plane. everything was foreign.

unfamiliar. Uninviting. even the air in my lungs left me short of breath.

we came here to find refuge. they called us refugees so we hid ourselves in their language until we sounded just like them. changed the way we dressed to look just like them.

made this our home until we lived just like them and began to speak of familiar faces. girl next door who would grow up to be a

mother. the fruit seller at the market.

the lonely man at the top of the road

who nobody spoke to. and our house at the bottom of the street lit up by a single flickering lamp to keep away the darkness.

there we would sit and watch police that lurked and came only at night to arrest the youths who sat and watched police that lurked and came only at night. this is how we lived.

i remember one day i heard them say to me

they come here to take our jobs

they need to go back to where they came from

not knowing that i was one of the ones who came. i told them that a refugee is simply

someone who is trying to make a home.

so next time when you go home, tuck your children in and kiss your families goodnight be glad that the monsters

never came for you.

in their suits and ties.

never came for you.

in the newspapers with the media lies.

never came for you.

that you are not despised.

and know that deep inside the hearts of each and every one of us

we are all always reaching for a place that we can call *home*."

1.54 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), and I pay tribute to his work in this area. It is fitting that the Member for such a constituency, which is beautiful and has wonderful people, is acting and leading the charge in this area, not least because it has been the site of forced emigration in the past.

I welcome this important debate in the middle of Refugee Week. The subject is important all over the world—in Germany, in Italy and in the US—and I welcome President Trump's decision to change course on the policy of separating children from their families at the border. This issue is also important in my constituency, which has welcomed all kinds of people fleeing persecution in other countries. For example, in the 1970s, we welcomed the Ugandan Asians. I pay tribute to how they have made a new life in this country, building amazing businesses, creating an amazing sense of community and integrating into our community. They are amazing people.

Others have come to my constituency more recently. I meet many of them because Kennedy House in Wigston in my constituency is a centre for people seeking asylum and new refugees. I pay tribute to those who volunteer with those people, helping them to integrate into our community and in other practical ways. They often bring some of them to my surgery, so I hear about some of their problems. I also pay tribute to the groups, such as Market Harborough Helping Refugees, that raise funds to help refugees in this country and overseas with practical things such as blankets to help them as they seek a new home.

Today's debate is about the importance of family reunion but before I turn to that, this being Refugee Week, I hope the House will not mind me briefly mentioning a few things that we could do to improve the lives of refugees. I have three suggestions that have sprung from the work done by the all-party parliamentary group on loneliness, of which I am a member, and from my constituency experiences.

The first thing that the Government should do is clarify the rules on refugees and asylum seekers doing voluntary work in the community. I understand the arguments against allowing asylum seekers to do paid work and the arguments about pull factors, but they should be able to do voluntary work. By doing such work, they can express their strong desire to do something helpful for the community that is hosting them, but they can also integrate and learn English, so it can play an important role in them becoming part of our country. Unfortunately, refugee charities tell me that the rules are not clear and that people have lost out as a result of doing voluntary work, so it would be good to clarify them.

The second thing that we could do to improve the lives of refugees living here is to help more of them to get a decision within our target time. Probably the most common reason that asylum seekers come to my surgery is that the deadline that they were given for a decision on their application has passed and they are wondering what is happening. It is clearly difficult to make decisions on complicated cases involving people who have fled from war zones where public records may have been destroyed or otherwise made unavailable, but, if we could speed up decisions, that would help many people who spend a long time unable to do anything but wait, which is a painful experience for them.

Kate Green: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman mentions the delays in getting a decision. A group of refugees from Refugee Voice recently visited me in my constituency to make exactly that point. Living with indecision and uncertainty, sometimes for years, puts incredible emotional pressure on people.

Relating that to the hon. Gentleman's earlier point about access to paid employment, does he agree that, increasingly, decisions are taking a very long time to be made, through no fault of the claimant, and that asylum seekers should be allowed to work after a certain period if delays in decision making mean there is a failure to give them a decision on their status?

Neil O'Brien: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I have heard that argument, which is an intriguing one. It would be a big step to do anything that suggested those people would be able to work in this country, so we should be very careful when we think about it. However, I understand the argument that, if people have to wait a very long time, perhaps something about their treatment should change at that point.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I support everything that has just been said. However, there is a real problem with identifying people and it has to be clear. I have been dealing with people who claim to be someone they are not. The danger is that you will get the wrong person and the wrong country. So it is very important to ascertain the facts. That is the reason it takes so long. I agree it should be speeded up, but that is the reason.

Neil O'Brien: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is extremely difficult and no one should downplay or minimise the difficulty of the task facing the officials who make these difficult decisions and who are trying to investigate very complicated cases.

My third suggestion for improving the lives of refugees in the UK is to teach them English. When I meet people who have come here as refugees and hear their stories, I am particularly struck by what it is like to arrive in a country where they do not know anyone. It is often a very different culture, and they are navigating quite complicated bureaucracy without speaking any of the language.

I am always amazed and impressed by how quickly some people pick up English, having started with absolutely nothing. I met an amazing Burundian woman the other day at the all-party parliamentary group on loneliness. She talked about her story and spoke in brilliant English, even though only a few short years ago she spoke no English at all. None the less, despite the success of many people in learning English when they come to this country, it can be very isolating and very lonely for those who do not have the language.

The fiscal environment, notwithstanding the welcome investment in the NHS, remains difficult but, working through community and voluntary groups, it need not cost a huge amount to help more people to learn English more quickly. The benefits in creating an integrated society in which more refugees can work and feel that they really belong would be enormous.

The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar quoted a number of excellent Scottish poets. When I meet refugees, I am often struck by the words of Grace Nichols's poem "Epilogue":

"I have crossed an ocean
I have lost my tongue
from the root of the old one
a new one has sprung."

I am always reminded of that poem because it is an incredibly impressive thing to have come to this country with nothing and to have learned a language, which I would struggle to do under ideal conditions. The power of the language to make people feel properly part of this country is very strong.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the way he is making the argument for learning the English language. I come from Gaelic Scotland, and Plaid Cymru Members come from Welsh Wales. Rather than the idea that refugees must learn our language because that is what we speak here and they must fit in, the idea of learning our language to stop them feeling isolated and lonely is commendable. I can get behind that idea, rather than demanding that people speak a language that I do not think is one of the original languages of the British Isles, but that is a minor point.

Neil O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman might say he makes a minor point, but it is an entirely fair one. I have been to some of the pubs in his constituency where other languages are spoken, and I certainly did not feel isolated or lonely—in fact, they were extremely sociable and very pleasant places to visit.

On family reunification, this country has a proud record of welcoming persecuted people from all over the world who have come to this country in fear for

their lives. I think back to my childhood in Huddersfield: we had Chilean family friends who came to this country because their kind of politics was no longer welcome in Chile. My childhood in Huddersfield was enriched not only because those people had come here and worked hard as social workers but because they brought culturally interesting things to us. Family Christmases in Huddersfield involved empanadas, as well as the traditional turkey roast.

The resettlement schemes in this country have been a success. I have met people who have gone through those schemes, and they have had a much better experience than many people who have gone through the asylum route. We can learn a lot from the success of some of those schemes.

To summarise the current situation, as the hon. Gentleman has approached it, refugees can bring their children here if they are under the age of 18, but adult children are not included. Children under the age of 18 cannot bring their parents here. There are also powers for leave to be granted outside those rules in exceptional circumstances.

I can see the arguments both for and against changing those rules, and it sounds as if Ministers are thinking about it carefully. The question is whether we should go down the route of changing the rules, or whether we should instead use the exceptional circumstances rules in a more generous, more humane way. By way of analogy, I think of the people who are working on the Windrush generation. We need a high-calibre team with enough time to think properly about processing difficult cases. One way or another, the hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. The question is how we solve it.

I am not saying the hon. Gentleman's idea is necessarily a bad one or the wrong one, but I will rehearse the downsides for a moment because this is a debate. We need to think carefully about whether we would be creating an incentive for young children to be trafficked. He rightly asks: who would use their children as bargaining chips? When people make the argument that the proposed change might lead to more unaccompanied children travelling to the UK irregularly, it is not a criticism of those children's families, and we do not necessarily know anything about their circumstances. The children might be completely on their own, and it is almost certainly the case that, if they have parents, they will be desperate parents in a warzone who fear for their lives. We need to think about whether the change could lead to children being exploited by unscrupulous people smugglers.

In my own area, I am reminded of the case of Ahmed, a young Afghan boy who, in 2016, saved the lives of some 15 people. He was being smuggled into the UK and he arrived at Leicester Forest East services. He and those 15 people were trapped in an airtight lorry and running out of oxygen, and he had the presence of mind to text a charity, Help Refugees, which had given him a mobile phone. That text saved his life and the lives of those around him. They were much luckier than the 70 people who, just a few months previously, had choked to death at the hands of people smugglers in an airtight lorry in Austria. There are some truly wicked people in the people smuggling racket.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there is a live debate on these issues, which is why the hon.

Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) tabled his private Member's Bill in the first place. We can engage in that debate only if the Bill goes into Committee and is given a money resolution. Will the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) join me in gently encouraging his colleagues on the Treasury Bench to do exactly that?

Neil O'Brien: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I am sure Ministers will have heard his important argument about the process.

In general, we must stick to the principle that people should claim asylum in the first safe country they come to. Our policy can definitely affect the secondary movements of people who are fleeing conflict. We see from policy decisions such as Angela Merkel's that one can affect the flow of people. Whether we think her policy is right or wrong, it has certainly changed the flow of people. The decisions we make on the questions raised by both the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar have the potential to affect the movement of people and we have to think about the secondary effects. None the less, I absolutely agree that they are raising an important point about the families of young people who arrive in the UK.

Today's debate is important. There are many different things we could do to improve the lives of people who come to this country as refugees or as claimers of asylum. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar has raised some ways in which we could do that, although there may be different ways of addressing those issues. Those who come to this country as refugees are often very impressive people. In our history, they have often brought a lot to this country in terms of their achievements, work and cultural contribution. I am proud that people think of this country as a good place that they want to get to. In a sense, we should be flattered by the number of people who want to come here and be part of our community. We should think about how we can welcome them into this country.

2.10 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It truly is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), who makes an excellent case for why we should improve the welcome we give refugees. I am glad he feels that way. It was good to hear about the lovely things his constituency organisations are doing to welcome refugees, and I thank him for that. I also thank the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) for bringing us this debate today, in Refugee Week, and for marking the fact that yesterday was World Refugee Day by reading out the moving and beautiful poem that was read by its author, a young refugee, so movingly in Speaker's House yesterday.

This debate is an opportunity for us to celebrate, welcome and improve the huge contribution that refugees make to this country. My constituency has been particularly enriched by people who have made long and often arduous, dangerous journeys across continents, fleeing war, persecution and other disasters. As chair of the all-party group on refugees, I ask myself every day: what can we do in this place to improve the way this country treats refugees? I know we can do this, and I think it is part of who we are as a country to do better.

As hon. Members will know, we are living through a global migration crisis: 65 million people were forcibly displaced in 2016, through poverty, environmental disaster, war, conflict and persecution. We have moral, as well as legal, obligations to assist, but we currently take only a tiny fraction of those people. Refugee family reunion is one area where we can make a difference. Current laws and international agreements exist to help reunite separated families, but they do not go far enough and leave many refugee families separated by international borders. The Second Reading of the hon. Gentleman's private Member's Bill on refugee family reunion, including the right to legal aid, was really significant. The fact that a huge number of MPs turned up to a Friday sitting was a testament to the fact that not only do those MPs, from right across the House, care about refugee rights, but their constituents are also concerned. Our making that difficult decision to be here on a Friday usually has to be done with some level of informed consent, informal or otherwise, from our constituents, whose engagements we may have had to cancel.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I want, again, to put on the record the fact that we had Members from five political parties coming in on Friday 16 March to support us, which was very much welcomed and appreciated.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It seems to me that, as he said, this argument is cutting through: someone with confirmed refugee status should be able to live with their family. To be clear, for the record, we are talking about people who have their status settled and want to be with their family. I agree with the points that some Members make about clarifying who is who and whether or not they have a right to be here, but we do have a process and once someone has their status confirmed, they should be allowed to be reunited with their family. I will be working with the hon. Gentleman and others to capitalise on this political and public progress, and push the progress of this Bill and a separate similar Bill in the House of Lords. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, whom I know to be a very honourable woman. I have had meetings with her and was pleased to discuss these matters with her. I hope she can commit today at least to bringing forward the money resolution, so that we can get this Bill moving and at least debate this, to the satisfaction of our constituents as well as Members across the House.

It is a difficult and perhaps tense moment to mention the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, as we have spent a lot of time on it over the past few months. Indeed, I cannot remember a time when we were not debating it, although it now looks like that period is coming to a close. As part of that Bill, I was glad the Government took on a significant part of the amendment from my friend and colleague Lord Alf Dubs, as well as that proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). She proposed additional changes to maintain the current situation in relation to the obligations we have under our membership of the EU and the Dublin III convention. I am not going to go into detail, but I wish to acknowledge that that is a positive step, although it does not remove the need for the private Members' Bills to make further progress, as those provisions do not contain all that those Bills contain.

[Thangam Debbonaire]

I wish to echo what the hon. Member for Harborough has said about the right to work and tentatively suggest to all colleagues that they should remember that refugees come here with skills and want to work. They do not come here to claim benefits. They want to contribute. Every refugee I have ever met has said, “I want to contribute my skills.” They want to be able to work, but, except with specific permission, they are not allowed to until they have been granted asylum by the Home Office. That would be okay, except that the Home Office target to complete asylum decisions within six months is frequently missed. In my case load, for whatever reason—I am prepared to accept there may be good reasons—that target is, unfortunately, more often honoured in the breach than in the observance. It is often missed by months or even years, which means that skilled people are meanwhile left without opportunities to maintain their skills, support their families and contribute to the national and local economy. This also makes it harder for them to integrate when they are eventually given status. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, they often face restrictions on volunteering. This makes family life harder and makes it particularly difficult for people to get towards the point where they can earn the money they need to reunite their family members and bring their families back together.

Hon. Members may or not be aware that, by contrast, Uganda allows refugees to work immediately, and provides them with land to grow food on and start-up finance to set up their own businesses, if that is what they wish to do. Other countries have also given us useful models. We should at the very least consider a principle of the right to work after six months, which would also encourage the Minister’s Department to end those delays, and the right to volunteer until they can work. I would prefer us to move towards a system where the default setting is the right to work or the right to volunteer, and ideally both. Of course, we need to discuss that and how it would work, but I would like us at least to be considering it as a principle.

There are many other things we can do to improve the way we treat refugees and reunite families, including ending indefinite immigration detention. That is not the subject of this debate, so I am not going to discuss it. We could also restore legal aid, so that refugees can be reunited with their families; prioritise free, high-quality English language teaching; and do more to create safe and legal routes to the UK, with refugee schemes such as the excellent vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. I applaud the Government’s efforts to keep that scheme going and make it as good as it is, but I would like it to be made easier to make in-country or border applications for asylum and resettlement. Keeping people in refugee camps or on the borders at best leaves people in limbo for years and at worst creates a recruiting ground for people traffickers and people who sexually exploit women. We all want to prevent those dangerous journeys—we share that aim—but the way of preventing them is not by making it harder to claim family reunion; it is by increasing safe and legal routes.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, because she is talking about some of the practical steps the Government can take. Children I have visited in the Calais camps—as close as that—have the prima

facie right under the Dubs amendment and Dublin III to come here but are simply not being assessed. They will therefore eventually risk their lives under trains or lorries in order to get here. Those are the sorts of issues, along with the funding of English language teaching and the right of asylum seekers to work here, that would make a practical difference and would help this country.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend for making those excellent points. He is absolutely right to say that there are children in Calais—other hon. Members have been to see them, too—who appear to have a relative who already has status in this country, and who should be here. Making those safe and legal routes available is very important in order to protect children and adults.

In closing, let me say that the forthcoming immigration Bill may give us scope to support amendments in many of these areas, and I hope it does, but we need to create other opportunities to improve the treatment of those looking for sanctuary in this country and to improve our welcome. I urge Members from across the House to read the report that my all-party group compiled, researched and wrote last year, “Refugees Welcome?”. One recommendation was about the right to work, but others were about the other matters I have mentioned. We can all improve the welcome that we as Members of Parliament give to our own constituents. I have been learning Arabic for the past 18 months to make myself a better MP for Syrian and other middle eastern refugees. I am smiling because it is very slow progress—painfully slow; they are learning English faster than I am learning Arabic—but the idea is to make that welcome as genuine and sincere as possible.

This is about who we are as a country. It is about how we want to be seen in the world. It is about the fact that in our increasingly, heartbreakingly divided world, differences are reinforced more than they are bridged. It is about those countries that live out their values and provide safe haven for those who flee war and persecution. Those are the countries that light up a more hopeful future for us all.

2.20 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am grateful to be called to speak in this hugely important debate. I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and wish to pick up on several of her remarks later. She said very movingly that how we treat this subject reflects who we are as a people and the kind of culture and civilisation that we represent.

As the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) said in his opening remarks, the debate in Britain has been driven perhaps for too long by sensationalist tabloid headlines. There is of course a huge swell of emotion whenever the issues of immigration and refugees are raised, but we have to distinguish between different types of immigration. We have to distinguish between economic migrants and refugees, and we have to recognise that opportunistic traffickers exist—we cannot turn a blind eye to that. It is a complicated picture.

On refugees, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar’s private Member’s Bill is a remarkable thing for a private Member to bring forth. It commanded the support

of many Members from across the House: the hon. Gentleman said that Members from five parties turned up to support his Bill on 16 March. Regrettably, I could not be one of those Members, but it is striking that his Bill has commanded such a wide range of support. The reason it commanded that support is that in Britain, as represented not only by Members in this House but by a wide population—by many, many of our constituents—there is a general feeling that if people are fleeing for their lives or fleeing persecution, Britain will be a welcome home and place of asylum for them.

Britain has a long history of welcoming, in a very generous spirit, people who have fled persecution. We can talk about the Huguenots in the 17th century or Russian Jews fleeing persecution in the 19th century. We can talk about the 20th century, when Jews once again faced a terrible tyranny and sought asylum here in Britain. Over the centuries, many of those people have contributed enormously to British culture, literature, economics and philosophy. All sorts of brilliant ideas have been fostered by extremely talented people who have fled for their lives. There have also been people who have helped in more ordinary situations, such as in the transport sector and the public services. A number of those people have come from families of refugees, or have been refugees themselves. No one denies that.

In the recent past—in the last few years—the British Government have had a good record and a good story to tell. One thing that no one has really talked about so far in this debate is that we are going through an unprecedented period of stress and political turmoil in the world. I have travelled a lot in the middle east and Egypt, and I have seen at first hand the devastation—the complete chaos—to which large areas of that part of the world have been subjected, through war and the lack of stable government. We hailed the Arab spring when it came upon us in 2011, but for many people that spring has turned into a nightmare. We need only look at the situation in Libya. I am one of very few Members of Parliament to have been there, and some of the conditions in which migrants there find themselves is appalling. As I said earlier, we cannot be blind to the fact that there are unscrupulous and wicked people who will exploit the situation.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and highlights the importance of having this debate and getting it right. The pressures we face are not going to get any easier. Whether or not the conflicts come and go—I suspect that they always will—we are going to see, not that far down the track, further pressures from the effects of climate change. That will cause massive movements of people. Whether they would currently be seen as economic migrants or refugees, there will be people unable to remain where they currently are.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The right hon. Gentleman makes a crucial point: this phenomenon of migration and the political uncertainty and instability are not just going to go away. In fact, if we look forward, we are probably going to have greater pressures and greater numbers of people coming from sub-Saharan Africa and the middle east.

Bob Stewart: I thank my very good friend for allowing me to intervene on him. He cites migrants in Libya. I have not been to Libya, so I bow to my hon. Friend's

greater authority on the matter, but are those migrants refugees from other parts of Africa or displaced persons from within Libya, or are they economic migrants? It seems to me that they might be a mix of everything.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend—my very good friend—is absolutely right, and that shows how complicated and variegated the problem is. In Libya, there are all three: economic migrants, people from sub-Saharan Africa fleeing real persecution outside Libya, and people who are being mercilessly trafficked for gain. It is a complicated picture and it is not easy to say which is which. In some instances, an individual or family might have two or three different reasons why they should leave their home or why they were forced out of their home. It is not particularly helpful to come to this question with a simple, preconceived notion of what a refugee is, what an economic migrant is or what someone who is being trafficked is, because the real world is a lot more complicated than that. We cannot simply put people, families and children in such neatly defined silos. We have to be much more flexible in our approach.

The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar stressed how Britain is very welcoming, but he also mentioned the fact that the climate has been hostile in many instances, particularly in respect of tabloid newspapers. I am not someone openly to praise tabloid newspapers in this country—they have many strengths and many weaknesses—but it is easy in this House to pour scorn on what used to be called the popular press. The tabloids respond to the very real concerns of people throughout the country. If I speak to my constituents in Spelthorne, they express extremely generous sentiments towards genuine refugees, but there is also genuine concern that Britain's hospitality and generosity can be abused, and it can be abused by some of the unscrupulous traffickers we talked about.

I wish to talk a little more about trafficking, because it is a problem that perhaps absorbs too little attention in this House. I was in Libya a year ago, when I was told that an individual needs to pay \$1,000 to be transported from Libya to, in the first instance, Italy, which is the most common country of destination for these migrants. It does not take a mathematician to work out that if each person pays \$1,000 to be trafficked, or transported, and there are—I was told—up to something like 1,000 migrants a day in the high season, when trafficking is at its peak the business of trafficking is potentially worth around \$1 million a day. Such a huge amount of money that is potentially being distributed, or is part of the revenues of this business, attracts all kinds of people. When I was there, people talked about the Sicilian mafia, various eastern European mafiosi and the Russian mafia. Lots and lots of unscrupulous people are involved in this terrible trafficking.

We must look not only at the political instability and the relative disturbances in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, but at the sources of the trafficking. We must clamp down on the criminal activities of these gangs, because they are the people who are driving this trade. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) suggested, this is a problem that will not go away. I assure the House that, if it does not go away, there will be unscrupulous gangs and criminal elements all over this trafficking and this way

[*Kwasi Kwarteng*]

of making money. If that is the case, any European Government will have to focus much more closely on stopping the criminality.

When we talk about refugees, we understand the humanitarian concerns of our constituents, but there is another side to this issue. I see the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) shaking his head, but we cannot simply stick our heads in the sand and ignore this terrible trade.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting case. On a wider point of information, I think it was the Swedish academic, Hans Rosling—I might have the name wrong—who pointed out first that the reason why many people go overland is that air transportation is closed to them because of our rules that will send them back again. We have other difficulties and other issues in and among that, so, sometimes, our own policies are actually creating the free market business that he describes of people trafficking at £1,000 a head.

Kwasi Kwarteng: That is a legitimate point, but this trafficking has not come from British policy. I do not think that people who are trafficking Nigerians from the western coast of Libya into Italy, as the first port, are doing so because of the policies of the British Government. I do not really see a direct link. All I am trying to suggest is that there is a far wider range of problems on which this issue touches.

Mr Carmichael: I am in broad agreement with much of what the hon. Gentleman says, but there is another aspect on which he has not touched. He said earlier, I think, that people traffickers lead this trade. I suggest to him gently that, in fact, they are the product of it. One reason why they are a product of it is that they are filling a vacuum because there are no proper safe and legal routes. If we put in safe and legal routes, along with proper action on an international basis, we will be part of the way to excising the cancer of the people traffickers.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The right hon. Gentleman is right that, clearly, criminals are not, in the first instance, driving this issue. There are many social, political and economic reasons for this phenomenon but, certainly in the parts of Libya that I saw and in the migrant camps in Sicily where I talked to a few people who were unlucky enough to be trafficked, a big criminal enterprise underpins it. It is very easy in the Chamber of the House of Commons to focus on the humanitarian aspects and to remind Members of our obligations not only as MPs but as citizens and human beings to very vulnerable people. I completely accept that. It is too easy for people in this Chamber to turn a blind eye to what is actually going on from the economic and criminal point of view, which is, frankly, a scandal. Too little of our political debate focuses on these wicked criminal elements. We must take a much bigger view.

Bob Stewart: I ask my very good friend to forgive me for intervening a second time. I have had to deal with the mafia in the Balkans. It may be foreign-owned or run, but it uses local people. I am quite sure that, in Libya, the mafia to whom he is referring will often be Libyans who are actually working for foreigners. That makes it even more complicated.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The situation in Libya is very particular, and I do not want it to monopolise the closing moments of my speech. All I want to say with regard to Libya is that it can be seen as a test case. Certainly, Libya is the biggest immediate source of migration coming into Europe. That is what we have seen in Italy with the Five Star Movement and the remnants of the Northern League, the neo-fascist party. Their success was largely in response to this ongoing migrant crisis. I know that we are straying a bit from the private Member's Bill of the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, but it is very important in a debate of this nature, which enjoys cross-party engagement, to suggest that there are bigger problems that we need to face. They are less attractive issues, dare I say it, and they probably do not salve our consciences in the way that helping genuine refugees does, but there are important questions that any serious legislature, any serious Government and serious Members of Parliament need to look at with respect to criminality.

In conclusion, I congratulate once again the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar on his private Member's Bill. I have heard some excellent speeches today—from the hon. Member for Bristol West and also from my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien). I close on a number of suggestions that they have made. It is important that English language teaching is a priority for this Government. It should be in place for people have come from abroad and who do not speak English. I say that not because, as the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar has suggested, we feel that we speak English here and they must be like us. That was not a particularly helpful point. My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough suggested that it was a way of empowering refugees and people coming into this country. That is perfectly legitimate.

The Government should also look at ways in which asylum seekers could, in an ordered process, work in the community, pay their own way and earn wages. Certainly, in my constituency, which is very near Heathrow, I have had a number of asylum seekers whose papers have not been processed in the six-month period, and they have said to me, "We really want to work. We want to be able to contribute to the economy and to look after ourselves." There must be a way for them to do that. It cannot be beyond the wit of even this Government, dare I say it, to construct an ordered way in which asylum seekers can work and contribute to their communities. There have been many extremely helpful and extremely well-thought out suggestions. From a personal point of view, I would hesitate to relax the rules about children being allowed to bring in their parents, because of the objections that have been made and also the suspicion that these children could be ruthlessly exploited. That is a legitimate concern. I very much hope that the Government allow a money resolution so that we can debate these issues more fully in Committee.

2.38 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) who made a very eloquent, thoughtful and measured speech. Indeed, I welcome all the speeches that have been made so far in this debate. I congratulate those who secured the debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) who has been leading the charge on this issue.

As the UN Declaration of Human Rights states:

"The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State."

As lawmakers, we should do all we can so that we never force anyone to have to choose between living in this place of safety, and living with their family. Most reasonable people looking at the immigration rules now would agree that our refugee family reunion rules are still too narrowly drawn. Most Members in the Chamber will have encountered their own heartbreaking cases—perhaps an 18 or 19-year-old child left stranded in Libya or Lebanon while younger siblings are reunited with parents in the UK. Most strikingly, our rules on recognised child refugees in the UK are both outliers and pretty outrageous. To borrow the word the Home Affairs Committee used, it is "perverse" that unaccompanied children cannot be sponsors for their parents or carers.

In the lead-up to the Second Reading of my hon. Friend's private Member's Bill, there were many excellent articles about divided families, and one I found particularly moving was written by Sarah Temple-Smith, a children's psychotherapist at the Refugee Council. In that article, she described the utter agony endured by two young child refugees because of separation from their families. One teenager, whose father had been killed, tells her that being apart from his mother and siblings was harder to deal with than the torture and violence suffered in detention in Libya. He was just one of an inbox full of referrals she received every day relating to children suffering from separation. It is incredibly sad, therefore, that other than Denmark, this is the only EU country that refuses to allow children to apply to have close family members join them here, if they can be found.

There cannot be a clearer illustration of why refugee family reunion is a win, win for everybody involved. It is clearly of huge benefit for the refugees here, reunited with their support network and better able to rebuild their lives. It is good for us because it means that the refugees can integrate more easily. It can literally be lifesaving for those who are granted family reunion visas to join their families here, and by providing a safe legal route it stops them turning instead to traffickers and smugglers to find their way to the UK.

In response, the Government tend to turn to two or three arguments. The first is that immigration rules already make provisions for other family members to join refugees here, but in my view the alternative rules are barely worth the paper they are written on. The legal thresholds, costs and complexity make them a poor and pale substitute for proper refugee family reunion rights. It is not unknown even for families to have to sponsor a niece or a nephew but be unable to sponsor both—a horrendous decision for anyone to have to make! I do not regard those rules as fit for purpose. Exceptional grants outside the rules are far too rare.

Secondly, the Government sometimes argue that expanding refugee family reunion rights would somehow incentivise dangerous journeys to the UK—we have heard a bit about that today. The most significant point is that the rules keep too many family members out and so force them to turn to smugglers and traffickers and to make dangerous journeys.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I want to ask the hon. Gentleman about a point I made in my speech. We cannot pretend that there is not a criminal element to this. What would

he say to people who suggest, perhaps misguidedly, that changing the rules would bolster this criminal activity?

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to flag up the trafficking and criminality. The UK, and the EU generally, have a long way to go to improve their response to that issue, but at the end of the day who are the most desperate to get here? It is the people with close family ties here, who are perhaps the parents of a child who has made it here, or 18 or 19-year-old siblings of children here. They will come here come hell or high water. The issue, then, becomes: are we going to allow them a safe legal route, established under my hon. Friend's private Member's Bill or otherwise, or are we going to leave them having ultimately to use these smugglers, traffickers and criminals? By expanding the safe legal routes, we will undermine and tackle the smuggling.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and one I can back up anecdotally. In the debate on 16 March, I mentioned a young man from Canterbury, Yohannes, who I also highlighted earlier. He is worried that his sister in a camp in Sudan might do exactly that and go to the criminals. If we were to provide, through my private Member's Bill, a safe legal route and a right for her to come, she could fly here in a couple of hours without the danger of what might happen across the Sahara, which we do not want to speak about.

Stuart C. McDonald: That is a perfect example that illustrates the argument very strongly.

If we take the approach that somehow changing the rules will provide an incentive for others to make a dangerous journey, particularly children, we have to examine the ethics of that position. Are we really saying that we are going to do something that is not in a child refugee's interests—actually harmful to their interests—just to disincentivise other children from making that journey? That is a pretty horrendous ethical argument to propose and dangerous in itself. The key point is that this is about creating safe legal routes that keep people out of the arms of smugglers, rather than forcing them into their arms.

Neil O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman is making some really important points, and I do not necessarily disagree with him, but, on the ethics, he says it is not necessarily in the child's interests. The thought behind the argument is that the child would not be there in the first place—would not have gone through the people smugglers and so on—if that right did not exist. I repeat: the argument is not that people will use children as anchors to cynically get something they should not get; it is that these people, desperate and destitute and with limited funds to give to people smugglers, will be tempted to pay to get just one person, particularly a smaller person, transported. It is not that they are bad people or doing anything unethical; it is that they are desperate people.

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly fair point, and we can have this debate when the Bill, I hope, returns, but there is limited evidence to support the proposition that that is what happens in all the other EU countries—as I say, it is only Denmark and this country that do not give children this right. As far as I can see, the Government have not produced any

[Stuart C. McDonald]

evidence that in other EU countries this has become a phenomenon out of kilter with what happens in Denmark or the UK, but if somebody wants to cite statistics showing that everyone is sending their kids unaccompanied to the other EU countries, I will look at that argument.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Having visited Libya and having been to Italy and seen migrant camps in Sicily and other parts of the south of Italy, I can provide the hon. Gentleman with some assurance on this point. I cannot cite chapter and verse with numbers, but there is a narrative that there are lots of unscrupulous people exploiting children. One need only look at the results of the Italian election. I am not saying it was the sole reason the populist right got into power, but it was a factor.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am not absolutely sure what the hon. Gentleman is getting at. My view is that there is no evidence to back up what the Government are saying about providing an incentive to go to other EU countries as opposed to Denmark and the UK. I struggle with the ethics of that argument as well. We have child refugees here, and we should have rules in place that are in their best interests and which allow them to be reunited with their families, as do these other countries.

I turn to a third argument the Government tend to use in these debates: that they are acting in different ways in response to the refugee and migration crisis. It is only fair to recognise that the Government are doing good things. The Syrian vulnerable persons scheme is making excellent progress, and it is true that the Government have a record they can be proud of in providing aid to the region around Syria in particular. That does not mean, however, that we should not look at how else we can improve our response. Broadening the category of family members, as proposed by my hon. Friend's Bill, would have limited implications for the Home Office but transformative consequences for the people involved.

Finally, I want to touch on legal aid. I used to be an immigration solicitor, and I can say hand on heart that using legal aid for a family reunion application, which people can still do in Scotland, never remotely struck me as a wasteful use of resources, because of how serious the subject matter is—separation can be both stressful for all involved and dangerous for those who are left behind—and how complex the process is. It is not just a matter of form-filling and box-ticking; there are other questions—what documents does a person need to prove a family relationship, how much credibility will a birth or marriage certificate from a certain country have with the Home Office, should we get expert verification, should a DNA test be done? That is even before we get to barriers of language and culture. Without a doubt, legal aid can make a huge and important difference to ensuring that applications are completed properly and that the Home Office can make the right decision on what are hugely important issues for those involved. For all these reasons, the measures in my hon. Friend's private Member's Bill are well founded, and I hope the money resolution will be tabled very soon.

2.48 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who made a

number of points that certainly deserve far more examination and scrutiny. Like other Members, I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on securing this important debate. I did not know whether I would get the pronunciation of his constituency right, but I think I was close enough—I am afraid that that might be as good as I get on Thursday afternoon.

It is fitting that this debate is taking place during Refugee Week, because refugees are among the most vulnerable people on our planet. Whether they are fleeing war, famine, national disaster or religious persecution, refugees make perilous journeys to seek asylum in a safer country, often leaving behind their families and friends.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) said, the United Kingdom has a proud history—it goes back centuries—of welcoming people from abroad who have fled danger. Although he clearly has far more historical understanding and expertise than I could ever hope to have, I am sure that we are all aware of a number of waves of immigration from people fleeing persecution—from the Huguenots and other Calvinist and Protestant refugees fleeing persecution in Europe, right through to the 20th century, when we welcomed Jewish refugees from the continent. We can also be proud of and grateful for the incredible work that is done in all our communities by many individuals, groups and community organisations, particularly faith-based organisations that do so much to welcome and support those who seek asylum and safety within our shores.

Our current rules allow for partners and dependent children under the age of 18 to be granted a refugee reunion visa, but there is scope to extend those parameters in exceptional circumstances. However, I recognise that those powers are perhaps used rather less flexibly than they ought, as we heard from the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East. As many Members have said, only refugees over the age of 18 are able to sponsor those visas.

Many of us are extremely sympathetic to the intentions of the two Bills that are currently before Parliament: the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill in the name of the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar; and Baroness Hamwee's Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill in the other place. As a matter of principle and policy, we clearly wish to keep families together whenever possible, as that is usually in the best interests of children. Of course, we do have to look at the possible unintended consequences of any change, although that does not necessarily mean that we should be against the change. We need to proceed with some caution as there could be an impact due to behavioural change, particularly if that could lead to additional people being put at risk. Whereas the current policy means that refugee family reunion exists in many circumstances, we need to look at the best way of keeping families together without creating an incentive in which more children are put at risk by becoming unaccompanied migrants, which involves a huge amount of danger.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East asked whether there was any evidence that changes in western policy were having an impact on migration flows. A 2017 UN report that looked at child refugees into Italy offers some empirical evidence. The number of unaccompanied child refugees travelling into Italy rose from 75% of all refugee children travelling

into Italy in 2015 to 92% in the year to February 2017. That is clearly a significant change in the pattern of migration. It undoubtedly has many causes, but it seems likely that part of the reason behind it is an assumption that unaccompanied children are more likely to be granted asylum and that their families might be able to join them at a later date.

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend's point goes squarely to the important question asked by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East about the evidence. Of course it is difficult to prove anything when we are dealing with hypothetical questions, and we must look at what has happened in other countries, particularly if their policy has shifted from not allowing children to sponsor adults to allowing that to happen. Does my hon. Friend agree that one difference between the countries of southern Europe and countries in northern Europe such as Denmark and the UK is that the northern countries are more likely to experience secondary movements than primary movements? Given the physical geography involved, people are more likely to arrive first in countries such as Italy, whereas secondary movements are more likely to occur further north in countries such as Britain, which can be attractive for all kinds of reasons.

Mike Wood: My hon. Friend is clearly right. We have seen with the migration from the middle east and Africa—particularly from Libya and Syria—that the first destination is overwhelmingly one of the Mediterranean countries, for the obvious reasons that have been highlighted.

Our policy needs to be one of trying to keep families together whenever possible and appropriate, but it must also limit the risk to those fleeing danger and persecution. We hear reports about the transport used by asylum seekers and refugees, particularly the maritime transport. We talk about refugee boats, but anyone who has seen the footage of the vessels that those people are travelling in—some hon. Members will have seen this in real life—will know that “boats” hardly seems an appropriate word. Too often, the vessels are barely more than flotsam and jetsam—almost anything that will float on the ocean and that people can get on top of or cling to. One of our aims must be to minimise the number of people, and particularly the number of unaccompanied children, making these extremely hazardous journeys. I recognise the points that have been made about whether we could provide safer routes and methods that could hold out hope for those who desperately need a safe haven without playing into the hands of those who would take advantage as traffickers and without putting people in unnecessary danger.

Neil O'Brien: Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the BBC's brilliant series “Exodus”, which gave the lucky people like us who were born in this country an insight into the unbelievably harrowing experiences of refugees travelling across the Mediterranean? Does he agree that an attractive idea would be to spend a larger proportion of our aid budget on trying to help people feel that they no longer need to put their lives at risk crossing the Mediterranean by helping them to build a future in their own countries?

Mike Wood: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I am afraid that I have not seen that series, but I will certainly look out for it. On his second point, a key

part of our international development aims is to try to tackle absolute and abject poverty, and the risks to people's safety and security that often drive large waves of migration and lead to people seeking asylum. One of the strongest arguments for why it is right that, as a country, we commit to spending a proportion of our national wealth on international development and overseas development aid is absolutely that it helps to reduce the numbers of people involved and the risks and dangers to them.

UNICEF's six-point agenda for action acknowledges that children who travel alone are more easily preyed on and more vulnerable to violence and abuse. We should be wary of changes to legislation that risk increasing the numbers of children put into that position if there are other means of keeping families together and of being able to offer people a safe haven from danger.

I look forward to listening to the debate about changing the rules on the sponsorship of refugees and whether it would be right and effective to allow those under 18 to sponsor. I hope that the House will have an opportunity to debate such legislation without too much more delay. However, other action could be taken to improve the welfare and safety of those seeking asylum—refugees coming into the United Kingdom. The first, as we have heard, is to ensure that, after Brexit, the United Kingdom and the European Union continue to operate on the basis of keeping families together so that refugees with close relatives in the United Kingdom who come into another European Union country are able to join them here, and the few refugees who come into the United Kingdom and have relatives in another European country are similarly able to join their relatives in those countries. I was very pleased to hear the Solicitor General commit to ensuring that that happens after Brexit.

What would clearly make a big difference to not only child refugees but refugees more broadly would be to make sure that asylum claims are processed quickly, without unnecessary delay. It is not only those claiming asylum who are adversely affected by long delays in processing claims while they are unable to work; our local economies and local societies similarly miss out because those people's ability to contribute to those local economies and societies is severely restricted while their claims are being processed. I look forward to hearing the Minister say what more can be done to make sure that asylum claims are processed in a timely and efficient manner so that those who need asylum in our country are able to live here, to settle, to contribute and to integrate, and so that our communities are able to welcome and support them.

3.3 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): This is the 65th anniversary of the signing of the European convention on human rights. One of the fundamental rights guaranteed under article 8 and enshrined in UK law is the right to family life. The article states:

“Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) has already mentioned the UN convention on the rights of the child. Unfortunately, the UK is out of sync with its own law by not applying the right to family life to refugee children.

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

As we have heard, the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), seeks to amend the law so that child refugees are allowed exactly the same rights as adult refugees, as well as legal aid to make their application. I support his Bill.

I emphasise that that only applies to children who have been processed and have lawfully acquired refugee status, and who therefore have the legal right to be in this country. I am sure that anybody with children of school age still worries a little when their children go on a school trip, even if it is only for a day. Imagine those children having to flee their home after witnessing the ravages and horrors of war and to make dangerous journeys over thousands of miles alone, having left their family behind. It is not something that any parent would wish on any child, let alone their own. Then imagine that, having made that journey and reached a safe haven, that child cannot be reunited with his or her parents or siblings. Imagine the mental trauma that the child has to go through alone. It is inhumane to prevent any child from having access to their family.

There is an EU directive on family reunion, which has been adopted by 25 out of the 27 EU members. Article 10 of the directive specifies that unaccompanied child refugees are entitled to be reunited with their family members. Two countries chose not to opt in. Ireland has introduced its own domestic law right to allow child refugees to be sponsored for their family members, so that they can join them. Only Denmark and the United Kingdom are out of step with the rest of the EU.

Alex Sobel: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that, when the Prime Minister says “Brexit means Brexit”, this is what she means—that refugee children will not be able to be reunited with their families? Does not our international reputation potentially suffer in the same way that the United States’s has this week if we adopt such policies?

Bambos Charalambous: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is right that, given the uncertainty about what will happen post Brexit, we cannot be sure of anything, and these issues need to be spelled out and confirmed as soon as possible.

Why would anyone want to deprive these child refugees of the right to be with their parents and families? These are vulnerable children, some suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, dealing with the bureaucracy of being a refugee, having difficulty accessing support, in a culturally different environment and now lacking the support network of their family. Why heap that unnecessary cruelty on a child when it is obvious that a child refugee will do so much better in all areas with the support of their family?

The UK has already failed in its promise to accept 480 children from the Calais camp, which is shameful, and it is only thanks to the phenomenal work of charities such as Help Refugees that some of the Calais children living in the woods are alive today. I hope that hon. Members at least have the humanity to do the right thing by supporting the children who are already here.

Having looked at the first part of the Bill, I will now focus on the second part, which relates to legal aid. Legal aid was made unavailable for refugee family reunion

cases following the passing of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. It is difficult enough for adults to navigate the myriad complex legal procedures and forms that need to be completed. With family reunion applications, there is an additional requirement: family members have to attend the closest British embassy, which will necessarily mean travelling through conflict zones. In some cases, there is a need for DNA tests, and documentation gathering is also a necessary part of applications. The British Red Cross highlighted the complexities of applying for family reunion in its report “Not so Straightforward”.

As child refugees have no other way of accessing the legal support they need because of the bureaucracy created by the Government, it is only right that they should have access to legal aid to help them to navigate this process. If the Government want to reduce the cost of the Bill, perhaps they should look at making the process of family reunion easier and therefore cheaper. Since the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act came into effect in 2013, there has been a cut of more than £600 million in the legal aid budget, which is over and above the savings that the Treasury was demanding of the Ministry of Justice. The Act is due to be reviewed this year. I am not aware of how much progress has been made on that front, but the Bill gives the perfect opportunity for the Ministry of Justice to examine the impact of the legal aid cuts, particularly in the field of family reunion, and to put some money back where it is needed.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): A few weeks ago, I spent a few days in Djibouti in Africa, and I saw wave after wave of young people—predominantly men—on the march, walking away from the refugee camp set up there, which we visited. They were leaving because there was no secondary school. We all know that the overseas aid budget causes some controversy. I support it, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that, if there is a finite amount of money, we are better off setting up a secondary school, rather than trying to stretch the pounds over here, which in the end deprives people of some of the opportunities I have just referenced, which we could be funding more abroad.

Bambos Charalambous: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is right about refugee camps needing more support and the provision of education. Many people spend years and years in refugee camps and their education suffers. However, we want to tackle the cause of this. The reason that people are in refugee camps is war. Unless more is done to stop war and conflict, these refugee camps will continue to exist and there will be more asylum seekers and refugees.

There will no doubt be critics who say that this will open the floodgates, with more people traffickers exploiting young people and more migrants wanting to come to the UK. However, I remind hon. Members that the countries neighbouring Syria, such as Jordan and Turkey, have taken in millions of Syrian refugees, while across Europe, Germany, Italy and France received at least twice as many asylum applications as the UK in 2017. The UK received less than 3% of all asylum claims made in the EU last year. I also remind hon. Members that, in 2017, 3,119 people lost their lives in their desperate attempts to cross the Mediterranean to claim asylum. Even for those who make it to the UK, the

asylum system here is extremely tough, with only 29% of initial asylum applications made in the UK being successful and only 35% of appeals being successful.

I want to give hon. Members an idea of the numbers that will be helped by the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar. Last year, only 794 children who arrived in the UK as unaccompanied children were granted asylum. The Bill seeks to help those 794 children—that figure is less than the number of peers in the other place—and allow them to be reunited with their families. Not allowing child refugees to be reunited with their family members is morally wrong, legally wrong and inhumane. I invite all hon. Members to support the hon. Gentleman's Bill, and I encourage the Government to bring forward a money resolution to allow the Bill to progress so that these children can be reunited with their families.

3.12 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate those who have brought forward this debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). I have pronounced his constituency much worse than our English colleagues have done this afternoon. I hope my mum, who is an Irish speaker, is not watching or there will be a row when I get home.

To be serious, the true horror of the reality of the pain of children separated from their families was brought home to us this week by the audio and video footage of the children weeping in the cages constructed for them under the immoral and ghastly policies of Donald Trump. Like other Members on the Opposition side of the House and, I suppose, some on the Government side as well, I was a little disappointed that the Prime Minister could not bring herself to condemn Trump yesterday in quite the way I would have liked. There are many of us who would do so today without hesitation. I may have many criticisms of the UK Government, but I do not think they would ever stoop to that level, and I am pleased to be able to say that. It is very important for us all to distance ourselves from what is happening in America—

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): I did.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Well, you're much better than Donald Trump.

Joanna Cherry: Yes—credit where credit is due. That said, there is a lot more that we could do to help refugees in this country. We have heard some very thoughtful contributions about the pros and cons of doing that. I am very firmly on the side of my hon. Friend, whose Bill is a small step in the right direction, but there is still a lot more to be done.

Earlier, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) mentioned the size of the displacement problem that the world faces at the moment. The UNHCR reports that the world is witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record, with an unprecedented 68.5 million people forced from their homes around the world. Among those, there are nearly 22.5 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18. European Union statistics show a significant increase in the number of asylum

applications over the past few years, and we need only to switch on our televisions every night to see the impact of the refugee crisis on Europe and the European Union.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) said, current rules for family reunion in the United Kingdom are too narrowly drawn, and the private Member's Bill before this House, and that in the other place promoted by Baroness Hamwee, who I am pleased to call a friend, try to widen eligibility. At the moment, immigration rules state that

“adult refugees in the UK can only be joined by their spouse/partner and their dependent children who are under the age of 18.”

No provision is made for dependants who are over 18 and that can—and has—resulted in, for example, a sole 18-year-old girl who has fled her country being left in a very vulnerable situation in a refugee camp. I urge hon. Members and the Government to support my hon. Friend's Bill. It is modest but, as the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) said, it will make a significant difference to a number of people.

The Bill would expand the criteria for who qualifies as a family member for the purpose of refugee reunion, so that young people over the age of 18, and elderly parents, can live in safety with their families in the UK. It would also give unaccompanied refugee children in the UK the right to sponsor their close family to come and join them. Importantly, it would reintroduce legal aid so that refugees who have lost everything have the support they need to afford and navigate the complicated process of being reunited with their families. I ask the UK Government to support the Bill and to take a leaf out of Scotland's book in two respects—first, because we still have legal aid in Scotland for such situations and, secondly, because of our refugee resettlement and integration programme.

I would like briefly to address the “pull or push” argument that has been mentioned this afternoon, because I am aware of two reports that emanate from this House that show no evidence for such a pull factor. The first report was written with the assistance of the Human Trafficking Foundation and published in the House of Lords last summer. It was an independent inquiry into the situation of separated and unaccompanied minors in parts of Europe. If hon. Members look at it, they will see that it found no evidence for the pull factor. Indeed, it referred back to an earlier report that was published by the Lords EU Committee in 2016, which found absolutely no evidence to support the argument for a pull factor. It said that, if there were a pull factor of the kind sometimes posited, one would expect to see evidence of that in other EU member states that participate in the family reunification directive and have more generous family reunion rules than we do. The Lords Committee, and the Human Trafficking Foundation—two separate reports, a year apart—found no evidence to that end. We should therefore proceed on the basis of evidence from reputable reports, rather than the impressions of hon. Members, important as those may be.

It is important that hon. Members visit refugee camps abroad—I visited the camps in Calais and Dunkirk when they still existed, as well as one in Palestine, and I hope to go to Jordan later this year with Lord Dubs. It is important that MPs visit those camps and bring their experiences home, but our experiences and impressions cannot substitute for evidence from careful reports.

Huw Merriman: The hon. and learned Lady and I have had this exchange before. I recommend that she goes to the camp in Jordan—I found it extraordinary when I went there with Save the Children. I respect the evidence that she mentions. It is a fascinating point. The issue I have is that the aid workers I was with—they were from reputable organisations, although I will not list them—were absolutely determined that there would be a pull factor because it is predominantly the young who are on the move—I have seen them. I cannot think why I would dispute what I have heard from those on the ground.

Joanna Cherry: That is as may be, but there is no proper, forensic evidence to support the argument that the Bill would have a pull factor.

Kwasi Kwarteng *rose—*

Joanna Cherry: I am going to make some progress, because I am conscious of the time. We will return to these issues in more detail.

I said that I wanted the UK Government to take two leaves out of Scotland's book. The first is on legal aid. Legal aid is available in Scotland. We have managed to make it available. We actually spend less per capita in Scotland on legal aid than is spent in England and Wales, but we still make it more widely available. Do not take my word for it. An independent review of the Scottish legal aid system published earlier this year reported that, for less spend per capita than England and Wales, legal aid is more widely available in Scotland and covers a wider range of categories. Where there is a will there is a way.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East, I used to work in the Scottish legal system and did a lot of legal aid work. I can tell Conservative Members, as I have said to their colleagues in the Ministry of Justice, that the English legal aid system would benefit greatly from looking north to what has been achieved on a smaller budget. As has been said by others, the law on this subject is complex. People who are already vulnerable and separated from those who normally give them guidance need the assistance of a solicitor to find their way through it.

I would like to say something about the integration strategy in Scotland. I will keep it brief. The hon. Members for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) and for Dudley South (Mike Wood) spoke about good works in their constituencies. I am very proud of the work done in my constituency by the Kurdish community centre and by the Welcoming to integrate refugees, and also of the work done in primary schools in my constituency, particularly Redhall and Oxbgangs, which are rights-respecting schools that have worked on big projects about welcoming child refugees. I have written to the UK Government about that.

In Scotland, we launched the New Scots strategy. The UNHCR UK representative said that he believed the New Scots strategy could be used as an example and model not just for the United Kingdom but for many countries around the world which host refugees. At the launch of the strategy, he said that, having left family far away, it is for many refugees a daily pain to think about a loved one, and he stressed to the Scottish audience how critical it is that the UK Government adopt more flexible and humane policies when it comes

to bringing families together. He recognised that the powers are reserved to this Parliament at Westminster, and called on his Scottish audience to continue to influence and affect change here at Westminster.

That is what we seek to do here today. My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar has brought forward a private Member's Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East and the whole of the SNP will continue to try to pressure the UK Government to do more to help refugees, particularly the most vulnerable child refugees.

3.22 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on securing the debate and on the work he has been doing in this area. Many Members have made contributions to the debate this afternoon, and they have been thought-provoking and positive.

This is Refugee Week and it is appropriate that we acknowledge the work done by many British charities both in this country and abroad. I have seen the work that goes on day in, day out in my own city of Manchester. Only a few weeks ago, I went to Bangladesh with the Rafay Mussarat Foundation. In two days during the month of Ramadan, it delivered over 300,000 meals. We should be proud of the work that charities do, and how the British people contribute and help refugees both here and in the rest of the world. In Refugee Week, it has been wonderful to celebrate all the ways that refugees have enriched our lives and our society. Yesterday, I too was at Speaker's House with the UNHCR to hear inspiring stories of refugees.

The celebrations have been somewhat overshadowed, however, by the tragic and shocking images from the US of children being forcibly separated from their families and caged like animals. We have all been disturbed by the recordings of crying children and images from inside these centres. It is estimated that nearly 2,000 children have been separated from their parents since the zero-tolerance policy began in April. More than 100 were under the age of four.

The scenes from the US are a stark reminder of the consequences of the worst excesses of a hostile and criminalising approach to migrants and refugees. While the Prime Minister has correctly criticised Trump's approach to family break-up, this Government's policies have the same effect. Our immigration system breaks up families, too. Currently, adult refugees can apply only for their spouse and dependent children under 18 to join them in the UK. This leaves grandparents, siblings and children over 18 stranded in peril.

We also have the perverse situation where unaccompanied children are not allowed to sponsor family members to join them. Tesfa fled Eritrea when he was still a child. After a terrible year-long journey, when he was crammed on a boat crossing the Mediterranean with 400 other people, he arrived in the UK and claimed asylum. He is now living and studying here but finds it very hard to be without his family—the people he feels most safe and secure with. He has no right to sponsor them to join him in the UK.

When we grant refugee status to someone, we need to provide them with a realistic chance of integrating in the UK. That means English language training and not cutting off asylum support after 28 days, which is

shorter than the minimum five weeks that it takes to apply for universal credit, and it means allowing them to reunite with their families.

The private Member's Bill from the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar will rectify some anomalies and allow refugee families to be reunited in the UK. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government will support the Bill at its next stage? If not, will she confirm that the Government will not block it in the way they are blocking my private Member's Bill on boundaries? This is a matter of morality, and it is vital that the will of the House be heard and respected.

There has been some troubling rhetoric from the Government in our previous debates about family reunion. They have argued that we do not want to create pull factors to attract refugees to come to the UK, as if there were not enough push factors to force people to flee their homes. I assure the Minister that that is never done lightly. Donald Trump's rhetoric over the past few days has shown the chilling extreme that this kind of thinking can lead to. I hope that the Minister will unequivocally condemn Trump's remarks about allowing the US to be a "migrant camp" or "refugee holding facility".

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point—refugees are indeed to be valued. While they are fleeing injustices from other parts of the world, we should not be following the example of President Trump in the United States. If anything, we should be showing compassion in our policy towards refugees.

Afzal Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and wholeheartedly agree—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There seems to be a bit of concern—every Member who is here was here when I came into the Chair. [*Interruption.*] Let us leave it to the Chair to decide whether interventions can be made.

Afzal Khan: Will the Minister halt the Government's current approach, which seems to be to make the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK so awful that nobody would ever want to come? I will mention two ways in which this has emerged particularly acutely.

First, the conditions in some private asylum accommodation are abhorrent. My attention was recently drawn to private asylum accommodation in my constituency that was infested with cockroaches, rodents and bedbugs. Nobody, let alone families with children, should be forced to live in these conditions. This accommodation passed safety and standards tests, so will the Minister review these standards? Unfortunately, we know that this is not an isolated case. Our asylum accommodation system is not fit for purpose. I fear that, on a certain level, the Government accept these conditions for a reason connected with their pull factor argument. They want the asylum process in the UK to be so awful that no one will risk it.

The renewal of the asylum accommodation contracts is coming up. Can the Minister tell us which private bodies, separate from local authorities, have been contracted to provide housing for refugees? Can she also tell us something about the involvement of private firms in the rehousing of refugees, temporary or otherwise?

What assessment has been made of their performance delivery, and are any new contracts likely to be awarded this year?

Indefinite immigration detention continues to be a blight on our country's moral record. Refugees and asylum seekers are frequently detained hundreds of miles from where they were living, and they are moved around constantly, often during the night. That makes it very difficult for them to maintain contact with family and friends, especially when phones are routinely confiscated. The current system to prevent vulnerable people from being detained is not working. We know that torture survivors and other vulnerable people are not identified before their detention and that it is extremely difficult for them to be released once they are there, although there has been a significant reduction in the number of pregnant women in detention.

I look forward to reading the Shaw review and the Government's response when they are published. I hope that they will propose the far-reaching reforms that are so desperately needed.

The Labour party is clear about this issue. We would uphold the right to a family life. We would allow the carers or parents of child refugees to come here. We would also end the practice of deporting children who are not entitled to be here once they turn 18, even when their parents are entitled to be here. We would end indefinite detention and the outsourcing of detention, and we would ensure that families fleeing war and persecution were housed in safe and sanitary conditions.

3.32 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Let me first congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on securing not only the debate—which, during Refugee Week, is very timely—but a Committee stage for his private Member's Bill. Let me also acknowledge the support from Members on both sides of the House today, and in the other place, for the bringing together of refugee families. I can reassure the House that the Government have listened carefully to the many thoughtful and compassionate contributions that have been made, and will continue to listen. I particularly thank Members for the constructive tone of the debate, which I have found both useful and interesting.

I should acknowledge the work of the non-governmental organisations that are supporting changes in refugee family reunion arrangements. I have met the representatives of several of them over the past few months. I am grateful for their valuable insights, and for the constructive dialogue that they have had with my officials and with me.

During the last few months several Members, including some who are no longer in the Chamber, have beaten a path to my door. Let me take this opportunity to acknowledge their expertise and their keen interest in these issues. The hon. Members for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) have been particularly assiduous in taking the time to come and speak to me. They have frequently used the opportunity presented by the private Member's Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar to highlight some of the issues about which they feel most strongly, and they have, of course, given me the chance to reflect.

[Caroline Nokes]

I fear that the hon. Gentleman has pushed the envelope a bit today. Certainly, by the time he got on to west coast fishing fleets, I was at rather a loss to know what we were actually debating, but I commend him for his ingenuity.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The Minister knows the issue.

Caroline Nokes: I think it might have been the second time it had cropped up for me this afternoon. However, some important points have been made, and I thank him and my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) for their poetic contributions, which brought some real thoughtfulness and passion to the issue.

A number of Members raised the issue of the scheduling of parliamentary business, which is of course a matter for the Leader of the House, but she and I will have taken note of the representations made today.

I want to briefly reflect on some of the comments made about asylum seekers and their ability to work. They are of course allowed to undertake volunteering opportunities, but we must carefully bear it in mind that those voluntary opportunities should not amount to unpaid work or job substitution, because we certainly do not wish to see them taken advantage of by unscrupulous employers. I have heard the concerns of many Members about delays in the asylum system. It is in fact stabilising, but we have an ambitious plan to reduce the number of outstanding decisions and the length of time people wait for a decision, which is very important.

We are on track to resettle 20,000 refugees from Syria and a further 30,000 children and families from the wider middle east and north Africa—MENA—region. Under our resettlement schemes we deliberately target those in the greatest need of assistance, including people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children at risk. We work closely with the UNHCR, as it is best placed to identify people living in formal refugee camps, informal settlements and host communities who would benefit most from resettlement.¹

We are also enabling civil society to play a greater role in refugee resettlement. I was very pleased this Monday to be at the organisation Reset, to which the Government have awarded £1 million of funding to help community groups with sponsorship schemes. I often use the phrase that they are well placed to wrap their arms around resettled families and help them on the road to reintegration. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough and others across the House about the importance of integration and of language teaching, and of ensuring that we as a society do more to enable those who have resettled here to integrate. That is very important.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab) *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: I apologise for not giving way; the hon. Lady has not been in her place for the entire debate, and I have very little time.

The Green Paper on integration that has come forward from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is crucially important, and I have pushed with both officials and

Cabinet colleagues the importance of people having the language teaching they need to enable them to integrate as best they possibly can, and I absolutely hear the calls for how work should be a part of that.

My hon. Friends the Members for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) and for Dudley South (Mike Wood) and a number of Opposition Members rightly mentioned perilous journeys. We do not wish to see children in the hands of traffickers. From my earliest days at the Home Office I have been struck by the links between organised crime, people trafficking, modern slavery and violence against women and girls, and we are determined to do our utmost to tackle trafficking. Breaking the smugglers' business model and their trafficking rings remains a key priority for this Government. Under Operation Sophia, our commitment is to work hard to its full mandate through to the end of December 2018. Our naval assets have destroyed 182 smuggling boats and saved 13,400 lives since the operation began, but we are of course conscious that we continue to see boats come across the Mediterranean and children and families making very dangerous journeys.

I have little time left, but I would like to lapse somewhat into the anecdotal. This week I met a group of students from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. They had spent some time in Europe over the past few years and had come to the British Parliament for a tour, and had the opportunity to spend a few moments talking to me. I was not quite sure how to begin my comments as Immigration Minister on the day that I had watched footage of children crying in cages and had listened to the terrible audio recordings, so I kicked off with some trepidation, recognising that my audience included US citizens who had perhaps had a vote in the last presidential election. I said that I sought in our refugee and immigration policies to ensure that I chose not to model myself on their President. I was not sure how that message would go down, but it was welcomed by this group of US teenagers. They told me that what they had found most moving during their time in Europe over the past few weeks was meeting individual refugees and hearing their stories, and we have had a little of that this afternoon from individual Members who have highlighted the excellent work being done in their constituencies. Indeed, that work goes on in my constituency, and I spent the Friday before last with the Southampton & Winchester Visitors Group, where many of the issues, including the right to work and legal aid, were raised with me. I have to thank the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan Iar, because his private Member's Bill and this afternoon's debate give us the opportunity to reflect carefully on such issues.

This Government recognise the need for a fair and humane immigration system and, within that, the importance of policies that work for individual asylum seekers and those granted refugee status. We are currently reviewing our policy on refugee family reunion in the context of our wider asylum and resettlement strategy, and I look forward to continuing my productive discussions with hon. Members and key NGO partners on this complex, sensitive issue.

3.41 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I thank all the Members who have taken part in today's debate, which, as the Immigration Minister just said, had a fantastic tone to

1. [Official Report, 5 July 2018, Vol. 644, c. 1MC.]

it. Many great points have been made, so my best advice to people who have missed it is to look at *Hansard* tomorrow. Fantastic points were made by the hon. Members for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) and for Dudley South (Mike Wood). I note that the hon. Member for Spelthorne was somewhat hesitant, but we can work with hesitancy, and the rest of his speech was supportive, so I thank him for that, as I thank the hon. Members for Harborough and for Dudley South. In fact, I reserve special thanks for those three Government Members, because we will need to find at least eight Conservatives for the Bill Committee. There could be nobody better than those three, so I will be grateful if they want to be on it. Indeed, if anybody else wants to get involved, please get in touch.

There were several great speeches from the Opposition Benches, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) made a speech that I wished I had made myself, pointing out the 794 children came to this country last year, which is less than the number of Members of the House of Lords. There is an interesting point to be made about that when we talk about pull factors: if the pull factor was a reality, none of those 794 would have come to the United Kingdom, because they would have gone to another country that had rights for child refugees. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said when so eloquently talking about my modest Bill, the pull factor is not real, as House of Lords reports have pointed out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East mentioned legal aid, which is actually a minor point because less is spent per capita in Scotland, where people have the right to it, so I think that the right to legal aid could easily be extended to everybody. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said that if we want to debate this matter further, we must get the Bill into Committee, where we can have a more in-depth debate. I look forward to Members from both sides of the House being on that Committee and to the Government granting the money resolution.

I will leave the last word to J. J. Bola, who summed things up eloquently with the following:

“kiss your families goodnight be glad that the monsters never came for you.”

I mentioned Iain Lom, the highland poet. Some 372 years have passed since the battle of Inverlochy, but I cannot be confident that descendants of mine will not be refugees at some point over the next 372 years and therefore may need the sort of legal protections that we will be introducing.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that 18 to 24 June is Refugee Week; further notes that many families throughout the world have been torn apart by war and persecution; welcomes the fact that the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No.2) Bill was given its Second Reading without opposition on 16 March 2018; and calls on the Government to support the provisions of that Bill.

Erasmus Plus Programme

3.44 pm

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

That this House calls on the Government to negotiate continued access to the Erasmus+ programme and its successor schemes beyond 2020.

Almost two years on from the referendum, the Government have not answered some of the key questions about how we will continue to co-operate with the Erasmus+ programme post-2020. The British Government cannot afford to duck this issue, because that would put at risk the future openness and vibrancy of our university and youth sectors.

I applied for this debate to bring the issue to the Chamber for the first time in five years and to seek reassurance from the Government that they will actually commit to preserving the Erasmus+ scheme post-2020. I am aware that, on many issues, Brexit hangs over us. However, I stress that this issue cuts across political parties and across pro-Brexit and anti-Brexit lines. I have gained support for this debate from Members of all parties, from the 2017 intake to the Father of the House, and representing all four nations. Those Members are united by a deep concern about the Government's lack of full commitment to maintaining the Erasmus+ scheme beyond 2020 and to getting on with negotiating the modalities of how we would do that.

What is at stake here is the future existence of one of our most successful exports. The higher education sector is an export that has greatly enriched this country. The question is whether we will maintain an open and accessible higher education sector.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He talks about exports but, of course, we have a situation in which 10,000 students a year leave the UK to study abroad and 30,000 students come over to study in the UK. Why on earth would the European Union not want our engagement to continue?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I agree it is very likely that the European Union would want our engagement to continue, which is why, to some extent, this is an easy door to push against and walk through. The foreign students coming into the UK are economically an export for us, because they bring foreign money to invest in this country. It might seem strange but higher education is a net export, as it brings cash into this country.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): We would all acknowledge that the Erasmus+ scheme has been of huge benefit to our country. Indeed, over the past 30 years, 600,000 people from the UK have benefited. Erasmus+ is unique in providing additional funding for disadvantaged and disabled students, which is why the Government should fully support the scheme.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree, and I believe the Government are in favour of the Erasmus+ scheme. We have heard positive sounds from the Government, but we now have to put our money where our mouth is.

[*Lloyd Russell-Moyle*]

Erasmus+ is a valuable resource that contributes a vast amount of scope and depth to the British university and youth sectors. My former colleagues and I spent three years in and out of Brussels negotiating the current scheme, which was formed in 2014, and it brought together the Socrates, Erasmus, Leonardo, Grundtvig and Youth in Action programmes—the higher education, technical education, schools exchange and youth work programmes—and sometimes we forget that Erasmus+ incorporates all those different sectors of exchange.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent and powerful speech. I went on one of the predecessor schemes. Has he seen the figures from Universities UK showing that 7.8% of black and minority ethnic graduates who have not studied abroad are unemployed, whereas 4.6% of black and minority ethnic graduates who have taken part in student mobility projects, such as Erasmus+ and its predecessors, are unemployed? I did it, and I did not turn out too badly.

The Government place great faith in the race disparity audit. Does my hon. Friend agree it is important that we should cherish and prioritise Erasmus+?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. Some predecessor and current programmes of Erasmus+ are particularly good at diversity; 50% of its participants are from economically deprived or other minority backgrounds, and it helps improve not only grades, but longer-term outcomes. If I may say so, my hon. Friend has done very well for herself.

With a budget of €14.7 billion, Erasmus is an educational scheme that is not only continental, but global in reach.

Huw Merriman: I am particularly interested to know, as the hon. Gentleman has such a good understanding of this, why, given that such a wide-ranging Erasmus+ programme is already in existence, the budget is estimated to double to €30 billion. What would we get for that? What would all Erasmus participants get for that?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That is a good question. Not only is the youth part of the programme fully subscribed—I am talking about just British applications—but projects that in other places would be accepted are having not to be accepted at the moment because the money runs out before we are able to work down the whole list. I served on the programming committee for a number of years. We would analyse good programmes and then just work our way down until the money ran out. At the moment, the money is running out about halfway down the list. The doubling of the budget would therefore allow good projects that help disadvantaged British kids to travel and go on exchanges. That is exactly why we need an increased budget and why it is being negotiated with the Commission at the moment.

Every sector of lifelong learning is advantaged in some way or another from the Erasmus scheme, and most experts agree that Erasmus has a positive impact, as we have already talked about. Research shows that 81% of students who have gone abroad studying with the Erasmus scheme get a first or upper-second honours degree. That figure is 10% higher than the average in the

university sector. At least 2 million young people across the continent have gone on these schemes in the past 30 years, with 600,000 of them having been from the UK just on this current scheme.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Until the hon. Gentleman started to speak, I did not know of his personal involvement in this programme, which is excellent news. I have just received a message from my son, who is one of the students to have taken part in this scheme. He said that this programme

“builds future leaders with the self-confidence, determination and resilience of living and making it work in a foreign culture”.

I am sure he is one of many.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree, and I will try to touch on one case study from my local university, which says similar things.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I have been a foreign modern languages teacher for some years, so I know that knowing a foreign language is such a huge advantage to future employment. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Erasmus programme is a very good vehicle for making that happen? It gives fantastic opportunities to young people for further employment in this country.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. The biggest employer in my constituency is the headquarters of American Express Europe and the biggest problem it has is finding young people with language skills to go into that sector—the Erasmus scheme really helps with that.

Being an alumnus of the University of Sussex and having part of that university in my constituency, it would remiss of me not to mention the role it had in founding the Erasmus programme. Hywel Jones served as the director of education, training and policy at the European Commission for 20 years at the start of the programme. In a recent speech, he talked about modelling the Erasmus programme on the work he had pioneered at the University of Sussex, where it had made sure that all disciplines, not just languages, although importantly including languages, allowed a study year abroad that was part of the degree programme, not just additional to it. His vision was to get that idea recognised throughout Europe. He said:

“I was convinced that such an idea could be developed on a European-wide basis”.

Well, that idea became Erasmus, and now Erasmus+. From the University of Sussex was born an idea that has become so entrenched in the learning of so many that for many students it is now a byword for student exchange itself.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter to the House for consideration. It is not just his university that does so well; other universities throughout the United Kingdom do equally well, with Queen's University Belfast being one of them. In 2017-18, Queen's attracted some €1.4 million for the Erasmus project—that is the sixth highest amount in the whole United Kingdom—and since 2012, 1,429 Queen's students have benefited from funding to the tune of €4.68 million. Queen's University in Northern Ireland is also doing its bit.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Fantastic. Many universities are doing their bit and it is really good to hear what Queen's is doing. In the past three years alone, £230 million has been invested in the higher education sector part of the Erasmus scheme for the UK.

Amy Walker graduated from the University of Sussex with a BA in geography and international development. She says:

"I spent six months living and studying in Amsterdam, and I believe they were among the most formative, productive and happiest months of my life."

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and I am glad that he has brought this matter to the House's attention. Does he agree that, in addition to all the many benefits that Members have already mentioned, there is the benefit of increasing this country's soft power? As we are leaving the European Union, it is particularly important that we have as many good relationships with other countries as possible. Erasmus is one way to create that soft power.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That soft power is so vital, as is the provision of diverse, international campuses that then encourage other students from other parts of the world to come to study at them. They breed a virtuous circle.

Amy said that her time in Amsterdam gave her the motivation to study. Beforehand, she was perhaps not so motivated, but now understands the importance of learning, in a deeper way than before. Another student, Ifat Shaltiel, studied for a BA in English language teaching, plus Italian and Spanish—my goodness, what an incredible list of things to study—at Sussex. She said:

"Every person I have met...in the Erasmus programme cannot praise the experience enough,"

and she considers it enormously valuable, particularly for language teaching.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of the Universities UK report that says that students who study overseas are significantly more likely to enter managerial positions within 10 years of graduating, half as likely to be long-term unemployed as their non-mobile colleagues, and more likely to start their own companies than other graduates? Does he therefore agree that making sure that the Erasmus+ programme continues for the long term is invaluable, because of its long-term benefits to this country?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. There are examples coming out of our ears of the good work that the programme does.

Last month, Universities UK launched its Go International project to outline the reasons why international exchange is vital for our economy, education sector and young people. It also produced a very good little report. In fact, the Minister for Universities came and launched the project with us and said some good words about the importance of international exchange. We need those good words to turn into good actions, so that we can secure the Erasmus programme's position. I believe that we all share that desire.

Dr Huq: Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as the obvious numerical and financial benefits that higher education brings that we can see in Horizon 2020

funding and the Galileo programme, there are also socio-cultural benefits, as he has alluded to himself, to these type of exchanges? The fact is that, two years on from the referendum, we are still in the dark about what will happen post 2020. That shows that, with a lack of contingency planning, the Government rushed into this referendum, and they still do not know what they are doing now.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Gentleman has already used his 15 minutes. I want him to get to the end of his speech, but if he keeps taking interventions, we will not get there. We do have other speakers who wish to contribute, so I am sure that he will want to get to the end quickly.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I understand, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have probably been too generous in taking interventions.

It is not just the university exchange programme that is important. The European Voluntary Service has allowed young Europeans to travel, 50% of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds. In many respects, EVS was the forerunner of the International Citizen Service, which we now run in this country. The question is how the ICS will integrate into the new programme that goes forward.

Erasmus is currently being negotiated for renewal, but there are no clear guarantees from the Government on its future, and that is adding great uncertainty to the sector. Although the Prime Minister gave assurances at the end of last year that Erasmus would be maintained until the end of the current financial arrangements, there have been few assurances beyond that.

In December, the Government confirmed that they value international exchanges, and that, in the event of a no deal, the students could continue with these exchanges. In the Prime Minister's Florence speech, she indicated that that was her position. The first question that I asked in this Chamber when I arrived here a year ago was whether we would continue with the programme post 2020. The reality is that we have not yet seen a strategy from this Government of how that will be achieved.

Last month, the European Union proposed an outline of its strategy. It proposed that countries can buy into the new programme, but outlined that non-EEA countries and non-partner countries can only take part as third countries. The Government must use their position now to make sure that, in the education council, they are negotiating for that clause to be loosened up. I guess I need to ask the following questions. Can the Minister tell me what discussions he has had in the education council to ensure that the clauses will allow third countries to participate at a decision-making level, and not just at a buying-in level with no ability to make decisions about the targets of the programme? What instructions has the Minister given his officials to negotiate those respective clauses, which are being negotiated at the moment, on a statutory basis? What discussions has he had with his counterparts in Europe, and what co-ordination has there been with the Department for Exiting the European Union to ensure that, as we are not likely to be an EU member or an EEA member and clearly not a candidate or partner country member, we can still take part as a former member that wants good relations with the European Union?

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

I raised many of these questions in the Westminster Hall debate. How will our current programme co-operate with our International Citizen Service programmes? How are we setting out our strategy? I have yet to see the answers to those questions. I fear that, without proper negotiation, like Canada we will have to buy in access. Canadian undergraduates do not have access to the full exchange part of the programme and Canadian youth organisations cannot initiate programmes and activities. With the headquarters of so many international youth organisations based here in the UK, such as the girl guides, we risk their future if we do not allow them to initiate programmes here in the UK. To resolve these issues will require great clarity and direction, and an acknowledgement of the great benefits of the programme.

In the meantime, if the Government hope to maintain a youth and university sector that is open to co-operation with other universities across Europe, they should start by offering a full and comprehensive assurance that Erasmus+ and all the related programmes, including the European Solidarity Corps that takes over from the volunteering part, will be maintained beyond 2020. The Government should seek to represent Britain's interests in the council and reach an understanding that if we are unable to negotiate access, we will ensure that Britain creates a scheme that is equivalent and equally financed.

Finally, I should like to emphasise a few of the key statistics of why the Erasmus scheme is important. Some 16,000 students, young people and other staff from the UK go on the scheme every year, and it is important we keep it open to staff as well as students. If staff cannot exchange their ideas, they cannot promote or co-ordinate it and so make sure students go on it. As I mentioned, 50% of those on the scheme are from disadvantaged backgrounds, and almost 50% are in the youth programme, yet it equates to only 10% of the overall cost. The whole programme is important.

In conclusion, I urge the Government to negotiate continued access to the Erasmus+ programme and all its successors, not after Brexit day but now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I advise Members to speak for up to about eight minutes each.

4.5 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in the Chamber about Erasmus+. I am delighted to be here and to speak on behalf of British universities. I have received feedback from Universities UK, the Russell Group and MillionPlus, the association of newer universities, and I speak as the representative of Chelmsford, the heart and home of Anglia Ruskin University.

Britain has 14 universities in the world's top 100. We are less than 1% of the world's population, but researchers in Britain are responsible for one in six of the world's top research articles. We have among the highest level of Nobel prizes per head of population of anywhere in the world. Our universities are the jewel in the British crown, and our students matter. When it comes to supporting them, international opportunities matter. Each year, Erasmus+ funds about 16,000 British students to undertake work or study placements abroad. Through

the scheme, about 2,000 higher education staff go and work abroad, and about 27,000 European students come to our education institutions.

I am particularly plussed that the scheme is called Erasmus+, because—I must declare an interest—I helped put in the “+”. This great project is not just for universities as it also provides traineeships, internships and sports opportunities. Students who study, work and volunteer abroad are more likely to have better academic and employment outcomes. When I visited Essex University a few years ago, its vice-chancellor told me that studying abroad, even if for just a short period, was worth more than going up an entire degree classification when it came to employability.

After 10 years, Erasmus graduates are 44% more likely to be in managerial roles than their non-mobile counterparts, and the positive impact is especially great for those from less advantaged backgrounds, because the ability to cope with changing circumstances and the development of soft skills that one gets from international experience is attractive to future employers. In our global economy, businesses want clued-up employees who understand different cultures and know how the world works.

That said, the sad fact is that less than 7% of British students go abroad at the moment, so we must do better. I was delighted to be at the launch of Universities UK's Go International campaign and to be asked to give a keynote speech. It wants to double the number of UK undergraduates who study, work or volunteer abroad by 2020. When it comes to the next generation, we must be ambitious, and I totally support that. The most popular host countries for students who go on work placements are France, the US, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy—most are in the EU. That is why it is so important that we try to stay in the Erasmus+ student exchange. I was delighted to hear the Prime Minister say in her Mansion House speech that she wished to keep an ongoing relationship with the EU in respect of educational and cultural programmes, and she was talking about Erasmus+. Doing so is the right thing, and that is the aim of the Prime Minister and the Minister.

Alongside Erasmus+, we must remember the greater number of students who come to Britain from outside the programme. More than 100,000 EU students currently study in the UK, and they bring huge cultural and academic benefits to our universities through that diversity. It is estimated that they generate more than £4 billion for our economy each year, much of which arises from off-campus expenditure. These students also generate a huge amount of local jobs, both on campus and off campus. It is really important that we keep EU students interested in coming to UK universities as their destination of choice, which is why it is so good that the Government have focused on ensuring that there is clarity regarding the fees paid by EU students. I say to the Minister that we must continue to give those EU students clarity so that when they apply for our university places, they know how much they will be expected to pay.

Another, bigger issue is the work that our universities do on science and research. Continued collaboration is vital to keeping British universities in their leading role across the world. Research today has changed. Increasingly, it is not done by one academic sitting in a laboratory alone, but delivered through networks of collaboration—

between different disciplines, between academia and industry, and between people in different countries. As the Government point out in their industrial strategy, some of our closest research relationships and collaborations are with EU member states.

The UK was at the forefront of developing framework programmes for scientific collaboration across Europe. I worked with the Minister's predecessor to deliver the latest framework project, Horizon 2020. That programme has helped British scientists to work with European scientists to make real advances on issues that affect us all, such as healthcare, environmental research and food security. These matters affect all our lives today, and the work will continue to make the world a better place.

More British-based scientists hold grants from the European Research Council than scientists from any other country. It is absolutely in our national interest to make it easy for our researchers to continue to work with others. As I was getting up this morning, I was delighted to hear Sir Mark Walport talking on the radio about the Rutherford research fellowships because they will continue to ensure that international talent comes here. It is not only the top universities that benefit from these exchanges. The top universities can apply for many other grants, and it is in fact places such as Anglia Ruskin University in my constituency that benefit, as more than three quarters of its funding has come from EU-funded programmes.

It is really good that the Prime Minister has made an early commitment to continue forming a long-term partnership with the EU in its next programme. The European Commission has just launched its draft proposals for Horizon Europe—a seven-year investment programme that could be worth in excess of €100 billion. We want to continue to participate, and I am delighted to hear that the feeling appears to be mutual. This week, German research organisations of the Max Planck Institute stated that they believe that European research is better when they have Brits working alongside them.

The Minister is rolling up his sleeves to ensure that we keep Erasmus, we keep the “+”, we keep the students, and we keep the science co-operation. That is in the interests of not only Britain but Europe, our students and the long-term future of the world.

4.13 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is an pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), and I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for securing the debate. It is an honour to follow two Members who have played such a pivotal part in the scheme, which is valued by students in the UK and around the world.

We have heard what the programme has done for 9 million students all over the world since it started. It builds independence, life skills and an appreciation of international cultures. Moreover, when UK students take part in these programmes overseas, they project our values around the world, which is something that we should surely all welcome.

I will quote my son, who has taken part in Erasmus programmes in Germany. He puts it better than I do, in the way that young people do, when he says:

“I have had an enormous amount of language exposure over Erasmus schemes which have meant that my retention of German is incredible even now years afterwards. Living in a language

ingrains it. It makes almost no sense to learn language without the degree of cultural and linguistic exposure Erasmus provides. Alongside language learning the schemes teach independence, mental resilience and social skills, which are difficult to teach in the classroom.”

He concludes by saying:

“In an increasingly divided world education should teach the plethora of cultural and international values which Erasmus experiences foster.”

I think I should probably get him to write all my speeches, actually—he does a pretty good job. That is a very clear testament to the value of Erasmus. I remember him at the ages of 15 and 16 coming back and telling me of his fantastic experiences.

While I warmly welcome and endorse the words of colleagues with regard to seeing this programme taken forward by the Government post-Brexit, I want to raise the slight concern of how the programme reaches out more effectively to more disadvantaged communities. In Redditch, we have no university, unlike the constituencies of some Members in the Chamber. We have a university in Worcester, but we do not have one in our town, and I fear that young people in Redditch might be missing out. I would like to hear from the Minister—today or at a later date—what Erasmus can do more actively to reach out and champion these values beyond privileged parents like me who will push my kids to do these things, as that will benefit the most disadvantaged societies.

Part of my constituency is Wychavon, which has one of the lowest indicators of social mobility in the country. That is quite surprising, because it is a relatively wealthy area of Worcestershire, but it is nevertheless the case. I am working hard to raise aspirations across my constituency through some of my work to bring in more mentors to work with young people, and by encouraging businesses in my constituency to sign up to the social mobility pledge championed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and others. That is part of an overall push to help young people to benefit from these incredible experiences that their more privileged counterparts would perhaps take for granted. That is a very important aspect of this debate, and I am glad to have the chance to raise it.

I am interested to note that the Erasmus scheme is looking to reach out beyond our European partners. That is a welcome angle to the scheme, because we live in an increasingly globalised world, and it is really important that our young people have these opportunities.

Jim Shannon: Just to emphasise the international element of all this, Queen's University Belfast's education strategy for 2016 to 2021 outlines its commitment to increase the number of international students who choose to study there. It also aims to increase the number of such students by 10% annually. That is an example of Queen's University Belfast in Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, doing the very same thing.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman and congratulate the university on its work in that regard.

Yesterday we saw the historic passing of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. With that legislation on our statute book, we can, thankfully, proceed to the next stage of EU negotiations. I am absolutely sure that our Prime Minister will want to include this very important

[Rachel Maclean]

programme in her negotiations. I absolutely and wholeheartedly welcome the fact that we have come together as a Parliament and passed that Bill so that she can get on with that. I add my voice to those who call for her to include this programme in the negotiations.

I want the Government to continue to step up on the wider agenda of raising aspiration, not only through programmes such as Erasmus, but through their other work across this whole policy space. For example, the National Citizen Service, which has been alluded to, is an excellent programme that I have seen young people benefit from. It is a fantastic example of what this Government are doing generally to help young people to have more opportunities through which they can benefit and develop themselves. Schemes such as Erasmus are a great testament to our British values and something to be welcomed. I look forward to hearing more from the Minister about his plans.

4.19 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) again for securing this important debate about the future of Erasmus. He and I were both on a question time panel at our county's university, the University of Sussex, and I know he has a great knowledge of and passion for this subject.

I too have a positive passion for the ability of not just students but those involved in education to learn abroad and for us to reciprocate, because we learn hugely from those who come from abroad to study or work here. It is a vital cog in our ability to maintain relations, to develop and to learn from other countries. I am absolutely on the side of ensuring that the UK continues to participate in the Erasmus scheme in the next seven-year block.

I maintain that it is vital for all people—not just young people—to go and have that taster abroad and to develop their language skills. The statistics undoubtedly show that people are more likely to succeed in the workplace, with the responsibilities they will be given, if they have such an opportunity. I am passionate about ensuring that we continue to participate in the scheme, and I was heartened by the Prime Minister's recent speech in which she talked about the importance of continuing with our education networks and partnerships across Europe. There is no reason to believe that we will do anything but continue in that way.

I am, however, slightly concerned about the ongoing cost, as I said to the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown. To a certain extent, this is a bit of an indicator of why perhaps people in this country have fallen out of love with the European project, as it were. For a scheme—it has become Erasmus+ and already been widened to cover training, apprenticeships and even job seeking—to go from a cost of €15 billion to €30 billion is quite extraordinary. That was why I asked the hon. Gentleman what the scheme was being expanded in scope towards.

Vicky Ford: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Huw Merriman: I will just finish this point.

I understand the point that there is lots more we could fund, but unfortunately we have run out of funding. We have the same issue with funding many of our own projects in this country. It is the mentality of the European Union that you can just double the budget in one period, that causes concern about our ability to continue to fund that budget.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Huw Merriman: I seem to have stirred the hornets' nest. I will give way to my hon. Friend first.

Vicky Ford: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that money needs to be well spent and that sometimes the EU has not spent its pennies quite as carefully as we have done. However, Universities UK wants us to double the number of young people who take part in these programmes because of the benefits and because so few do at the moment. Does he agree that, if we are to double the number taking part, we need to increase the resources?

Huw Merriman: I do indeed, and without turning this into a wider universities debate, this is similar to the debate about doubling the number of students, how we fund that and how we then look students in the eye when it comes to their tuition fees. I acknowledge, of course, that these students bring funding over, so my argument is not a brilliant one, and I am sure the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) is about to tell me the same thing.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree, as we are all agreed here, about the huge added value of sending people abroad, and young people particularly? It exposes them to different communities and countries and allows them to gain experience. There is also the money that goes into scientific projects. The University of Bath in my constituency is involved in engineering and science projects that are funded through these streams. It is about not just the individual student being funded but wider co-operation across the European Union. For that reason, does he agree that it is money well spent?

Huw Merriman: I do agree. The point I am trying to make is that there is an analogy between the views in this country about the European project and costs continuing to grow. As I say, no one has any issue with costs increasing because the programme expands, but to double it from €15 billion to €30 billion at a time when money is incredibly tight not just in this country but across Europe makes me wonder whether the European Commission has quite understood what many of its citizens feel is an issue.

Let us move on because I actually wish to be positive and come to the reasons why I am not as pessimistic as the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown about our future participation in the scheme. Again, for me, it comes down to the numbers. It is absolutely clear that the UK is an attractive destination for the 33 participating members of and the 160 partners in Erasmus, because 30,000 students per year are coming to the UK, whereas we are sending 10,000 over in return. We are seventh in the league table of the number of students participating. Turkey—I remind the hon. Gentleman that it is not of course a member of the EU, but it is still a member

of Erasmus—is one place ahead of us, in sixth place, in terms of the number of students it places. France sends 7,500 students to the UK each year. The UK sends 2,300 to France. Germany sends 5,000 to this country. We send only 1,300 to Germany. Spain sends just short of 5,000 here and we send just over 2,000 UK students to Spain.

The point I am trying to make is that this is a very attractive option for European citizens, and they will not want their right to come to study in the UK to be fettered. That was the point I was trying to make to the hon. Gentleman. There should be a great desire on the part of the European Commission and European Union members to ensure that the UK remains part of this scheme. Therefore, I dare to venture the point that we have a very good hand when it comes to the negotiations. I take the point that we should be getting on with it, but I am one of those Members who finds that point a little rich, given that MPs spend so much time in this Chamber making it very difficult for Ministers to actually get on with it and help us leave the European Union on these terms. MPs trying to make it as difficult as possible by constantly dragging their heels.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I just want to make it clear that, when I am asking the Minister to negotiate details to allow us to sign on, I am not referring to the Brexit negotiations. There is a totally separate and parallel negotiation going on in the whole of Europe about the future of Erasmus post 2020. I am just trying to ensure that the Minister is negotiating, so that we can sign on without a huge negotiation on Brexit. That is the distinction I am worried about.

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman may be on to something. We know that the Erasmus programme is maintained by the European Commission. He will want to make sure that, if we do leave the European Union—I absolutely believe we will do so and he may reluctantly agree with me—we get an absolutely superb deal for all UK citizens. Therefore, to a certain extent, rather than actually giving away one of our good hands—our participation in the Erasmus programme, which so many students from the other 27 member states want to take part in—we should wrap it up to ensure that we get good terms in other matters. If we throw away our best cards, we may suffer in other areas where we do not have such a great export.

I will wrap up because it is important to hear the Front-Bench contributions, but I want to make the point again that I am hugely supportive of the scheme. It has delivered huge benefits not just for us, but for our partners abroad. I want to continue it, not least because it sends out the absolutely correct message that, while we are leaving the European Union, we are not leaving Europe or ending our relations with Europe. If anything, we need to cement those relations because we are leaving the European Union. There are very good and optimistic reasons why we continue to remain a member of Erasmus, but perhaps not with the costs getting out of control.

4.28 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I very much thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for securing this debate and the

Backbench Business Committee for granting it. It is a very useful and timely debate for us to have. It has obviously created a lot of interest. I have been contacted by the National Union of Students, the British Council and Universities Scotland, which are all lobbying for the scheme to be kept because they see its importance.

Before I get into my comments, I will briefly take issue with what the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said about the doubling of the scheme's cost. The cost of the scheme is going to increase if the number of participants doubles. That is just how it is. It is not that the costs have spiralled out of control; the scheme is looking to increase the number of participants and to widen the type of participants involved in the scheme, which is really positive.

One thing that the House of Commons and the UK Government—not just this Government, but previous Governments—do not do particularly well is evaluate schemes to see how effective they have been, before deciding whether to take them forward. The Erasmus+ scheme has been incredibly effective and made a huge difference to people's lives. I therefore understand why people are looking to increase the number of participants, so that more people can benefit from it.

In 2017, the Erasmus+ scheme was worth €21 million to Scotland. Daniel Evans from West Lothian College said that it was “life changing” and had made a huge difference to people's lives. The effect of the scheme on individual participants is important, and Daniel Evans made the case that the scheme makes a really positive difference, particularly for the most disadvantaged students.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): As is well known I represent the constituency of Stirling, which is home to the world-renowned University of Stirling. The university benefits enormously from Erasmus+. The hon. Lady is describing the benefit of the scheme for its participants, but one point that was put forcefully to me by the university is that the whole university community benefits from the presence on campus, and in tutorials and lecture theatres, of more than 100 international students who come to Stirling under that programme.

Kirsty Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I will come on to talk about those wider benefits. I will talk particularly about Aberdeen, but also the wider Scottish context.

In 2015, 2,098 students from Scottish higher education institutions travelled abroad—a huge number of students had that opportunity. Around 200 students a year from Aberdeen University get involved in the Erasmus+ scheme, and 350 students come to Aberdeen and become part of our university life. Aberdeen has the highest percentage of students who are EU nationals of any Scottish university, which make up a significant proportion within Scotland. Those EU nationals have shaped the university in my constituency, and made a huge difference. Indeed, 25% of people who live in Aberdeen city were not born in the UK, and a big reason for that is the number of students who come to both our universities—Aberdeen University and Robert Gordon University in the south of the city.

Scotland has much higher levels of participation in Erasmus+ than other parts of the United Kingdom, and 9.7% of students from Scottish institutions travel abroad. More than half of outward student mobility in

[Kirsty Blackman]

Scotland is accounted for by the Erasmus+ scheme, so I cannot overstate how important it is. In England, fewer than 7% of students take time to travel abroad, so the scheme is particularly important for Scotland.

It is therefore important that we receive clarity. It is good that the UK Government have committed to participating in the scheme until the end of the current funding round, but universities need clarity now about whether they will be able to participate beyond that, so that they can plan for the future. Universities are looking at their courses and numbers of students who will go there in future years, and that clarity will make a huge difference.

Let me move on to the wider benefits of the scheme. Some 93% of learners agree that they see the value of different cultures after having participated in the Erasmus+ scheme, which is hugely important. If the UK Government wish to pursue a global Britain agenda—that is despite shutting us off from Europe in many ways that I would prefer they did not do—we need young people who are taking part in life in our universities to be able to travel, participate in and see the value of different cultures, and to make those links. The reality, however, will be more difficult.

Jim Shannon: One thing that came out of the information we all received was that 64% of employers considered an international experience important for recruitment, and that was up by 37% since 2006. If any evidence were needed to reinforce what the hon. Lady is saying, that is it.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree. Earlier we heard the statistics for students who are unemployed, and how low those numbers are for students who have studied abroad when compared with those who have not. That is incredibly important.

We need to make sure that we increase our links with the rest of the world, not decrease them. When our brightest and best students take part in the life of universities across Europe, they showcase the talent we have in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We are able to receive the brightest and best students from other places so they can study in our universities. I have discussed this with Aberdeen University. The students who come to study in Aberdeen go back to their country and continue to have links with companies in our constituencies and our cities. They keep up the links they make, which has a huge positive economic benefit. Being part of the scheme is incredibly important.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I recently met Emma Shotter, the president-elect of the student association of the University of the West of Scotland. She spoke not only about the benefits for Scottish students using Erasmus as an opportunity to study overseas, but how it internationalises campuses, as the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) alluded to earlier. Not only does it enrich our campuses, but our local communities. For that reason alone, Erasmus has to continue after Brexit.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree. Aberdeen is an international city shaped by its two universities. They have made a really positive difference to our city.

It is very important to have this debate now, because universities need clarity as soon as possible. It is all well and good for the Government to say that European countries have an interest in us continuing in the scheme, but we need to make it clear how strong our interest is in continuing in the scheme. We need to make it clear that we absolutely want to continue to participate in it going forward. The more the Government can do to state that case, the better for our universities, our students and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) said, our communities.

4.36 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) on securing this debate and in showing that he—like the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), whose speech I greatly enjoyed—has an honourable place in the progress and expansion of Erasmus benefits. I think that everything he said struck a chord with Members from across the House. One point that my hon. Friend made, unlike the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman)—I enjoyed his speech, but he seemed to have a rather curious view of the concept of parliamentary scrutiny—was on detail and I want to emphasise that point to the Minister. The devil, as the Minister will know, is in the detail. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the superb way in which he put forward his case. I congratulate the hon. Members for Chelmsford, for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and for Bexhill and Battle on the positive points they made—in particular, the personal observations made by the hon. Member for Redditch—and the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) on the pertinent remarks she has just made.

There are continuing misconceptions that Erasmus+ is just a higher education programme. In fact, it is open to education, training, youth and sports organisations across all sectors of lifelong learning, including school, further and higher education for both the adult and youth sectors. It took on that wider field in 2014, making it all the more important that we should fight for it to be continued in a post-Brexit world. Erasmus+ is unique in that it provides additional funding for both disadvantaged and disabled students. It allows low-income UK students, who may not otherwise be able to afford to go abroad without financial assistance, the opportunity to study. It provides them with a fee waiver and a grant for living expenses.

Social mobility, widening participation and encouraging social inclusion are key elements of the programme. As the Russell Group observed in its latest briefing on Erasmus, most Russell Group universities are able to offer supplementary grants specifically for disadvantaged students to undertake an Erasmus+ placement. MillionPlus says that modern universities educate the vast majority of students from areas of the country with the lowest participation in higher education. Schemes such as Erasmus are therefore particularly important. It makes the point that EU students in the UK, as well as UK students in Europe, are an enormous benefit to this country and may be even more significant post Brexit, as the UK reshapes its relationships with these nations. The National Union of Students also made the point in its briefing that “the opportunity for transnational education, including... Erasmus+...benefits...students...UK education...local communities and the UK economy.”

The Confederation of British Industry has produced clear evidence that the UK workforce requires more graduates with international cultural awareness and, as Members have said today, foreign language skills. The need for these skills will become even more important after we leave the European Union, so it is vital that we do not take those opportunities away from the future workforce. There is also very strong evidence that student exchange programmes can have a beneficial impact, particularly on black and minority ethnic students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Erasmus+ also offers young people the opportunity to develop the enabling skills that translate into the workforce and every aspect of their life. The UK is currently rated one of the world's leading soft powers. It is no surprise, therefore, that the UK has been in the top three EU countries in terms of numbers participating and EU students coming here.

I do not think we should ever underestimate the importance of that soft power. Last month, I was in Georgia—not Georgia, US, but Georgia, Caucasus—for the 100th anniversary of its independence. I went to universities and met a group of Chevening students from Georgia. As Members will know, Chevening students come here and participate in not dissimilar ways to Erasmus+. Their affection for the UK was palpable. Only last week, one of those same Chevening scholars—alumni, I should say—who had been at that meeting with the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) and me in Tbilisi, led a trade delegation to this House for us to expand our trade with Georgia. That is an example of where that soft power can work.

Such programmes offer a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for students to challenge themselves and develop as individuals, and that is why they play such a beneficial role in boosting the skills of the UK workforce. We will need that to develop the workforce of tomorrow. Research commissioned by the Local Government Association reveals that the skills gap is worsening. It states that by 2024, there will be more than 4 million too few high-skilled people to take up the available jobs, 2 million too many with intermediate skills, and more than 6 million too many low-skilled people. That is why the Government cannot afford to dither and allow participation in Erasmus+ to lapse.

The importance of Erasmus+ was recognised, as we have heard, through the EU Commission's proposals for the new expanded programme. Doubling the funding does indeed enable the EU to support 12 million people and triple the number of participants. It also makes it easier for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to have an Erasmus experience by promoting more accessible formats, virtual exchanges and shorter learning periods abroad.

It is important to note—my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown touched on this today and in a previous Adjournment debate—that this funding includes some €3.1 billion for youth programmes and €550 million for sport. The implications for the new Erasmus programme are that it would offer even more possibilities—for example, for students at further education colleges, such as my Blackpool and The Fylde College, for apprentices and for others retraining with FE and skills providers, as well as opportunities for adults to retrain and reskill. These also help to address the issues of social mobility, which this Government consistently claim is at the forefront of their policies and indeed, is part of their post-18 education review.

However, actions speak louder than words. Despite these issues being raised consistently in calls from the sector and the Labour party for the past two years for guarantees on our continued involvement, it is still very unclear what the UK's participation in the scheme will be following the end of the current period in 2020. The British Academy, in its review of the Brexit process, says:

“Continuing full participation in the Erasmus+ programme on the basis of an arrangement that would enable the UK to fulfil all the obligations of the Erasmus+ programme as a non-EU Programme Country”

is essential.

I pay tribute to the British Council, which has supplied a number of the statistics that have been shared across the Chamber today and has played a crucial part in administering and promoting the Erasmus programme. It has also had a vital role in presenting evidence of the beneficial outcomes to Government. Anyone who saw the excellent Erasmus+ Shaping Futures exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall in February, which helped to lay out the clear advantages through personal case histories, will know what I mean.

Alongside an array of higher and further education stakeholders, we have consistently pressed the Government on this issue, during the negotiations on the phase 1 agreement and during the passage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. We tabled amendments to the Bill, both here and in the other place.

Vicky Ford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gordon Marsden: Very briefly.

Vicky Ford: The hon. Gentleman speaks forcefully about the need to retain Erasmus+, and also, I presume, ongoing co-operation in science. Does he not agree, however, that if we are to continue to participate in Horizon Europe, which will cost the British taxpayer many billions of pounds, we must have more than just third-country status. We must also have a say in how the programmes are structured.

Gordon Marsden: That is a very good point, although it might be better directed at the Minister rather than the shadow Minister. I agree that we need a rigorous debate on the subject.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, it was not until November, in a letter to my hon. Friends the Members for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), that the Government made a commitment to continuing participation in the Erasmus+ scheme until the end of the current EU funding cycle, and spelt out some of the details. That letter did not in any way answer our questions about our participation in the new expanded Erasmus+, which will be so beneficial to social mobility, and which will begin in 2021.

I therefore pressed the Prime Minister during Prime Minister's Question Time, asking whether she would ensure that Erasmus+ was

“now a top-line item for her Ministers”

in the continuing negotiations. I was disappointed by her answer, which was non-committal. She merely said:

“there are certain programmes that we wish to remain part of when we leave the European Union, and Erasmus is one of those we have cited that we may wish to remain part of, but of course we are in a negotiation with the European Union”.—[*Official Report*, 16 May 2018; Vol. 641, c. 277.]

[Gordon Marsden]

On that occasion, Mrs May said “may”, but as parliamentary draftsmen will know, “may” is not the same as “would” or “want”.

We continue to believe that it is imperative for future involvement in this programme to be on the agenda, and to be explicit in the Brexit guidelines. The Government must ensure that Ministers in the Departments for Education, for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and for Culture, Media and Sport are involved in the negotiations, and ensure that it is clear that Erasmus+ is a key part of that agenda. I do not doubt for a minute the commitment of the Universities Minister, but I want to see him, if not actually at the table, as close to it as possible, and whispering in the ears of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

Erasmus+ is every bit as important to the future of our country, and to our young and our older people, as Horizon, or the money from EU structural funds that will be lost to higher and further education, on which the prosperity fund—a slightly Orwellian title—has yet to comment. As the Russell Group has said, maintaining our membership of the programme is likely to be less costly than an attempt by universities to replicate it, either on a bilateral basis or through the European University Association. It would be very difficult to replicate via a national scheme.

Since the phase 1 negotiations the Government have had opportunities to express a stronger commitment to Erasmus+. I have met members of the European Commission twice, and have raised the implications of Brexit for our higher and further education and skills. Everyone to whom I have spoken has agreed that it is a benefit to both the EU and the UK. It is not just a glorified twinning experience. If the Government are in any way serious about our being a global Britain, they need to address this issue with the effort that it deserves; otherwise they will not be forgiven, either by the millennial generation or by their families and friends who have seen the life-changing opportunities that Erasmus+ has brought them.

4.48 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) on securing the debate. I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), and the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) on their contributions.

Let me begin by addressing an issue that has arisen in every speech. International exchanges are important to students, giving them social mobility and widening their horizons, and it is valuable to our soft power. None of that is in dispute today. I think we can all agree that it is very useful to the individuals concerned, and it is useful to us as a country to have students from abroad studying here, at a number of levels. It is also useful to us in terms of the reach of our diplomatic power. I will not focus on those points as they have been covered in some detail.

The Erasmus+ programme is an excellent example of international student exchange, and the UK has been a proud participant in it, but there are other schemes.

I think about what we can do through the Erasmus programme in the EU and everything else: it is not about the EU or other programmes. On that note, it is worth putting on the record the British Council’s great work over decades at the forefront of promoting opportunities for international education co-operation, not just in higher education but through initiatives such as Connecting Classrooms and school-linking programmes. The Government were also pleased to support the Go International: Stand Out campaign launched by Universities UK International in 2017 to encourage young people to experience studying, working and volunteering abroad. Last December we also announced the expansion of the Generation UK-China scheme, giving more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to take up internships in China each year. So as we move towards our exit from the EU, the Government will continue to develop education co-operation as a key part of our international agenda.

The motion before the House is specifically on Erasmus+, however, and we recognise that over the past 30 years the programme has played an important role in achieving some tremendous outcomes. From the start of the current programme there have been successful applications for projects across all the programme’s key actions in education, youth and sport. About 12,000 young people and 4,000 youth workers participate each year, with the latter benefiting from job attachments, training and other professional development activities. We know the benefits: young people learn new skills for life and work, get the opportunity to work with their European peers, and broaden their cultural horizons.

According to statistics compiled by the UK National Agency in 2016 some 31,000 higher education students and 4,000 higher education staff came to the UK under the Erasmus+ programme. So the Government are pleased that under the agreement made on 8 December 2017 the UK will continue to participate in the Erasmus+ programme until the end of 2020, providing clarity and certainty to students and institutions.

I will now turn to the question for this debate: our participation in the next Erasmus programme. As the Prime Minister said, this is a matter for negotiations on the future relationship with the EU, but although we do not want to pre-empt those negotiations, I would like to reassure Members that the Government are looking very carefully at the Commission’s proposals published on 30 May. We will discuss with the EU the options for future participation as a third country, as the Prime Minister has made clear, on the basis of a fair and ongoing contribution. So we have accepted that we will want the option to participate and we know we must pay into the programme, but obviously we want the contribution to be fair and we will have to negotiate the terms. As the Prime Minister has also said, it is in the UK’s and the EU’s mutual interests to engage on issues relating to the design of the programmes developed under the next multiannual financial framework, or MFF. We want to contribute our ideas as the thinking on the next MFF and Erasmus programme develops over the coming months and as the details are discussed and negotiated in Brussels and EU capitals. Those details are important, and we note that the new proposal contains a number of provisions that the UK can welcome.

First, therefore, I give Members across the House the reassurance that we are actively engaged in the discussions on the design of the programme and we have made the

EU aware of our desire to participate in the programme, and there is a lot to welcome in the framework proposals. We support, therefore, the decision to build on the success of Erasmus+ and to retain the basic structure of the programme and its key actions focusing on mobility and partnerships across the education, youth and sport sectors.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch made a valuable point about how wide the net is cast as far as participation in Erasmus+ is concerned. It is welcome that the proposals recognise the central position of the higher education sector while including the opportunity to do more in vocational education and training and school exchanges, so we welcome that breadth of scope.

We note and support the increased focus on building stronger relations with the rest of the world through mobility and co-operation with third countries around the globe. Similarly, the emphasis on widening access across all social groups aligns strongly with the Government's commitment to ensuring that all children and young people have the best chance to realise their potential through international opportunities. The proposal contains several new ideas, such as those on the development of a European education area, European universities and support for more general cultural and educational opportunities for young people, and we will consider them on their merits as the negotiations proceed.

In summary, the Commission's proposals offer a good basis for the Government to discuss with the Commission how the UK may be able to participate in the future. It is helpful that the proposal offers scope for a bilateral agreement with third countries, and we look forward to discussing the details. We will look carefully at all the different elements of the programme and how they align with the UK's interests and priorities in this area, and we are engaging actively with the Commission and other EU member states. For example, when I attended the European Higher Education Area ministerial conference in Paris last month, I had a constructive discussion with the EU education commissioner on potential options for UK participation, so I hope that that reassures the hon. Member for Blackpool South that I am engaging not just with our officials, but the Commission's officials on this matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle made another valuable point about the size of the budget and about continuing to consider the size of the programme to ensure that our contribution offers value for money, which is vital. We obviously note the proposal for the budget to be doubled, so we need to discuss our participation based on a sensible and hard-headed assessment of the UK's priorities and the substantial benefit to the EU should the UK decided to participate.

We are focused on that, and I am encouraged by the wording in the regulation on financial contributions, which refers to a

"fair balance as regards the contributions and benefits of the third country participating".

To make our intentions clear to our European partners, I have spent a lot of time talking to almost every member state's Education Minister over the past month or so, and I have met several of them in person. They have all expressed not only the hope that the UK will decide to participate, but the importance that they attach to education exchanges with the UK. Through those discussions, we will make sure that that the UK achieves the best possible outcome for its students and institutions, ensuring that we build upon our status as an internationalist and global nation. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford and the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown for their sterling work over the years before they arrived in this House to make the programme the success that it has been.

This has been a good debate. We are very much in the early stages of the negotiations.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Just before the Minister concludes, I want to add my support to the comments of the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) about our continuing participation in Horizon 2020 and ensuring collaboration between institutions.

Mr Gyimah: I would like to give an assurance on that. Horizon Europe is the successor programme to Horizon 2020, and we have made clear our desire to participate in it and there is a lot to consider in the new framework guidelines. The key point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford raised, is that it is a big programme, and the UK would make a multi-billion pound contribution if we were to be a part of the programme. We want the programme to focus on excellence—that is what science is about, and we do not want excellence to be capped—but we also want influence, because we will be putting more into the programme than all the other potential associate members combined.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That the Voyeurism (Offences) (No. 2) Bill be referred to a Second Reading Committee.—(*Craig Whittaker.*)

Court Closures: Calderdale

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Craig Whittaker.*)

5 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I sought to secure this Adjournment debate due to my desperate frustration 20 months on from the Government's decision to close both Halifax county and family court, and Calderdale magistrates court, in October 2016. When the court closures were first proposed in 2015, I joined local magistrates to campaign for a merger of the two courts, which would have delivered a cost saving to Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service while maintaining court provision and access to justice locally.

I met the then Minister responsible for courts, the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara)—I think that the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) did the same—to outline our case. I also wrote a letter to the then Secretary of State for Justice that was co-signed by 18 local law firms, the leader of Calderdale Council, the chief executive officer of WomenCentre and the Halifax Law Society, but to no avail, as the courts closed the following year. I then sought to press the Government for alternatives, having listened carefully to their suggestion that old-fashioned court buildings were actually a barrier to justice, and that their closure would instead facilitate a revolution in access to justice, enabled by the roll-out of a variety of new technologies.

After visiting Kent police's remote justice scheme to see the good work going on there, I attempted to help to shape the process as a member of the Public Bill Committee that considered the Prisons and Courts Bill in 2017. However, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), will be aware that that Bill was dropped following the announcement of the snap general election in June 2017.

I held further discussions with the then Minister responsible, the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), and he arranged for me to meet the chief executive of Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service, Susan Acland-Hood, in July 2017. She understood my concerns and confirmed that Halifax would get a video link to mitigate the impact of the court closures.

Sadly, a year on, I am aware of no progress. I want to outline my concern that, far from technology allowing for a better system that is driven by victim-centred best practice, and in which justice is more accessible than ever before, the same old-fashioned court system is still in place, but simply with fewer courts that are just further away than ever before.

As it stands, access to justice is undeniably significantly worse in Calderdale since the court closures—I will outline why. West Yorkshire police officers working in the Calderdale district have been clear that, at a time when resources are stretched and demand has to be carefully managed, the increased burden created by officers and staff travelling further to give evidence, to

secure warrants and to transport prisoners is placing yet another strain—one that was entirely avoidable—on resources.

I can only imagine that a similar impact has been felt by police forces in other areas across the country where courts have closed. I say I can “only imagine” because, having asked about this issue in a series of written parliamentary questions, it seems that no impact assessment has been carried out at either a national or a local level.

Although I have been informed that the Secretary of State for Justice has not specifically discussed with the Home Secretary the potential additional financial costs for police forces in areas where the local court has recently closed, it was explained to me that police forces could have made submissions to the public consultations prior to the court closures. There has been no impact assessment or even discussion since that point.

The police have also informed me that the reduced footprint of the justice system is having a particular impact on domestic violence prosecutions. A recent domestic violence charge was scheduled to be heard in February 2019, which will fall just short of the victim facing a 12-month wait for the case to be heard.

Further to that, when I asked the Minister in a written question how cases that would previously have been heard in Calderdale are now being distributed between the neighbouring courts, I was told that all cases have been transferred to Bradford. Although the commitment from Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service ahead of the court closures was that all work would be transferred to Bradford—10 miles away—and that that court could handle the increased demand, that has not happened from the very start, as cases are being heard in Leeds, Bradford and Huddersfield. It worries me that the Ministry of Justice is not across this in its response to written parliamentary questions, because the practical implications are massive and integral to the problems we are facing. Leeds magistrates court is 20 miles away from Halifax town centre, a further 10 miles away from Bradford, which was the subject of consultation.

One consequence of the situation is that it proves much harder to organise independent domestic violence advisers to attend court in order to support victims when those advisers are covering two or more courts simultaneously. Leeds and Huddersfield magistrates courts are 20 miles apart. Given the length of time victims now routinely face to have their cases heard, the instances of cases being lost or dropped due to victims withdrawing support is increasing. Surely we cannot allow this to happen. I asked the Government about the average and longest waiting times for domestic violence cases to be heard, but was informed that the information requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost and was therefore not available. Surely the Government need to understand what the impact is. If domestic violence cases are taking a year to be heard, the Government must step in to address the situation and take corrective action, but they first need to know where that is happening, the length of the delays and why they are occurring.

I received the same response when I asked how many cases had been abandoned or dropped in areas where courts had recently closed. I did so because there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that the failure of both vulnerable victims and defendants to appear in courts

that are now much further away has resulted in an incredibly disrupted and inefficient system. I understand that for so-called “cracked trials”—those that close unexpectedly—forms have to be completed to specify the reason why. Solicitors and local police tell me that the reason is increasingly because prosecution witnesses and victims fail to turn up in court, which is due in no small part to the distances they have to travel and the periods of time they have to wait before their cases are heard. As the Government are in possession of those forms setting out the reasons why those cases are cracked, may I urge them please to undertake analysis and publish that information, because if we do not get a grip on this, we let victims down and let perpetrators off the hook?

My local officers also make the point that between March 2016 and March 2018 in Calderdale, there has been a 64% increase in the number of arrest warrants issued under the Bail Act 1976 for failure to appear in court—a 64% increase! The cost of that to the police and its impact on resources reflect a damning failure of our justice system to deliver on its own responsibilities, rather than simply passing the work and cost on to other agencies.

Let me turn to the impact on the local authority. Calderdale Council confirms that family cases are being heard across the neighbouring area, with families travelling to Huddersfield, Bradford and Leeds for care proceedings. All emergency orders are heard in court in Leeds, about 20 miles away from Halifax town centre. Families are having to travel much further, as are lawyers, and, significantly for the council, so too are social workers. What was previously an hour or two out of the office for a hearing is now routinely half a day. Like the police, social workers were stretched without this entirely avoidable pull on their time, and the situation has an impact on capacity within the team.

An issue that was raised with me only recently by Trinity Academy Sowerby Bridge, and confirmed by Calderdale Council, is the local authority's inability to secure court dates to take enforcement action against parents who persistently flout attendance requirements. It is depressing that that might be necessary, and there are some uncomfortable patterns around lack of attendance in the cases outlined to me—that is a debate for another day, Mr Deputy Speaker—but having issued penalty notices to parents that have gone unpaid, the local authority has a statutory responsibility to the school to secure a court date for the case to be heard within a six-month window. These cases are all heard in Bradford, and there is a delay in obtaining court dates due to the volume of hearings being sought between the two councils, Calderdale and Bradford. Calderdale Council informs me that that is having a detrimental effect on its statutory service to schools, leading to a situation in which the backlog of cases in the system is such that it has had to write off a significant number of cases of unpaid penalty notices as it simply cannot secure a court date within the required six-month timescale. The fine therefore goes unpaid but, more worryingly, in some of those cases the child is not going to school for that duration, and the school and the council are powerless to take corrective action due to the court closures.

The youth offending team is also having to adapt, with staff now based at Bradford court, where all the youth cases are heard, despite staff having to drive young people to Bradford on occasion to make sure

that they attend. I understand that the YOT feels that attending court can help with behavioural change and convey seriousness to a young person who might be on the wrong path, and I am inclined to agree. The court buildings themselves will always play an important role in the infrastructure of justice provision.

I have discussed the situation with local law firms in Halifax and, disappointingly but unsurprisingly, three firms that specialised in criminal law have relocated since the courts closed. That is jobs and business rates gone from our area. Solicitor Mark Baxendale of Baxendale Vanzie solicitors told me that he is currently working on a case involving a Calderdale man that is being heard at Leeds court, confirming once again that cases are being heard as far as 20 miles from Halifax—not in Bradford as promised, or as suggested in the answer to my written parliamentary question.

My local courts were just two of the 86 courts across England and Wales that were closed in 2016, and an additional eight closures were proposed in January this year. Following my meeting with Susan Acland-Hood, Calderdale Council has had meetings with the Courts and Tribunals Service on the delivery of the commitment to video links in one of the council's buildings. The latest news that Calderdale heard from the Courts and Tribunals Service was in February—four months ago—when it was told that the technology at the court end was not fit for purpose to accommodate court hearings by video link. Attempts were being made to source alternative technology, but Calderdale Council has received no further updates since then.

In May, I asked the Government how many courts had been closed and replaced with remote video technology since 2015. The answer was that none had been closed and replaced with remote video technology since 2015 but, to “enhance” access to justice, remote video links had been established in six areas where courts had closed since 2015, with a further two video links to be in place by the end of the year. So 86 courts have been closed and video links have been introduced in just six areas affected by those closures since then. I object in the strongest possible terms to the suggestion that this was done to enhance access to justice. Justice gaps have been plugged in just six out of 86 areas; that is not enhancing access to justice, it is decimating it.

I hope that I have left the Minister in no doubt that the provision of justice in Calderdale and the surrounding areas has been dealt a critical blow by the closure of the courts. I would like to see immediate progress on video links, and if the technology is not yet available, court provision should be reinstated until it is. The case load has not been transferred 10 miles to Bradford, as was consulted on, but, in some instances, 20 miles to Leeds. What is being done to address that? It is not what was consulted on and, apparently, it is news to the Ministry of Justice, given its written response. Finally, will the Minister commit to undertaking an analysis of how long it is taking for courts to hear domestic violence trials, and the reasons why so-called cracked trials are collapsing in areas where courts have recently closed? In that way, we will really be able to understand the impact and seek to mitigate it, however and wherever possible.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this debate. I know that the hon. Member

[Lucy Frazer]

for Halifax (Holly Lynch) is very interested in this issue and has campaigned hard for her constituents. I am aware of how hard she campaigned against the original closure of the courts in Halifax on the basis of travel times and lack of access to justice. I was aware that, as she said, she met the chief executive officer of the Courts and Tribunals Service in July 2017 to discuss opportunities to establish a video link and, as she identified, she has recently asked a number of written parliamentary questions on this topic.

I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) is present; he, too, campaigned against the closure of the courts in Calderdale. I also see that Mr Deputy Speaker, the right hon. Member for Chorley (Sir Lindsay Hoyle), is in the Chair; he is campaigning vigorously against the closure of his local court in Chorley and I have met him several times to hear his concerns and those of his constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I am awaiting good news.

Lucy Frazer: Before I turn to the particular instances that affect the hon. Lady's Halifax constituency, it is important to make a number of broad points about access to justice and the courts estate. In every sector, digitalisation is improving access to services, including to public services. Technology has reformed the way that we live our lives and made many processes more efficient. In such circumstances, we ask ourselves whether justice should be immune from digital advancement.

In 2015, the Civil Justice Council wrote a report, stating that online dispute resolution had enormous potential to bring two great benefits to our justice system: a lower-cost court system and an increase in access to justice. The Ministry of Justice is now in the process of improving and upgrading our justice system to bring it up to date in the 21st century.

Technology is not the only answer to any upgrade. The provision of justice depends on people and courts and on lawyers and judges. However, in circumstances in which 41% of courts in 2016-17 were used at less than half of their available hearing capacity; in circumstances in which the money from the proceeds of the sale of a court are put back into the justice system; in circumstances in which we are spending £1 billion on our courts reform programme; and in circumstances in which finances are not unlimited, we do need to ask ourselves where money on the justice system is best spent. It is in that context that the closure of the courts in Calderdale took place.

The closures of the county and magistrates courts were proposed because they were poorly used. For example, in the financial year before the consultation, the magistrates court had been used for 33% of its available hours. Both the magistrates court and the county court were also grade II listed buildings and not fit for purpose. The court consultation resulted in a proposal to move the work to Bradford, where better facilities were available for those using the courts.

The courts were closed only after the Ministry of Justice had consulted and considered carefully the responses and the Lord Chancellor was satisfied that the courts could be closed without compromising access to justice.

The consultation response document stated that the Ministry of Justice would explore the potential for those living in Halifax to give evidence into court remotely from another location in the town. Finding an appropriate IT solution and local venue has taken longer than we had initially hoped, but I am pleased to be able to advise the hon. Lady that arrangements are being put in place to allow witnesses and users, subject to judicial approval, to give evidence via a video link located in the Calderdale council building. The facilities will require some initial testing to make sure that they meet all necessary requirements, but I am told that we will be able to provide this enhancement for those who need to give evidence in court and who are unable to travel to Bradford.

I know that this has taken a long time, and I will identify some of the reasons why that is the case. Initially, it was necessary to find a building. One was identified, but there were problems. The Ministry of Justice then looked at two other buildings: Customer First and the citizens advice bureau. It progressed with Customer First. There was then an issue of incompatible IT, but that issue is now solved. Then it had to bid for funding. It is now working with the judiciary on where the video facility will go in Bradford, but it thinks there will be a solution imminently. Then the IT will have to be installed.

I know that the hon. Lady welcomes video facilities. She mentioned that she was a member of the Prisons and Courts Bill Committee and that she visited Kent police's video-enabled justice system. I note that she said that she "genuinely welcomed" the move to introduce modern technology into the justice system, so that vulnerable victims can record their evidence just once to save potentially painful and unnecessary repetition; so that we can cut down the time spent by police officers in court; and so that justice can be accessed on an iPad in a front room. She went on to say that such changes would be "fantastic".

Across the court estate, we have established video link facilities that allow vulnerable victims and witnesses routinely to give evidence without having to be in the same courtroom as the defendant. We have more than 2,000 operational video links, with witness links in magistrates and Crown courts.

On the wider programme of reform, we are making considerable progress. So far, we have delivered high-quality new digital services. For example, the public can now apply for uncontested divorce online; apply for probate online; make pleas online for low-level offences, such as traffic offences or evading their bus fare; and respond to civil money claims. Thousands of people have already used these pilots and received straightforward digital access to the courts for the first time. Public feedback has been extremely positive.

This is not just about efficiency. Offering court and tribunal services online can significantly improve the experience of those using the courts. For example, the rejection rates for paper divorce applications was 40% due to errors and omissions. Since the latest release of the online divorce service, the online application rejection rate is now less than 1%, and surveys show user satisfaction of about 90% for our online services.

The hon. Lady has raised several important and interesting points about the experience in her constituency. She mentioned the particularly important aspect of domestic violence, and I recently held a roundtable with

practitioners in the judiciary and those who use the courts to work out how we can improve the court service for those who have experienced domestic violence. She made several points that I am happy to look into.

I am grateful that we have had an opportunity to debate this important topic today. The Government are investing a significant sum to enhance access to justice, and we will work hard to drive forward the

transformation of our courts and tribunals to make sure that we continue to have a justice system that we can be proud of.

Question put and agreed to.

5.21 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 21 June 2018

[MR ANDREW ROSINDELL *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

ME: Treatment and Research

1.30 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered myalgic encephalomyelitis treatment and research.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving Members the opportunity to hold this debate.

It is estimated that around a quarter of a million people in the UK suffer from myalgic encephalomyelitis—ME. It costs the UK around £3.3 billion per annum. Although the exact cause of the disease is unknown, numerous patients report that their ME developed following a viral infection. ME is characterised by flu-like symptoms that can vary in severity from headaches and muscle aches to debilitating pain, extreme sensitivity to light and sound, and memory and concentration problems. For some, even touch is intolerable and they require tube feeding. Despite the number of people affected and the devastating effect of the disease on sufferers and their families, it is very much a hidden illness, which is characterised by some as yuppie flu and misunderstood by doctors, the public and politicians alike.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Lady is quite right that doctors do not research this enough and do not have adequate training to suss it out, for want of a better term. More importantly, less than 1% of children are badly affected. Does she agree that, very often, employers do not understand the illness?

Carol Monaghan: I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman. It is a tragic situation when children are not able to attend school and social services become involved because they consider there to be a problem with those children's care.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): It is particularly difficult for those who attend benefits assessments on a day when the symptoms are not as bad, because there is no acceptance that the illness can be very bad on some days, but not quite as bad on other days. Does the hon. Lady agree the benefits system must look at the longer term picture, rather than the short term?

Carol Monaghan: I will come on to interactions with the Department for Work and Pensions. ME patients report that energy levels vary. Sometimes, going to such an appointment can wipe out someone for many weeks afterwards. If that person were to attend the appointment the following day, their condition would be very different.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I am delighted that the hon. Lady has secured this debate. She referred to the seriousness of ME and how many people are affected. Does she agree that for it to be taken seriously and

proportionately to its scale and impact, that needs to be reflected in every area, including the amount of medical research that is devoted to ME? It is certainly a point that my constituents are concerned should be raised in this debate.

Carol Monaghan: ME receives practically no biomedical research funding, which I will come back to. Because of the misunderstanding of the condition, the treatments available are often more damaging to the person than no treatment at all.

Merryn Crofts was just 15 when she experienced hives and swelling in her joints after a family holiday in Majorca. Tests revealed that she had contracted glandular fever. Despite dozens of medical appointments, Merryn's condition deteriorated; she suffered breathing problems, exhaustion and excruciating hypersensitivity to touch, light and sound. She was eventually diagnosed with ME. This once bright young woman was forced to wear an eye mask and suffered from severe migraines, brain fog, slurred speech and persistent infections. Stomach problems and difficulties swallowing meant that her weight plummeted to just 5½ stone. Merryn was eventually fitted with an intravenous nutrition line but was given a terminal diagnosis in 2016. Merryn wrote in her blog:

"Having severe ME, is like being trapped in your own body every single day. There is no rest, you are bedbound all day every day. It snatches the most simple things away from you like being able to wash yourself, even in bed. Being cared for in every way possible. In terrible pain, from everything. Not being able to talk on the phone or have visitors, and feeling worse about saying no every time someone asks again. Months and months in hospital. Severe infections. Breathing problems. Low immunity. Problems anywhere and everywhere in the body. Paralysis. Severe hypersensitivity. The list is endless, and if I was physically able to type I would carry on. Spread awareness and remember all of us and all of those who have lost their lives."

Merryn died on 23 May 2017, just days after her 21st birthday.

Why is the treatment for people with ME so poor? The lack of understanding shown by some healthcare professionals of a person's suffering is one of the greatest frustrations to the ME community. Much of that stemmed from the publication of the controversial PACE trial. The treatments investigated in the PACE trial were based on the hypothesis that ME patients harbour "unhelpful" convictions about having a disease and that the continuation of their symptoms is the result of deconditioning.

The PACE trial compared different treatments, including cognitive behaviour therapy—CBT—and graded exercise therapy, or GET. The results that were published in *The Lancet* in 2011 seemed to show that GET and CBT could bring about some improvements in a person with ME. Although that may seem positive, if we dig a little deeper we discover that the parameters for recovery were changed midway through the trial and the results depended on self-reporting. Patients have told me that they were pressurised to describe improvements they really did not feel. One participant in the original trial said:

"After repeatedly being asked how severe...my symptoms were. ...I started to feel like I had to put a...positive spin on my...answers. I could not be honest about just how bad it was, as that would...tell the doctors I wasn't trying and I wasn't being positive enough."

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech and is drawing attention to this much misunderstood but very serious condition.

[Robert Courts]

My constituents will be grateful to her for that. She made some powerful comments on the PACE trial; will she comment on the way that NICE guidelines have an impact on how the condition is viewed?

Carol Monaghan: I will come on to the NICE guidelines. They are under review, and all politicians can help with that. I have already written to NICE about the issue and I will ask the Minister about that later.

We now know that 13% of the participants in the PACE trial qualified at baseline as “recovered” or “within the normal range” for one of the study’s two primary measures—self-reported physical function—even though they were classified on the same measure as disabled enough to enter the study. That anomaly, which occurred because the investigators weakened key outcome thresholds after data collection, invalidates any claim that patients recovered or got back to normal. The overlap in entry and outcome criteria is only one of the trial’s unacceptable features.

For patients, the impact of PACE is severe. The recommendation of GET as a treatment for ME has provoked a backlash from patient groups, who report that many people with ME end up more severely disabled after a course of GET than before. I have spoken to people living with ME who have tried to do GET because they are so desperate to get better and have ended up in a wheelchair or bedbound as a result of this programme.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. The turnout shows the significance of this issue to all our constituents. Her point about GET is important. It seems perverse that people should be forced to take a course of treatment that patently makes their condition worse. Does she agree that that must be reviewed?

Carol Monaghan: Indeed. Many people have written to me about their experience of GET, but some of the most upsetting examples are of children who were forced through a programme of GET and ended up with life-changing disabilities as a result.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for mentioning my constituent, Merryn Crofts, whom I will speak about later. Merryn’s mum, Clare, said to me that Merryn was put on GET and that it made her condition worse. Everything that the hon. Lady says is backed up by the testimony that Clare gave me—I just wanted to share that with her.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Merryn’s is not an isolated case, and neither are those of my constituents—I am sure that Members present have all heard constituents describe the same situation.

The PACE trial, which recommended CBT and GET, influences how health insurers and the DWP make their decisions. Insurance companies refuse to pay out unless a programme of GET has been undertaken, and many people who apply for benefits are told that they must carry out GET—or, indeed, that they appear well enough to work. PACE is unique in UK medical history, in that it was part-funded by the DWP. The links of some of its

main authors to health insurance companies are troubling. One of those authors, Professor Michael Sharpe, states in his briefing for the debate:

“Several of the investigators had done small amounts of independent consultancy for insurance companies, but this was not relevant to the trial. The insurance companies played no part in the trial.”

I will leave hon. Members to make up their own minds about that.

Healthcare professionals worldwide are starting to take note. The US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and the Health Council of the Netherlands have both abandoned GET. If those countries acknowledge the flaws of GET, why are ME sufferers in the UK having to fight so hard for similar acknowledgement? The ME community hopes that GET will not feature in the NICE guidelines for ME treatment after they are revised.

Some argue that CBT is provided as a treatment for many illnesses, including heart disease and cancer, and that ME patients’ rejection of it is irrational. The key difference is that cancer patients receive biomedical treatment in addition to CBT, rather than having CBT to the exclusion of biomedical interventions. Biomedical treatment for ME is woefully lacking. There are reports from the US that certain antiviral drugs improve the condition, but without properly funded research to identify biomarkers for ME, we do not have the answers.

Diagnosis is currently based on a patient presenting with known symptoms. Although there is no biomarker for ME, that does not mean there is no biomedical test for it. The two-day cardiopulmonary exercise test, which can objectively document the effects of exercise, could be used as a diagnostic tool. In simple terms, people with ME perform adequately or even well on the first day but have reduced heart and lung function on the second. That relates to the point made by the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) about the DWP and the fact that someone’s presentation may be good one day but not the next.

That protocol involves two identical tests separated by 24 hours, the collection of gas exchange data and the use of an exercise bike to measure work output accurately. That type of testing reveals a significant performance decrease on day two among people with ME, in terms of their workload and the volume of oxygen they consume before and during exercise. Results from a single test may be interpreted as deconditioning, which may lead to harmful exercise being prescribed. However, the objective measurements of the two-day test remove the issues of self-reporting bias and the question of effort—in other words, the results cannot be faked.

Those results support the strong and consistent patient evidence of the harm that can occur as a result of inappropriate exercise programmes. However, there are moves afoot to categorise ME as a psychological condition. NHS guidelines on medically unexplained symptoms class ME as such a condition. The Royal College of Psychiatrists states:

“Medically unexplained symptoms are ‘persistent bodily complaints for which adequate examination does not reveal sufficient explanatory structural or other specified pathology.’”

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I just want to pick up on the hon. Lady’s point about ME being classified as a psychological condition. Does

she agree that that is a little curious, given that the World Health Organisation states in its “International Classification of Diseases” that ME is a neurological condition? My understanding is that the United Kingdom is legally obliged to follow that classification.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Worryingly, the WHO is looking at reclassifying ME, too—we should all be aware of that—and its current classification of ME as a neurological condition has been ignored in terms of the treatment we have offered to patients here in the UK.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists goes on to state that symptoms are

“not due to a physical illness in the body. However, they can be explained, but to do this, we need to think about causes that are not just physical.”

Under the new “Improving Access to Psychological Therapies” guidance for people with long-term conditions, patients who present with ME are classified as people with medically unexplained symptoms who should undergo CBT therapy, in conjunction with other treatments—in other words, graded exercise therapy. However, as ME is classified as a psychological condition, patients risk getting trapped in the psychological care pathway.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenhams) (Con): I am co-chair of the all-party group on Lyme disease. Does the hon. Lady agree that there are many similarities between Lyme disease and ME, in that patients may be misdiagnosed and may not know where to turn, and that we need to invest in research in both those important areas?

Carol Monaghan: There are many conditions that we now think could be grouped under the wide umbrella of auto-immune conditions. Lyme disease, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis and ME may all be in that group, but without research we do not know.

Some people consider ME to be a psychological condition, despite the fact that people with ME are not allowed to be blood or organ donors. Unfortunately, those who hold such beliefs often are in influential positions and have a blinkered view of the condition. I wonder what they have to fear from proper biomedical research into ME. If such research showed they were correct, their views would be vindicated. However, if it threw up new information that had an impact on ME treatment and care, as medical professionals they should surely support that.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Is she aware that the UK charity Invest in ME Research recently opened a centre of excellence for ME research at Norwich Research Park? That was funded by patients and carers, who raised a staggering £800,000 for what will be groundbreaking, world-class research.

Carol Monaghan: I was not aware of that specific centre, but I am aware that almost all the biomedical research currently taking place in the UK is funded by charities and patient groups, rather than by the Government or research councils.

Interestingly, Professor Sharpe, one of the authors of the PACE trial whom I already mentioned, emailed me this week and told me that my behaviour is “unbecoming

of an MP”. I say to Professor Sharpe that if listening to my constituents, investigating their concerns and taking action as a result is “unbecoming”, I stand guilty. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] If Members of Parliament are not willing to stand up for the most vulnerable in society, what hope do any of us have?

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an exceptionally good point about this whole challenge, and the number of Members in the Chamber is testimony to her leading an exceptional debate. Many of my constituents have written to me about this issue. Is the thrust not that the ME community needs to be listened to more broadly in the review by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence?

Carol Monaghan: NICE has said that it will review its guidelines and talk to patient groups and ME charities in doing that. We must continue to urge it to ensure that that is the case, because those best placed to talk about the impact of the current guidelines and what should be in future guidelines are those living with ME.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Should not graded exercise therapy be removed as a treatment option even before the NICE guidelines are reviewed, given the evidence that people are being harmed by it? The Minister is hearing that evidence today. Is there not a possibility that in future a court could compensate ME sufferers if they continue to be prescribed GET, given that we, the Minister and medical professionals know the evidence?

Carol Monaghan: One of the big issues we have is the real lack of awareness among many in the healthcare profession. I do not want to criticise people in healthcare, and in particular GPs, who have to cover many different conditions, but that highlights why GP education and ME awareness must be increased. It is not an uncommon condition, so we really need to look at that.

What do we need to do now? First, we need properly funded biomedical research into the causes of ME and the treatment of those with ME. I recently asked a series of written questions about the level of funding into biomedical research, and frankly the answers did not fill me with confidence. Less than £1 is spent annually on each ME patient in the UK. It gets worse, because the response states that that was not solely Government funding but, as has been mentioned, from a combination of funders including many ME charities. The Scottish Government have just announced £90,000 for a PhD studentship to support research into the causes, diagnosis and treatment of ME. It would be most welcome for people across the UK if the UK Government were to follow that lead.

I am pleased that NICE is reviewing its guidelines, but, as was just said, GPs are still recommending exercise as a treatment. I ask the Minister: how is the Department of Health and Social Care supporting training for medical practitioners on ME care and treatment? The new NICE guidelines will not be published until 2020, so what representations will he make to NICE to ensure that damaging exercise therapy does not remain the main course of treatment?

In the debate on ME in February, I asked the Minister for Care, the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), about working with her colleagues in the

[Carol Monaghan]

Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that new guidelines are drawn up for dealing with people with ME. What progress has been made on that? Most importantly, will the Minister support proper funding for biomedical research into the diagnosis and treatment of ME? I understand that money is not usually ring-fenced for particular conditions, but, considering how poorly funded biomedical ME research has been up to now, what steps will the Government take to address that?

I thank all hon. Members who have delayed returning to their constituencies to speak up for those with ME. Their support is appreciated and welcomed by those here today, and by the wider ME community. I also thank the ME charities and campaigners who have briefed us all so thoroughly, and the Countess of Mar for her relentless campaign for improved treatments for ME.

ME is a condition that it is all too easy for us to ignore. Those afflicted by it are often unseen by society, but many hon. Members are in the Chamber because they have been approached by affected constituents. I thank all of those who have brought the condition to our attention. ME has a devastating impact not just on its 250,000 sufferers but on families and carers, too—it has a far wider impact. Ultimately, as politicians we must remember that statistics are simply patients with the tears wiped away.

1.56 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) on securing the debate and all hon. Members who will participate in it. It is essential that we speak for the millions missing, and it is great to see so many people in the Public Gallery.

What I find so shocking is that scientists seem not to want to have the debate. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members across the House find it shocking that the hon. Member for Glasgow North West was written to by a scientist and called out. I have seen scientists writing in journals such as the *Journal of Health Psychology* calling out the PACE trial, so the idea that the scientists who produced that work have gone unchallenged by other scientists is simply not true. A huge amount of evidence from eminent people in the science community questions the PACE trials, including the methodology, the evidence they used and how they treated their patients, as the hon. Lady said. Therefore, it has been proven not to be the case that the NICE guidelines, built on that questionable evidence, are the only way in which we should consider this disease, and she did that well in a previous debate.

It is great that the NICE guidelines are to be reviewed, but my concern is that that will take some time. I am sure that is the right process; we must get it right and ensure that the voices of ME sufferers are heard. Scoping working groups have been set up in which ME sufferers have been able to participate, and that is welcome. But I find it quite scary that the current guidelines will be in place until October 2020. I have listened to my constituents and read about those of other right hon. and hon. Members who feel that if they are prescribed according to those guidelines and go through all that, it makes

them more ill. Far from helping them, it makes them deteriorate. Indeed, I have a constituent who feels that the programme she was put through set her back two or three years.

Real harm is being caused by some of the therapies recommended in the guidelines. If that is the evidence from ME sufferers—I am not a scientist, but from what I have read, that experience is widely shared—it is up to the Minister, working with the chief medical officer and others, to question whether the NICE guidelines should be suspended, at least with respect to GET. If GPs, perhaps because they have not been trained, are making medical prescriptions for treatment following NICE guidelines because Ministers and the chief medical officer have not acted, if that treatment is harming people, and if that continues until October 2020 there will, as I said in my intervention, be a case for those who are harmed to go to court and seek compensation.

No one wants that. To avoid it, surely there must be a way in which Government Ministers, working with NICE and the CMO, can issue guidelines directly to GPs and medical professionals to say, “Be careful before you prescribe GET. Ensure that you have read the evidence. Ensure that you have talked properly to the patient.” With many drugs and pharmaceuticals, there are sometimes side effects. Therapy does not work for everybody. Where is the warning in the NICE guidelines of the side effects of GET? That is serious, because people could be seriously hurt in the period between now and the conclusion of the NICE review.

I will move on to research. Looking at the work that Invest in ME Research has done, for example, setting out the calls for research in this country over two decades or more, I find it quite disturbing that those calls have been ignored. Only charities have enabled a meagre amount of research to be done. Some £5 million was set aside for the PACE trial; if we could have a small amount of that money to start real, biomedical research into ME, we would be making a step forward.

Andrew Selous: Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern that, as I understand it, there are roughly two and a half times more people with ME than with multiple sclerosis, yet there is 20 times more research on multiple sclerosis than on ME and, of what little ME research there has been, the vast majority has been through psychological and behavioural studies rather than the biomedical approach?

Sir Edward Davey: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern. I should say that we still need a lot of research into MS, so it is not one or the other, but given the incidence of ME, as he rightly says, the case for research into the biomedical aspects is strong. Invest in ME Research makes a number of proposals in its recent report. For example, it proposes a ring-fenced fund of £20 million a year for the next five years for biomedical research. That recommendation comes from a detailed report; it is not just plucked out of the air. That sort of figure would show that the Government mean business.

I am aware that Ministers cannot stand up at the Dispatch Box and say, “Yes, of course we will direct research money into this probe; I myself will do it.” I am not suggesting the Minister can do that today. I know he cannot. He has to work with research councils

and others to direct the research. I am also aware that if researchers do not make proposals, sometimes research moneys cannot be granted.

Sir Henry Bellingham: As I mentioned earlier, Invest in ME Research has set up a centre of excellence for research in the Norwich Research Park, and it is planning to create a hub for European biomedical research, which is good news indeed. It already has five PhD students and is hoping to push out a consultant-led clinical service. Here we have the infrastructure and base for that extra Government funding, to build on the money that has been raised by patients and carers.

Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and it is good that he is here to champion that centre. He makes the point I wish to make to the Minister: a pipeline of research proposals is likely to come about not only from the centre in Norwich, but no doubt as offshoots from research elsewhere—particularly the United States, which is beginning to get its act together on the research side. There is a pipeline, and I urge the Minister to anticipate that, to talk to the research councils and to say with his colleagues, “We will be ready and we will have the funds ready so that when the research proposals come through”—as I am confident they will—“we will back them.” Then we can start making progress. I say to the Minister, please, not to wait to see whether they come through before he dedicates the money and starts pressurising the research councils, because we know that process can take too long. People have already waited too long.

I will conclude my remarks by underlining two points touched on by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West. The first is the need for respect for patients. Sometimes it seems, from the stories I have read, that some in the medical profession—I say some—do not respect patients. They make comments that it is all in people’s minds and that they are making it up. That is no way to talk to adults. A constituent of mine who has been suffering from ME, who I talked to last night, recently went to see her consultant. The consultant said in terms, “All ME people are crazy, except you.” That did not make her feel very happy. I am afraid that type of view among senior medical people is not acceptable, and I hope Ministers will make it clear that they expect patients not to be treated like that.

That links to my final point, on the need to train doctors. We need better guidance and better training so they understand that situation. In that light, I am worried that we are seeing some pressure to reclassify ME. That is sending a dangerous signal, and I hope the Minister will say that the Government are questioning that reclassification and putting it on hold. Otherwise, the training for doctors will not happen, the respect for patients will not happen and we will not see the change that our constituents demand. I look forward to the Minister’s remarks and to the contributions of other hon. Members.

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): As a lot of colleagues wish to speak in the debate, I ask that everyone keep their remarks within about eight or 10 minutes each, if that is possible. For the benefit of the Minister and the Opposition spokesmen, I hope to be able to start the winding-up speeches at 4 o’clock.

2.6 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, and to contribute so early in this debate. I too congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) were right to say that the number of hon. Members here in this Chamber shows the importance of this subject; I pay full tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West for bringing this debate.

I am particularly pleased to contribute to this debate as a patron of the Dorset ME Support Group, to set out some of the work the group does and to give a brief insight into the lives of two ME sufferers in my constituency. Dorset ME Support Group’s chairman, Peter Bennett, has been hugely helpful in setting out the challenges that ME sufferers face in Dorset. Much of the knowledge the group has comes from the work done in our community in Dorset. There are nearly 400 members, not just in my constituency, but spread across the whole county, and the group provides practical support to its members and their friends and families.

I will highlight three ways that that practical support is given. First, there are local link groups, offering informal venues for members to meet and socialise. Secondly, there is an annual medical lecture. Thirdly, there is telephone support and personal one-to-one support from a self-care co-ordinator. The group’s activity is quite a feat, given that the charity was set up in 1983 and relies on only two part-time employees, as well as a number of volunteers. Needless to say, more volunteers and trustees would be welcome, so if any residents of Dorset are following our proceedings and would like to get involved, I invite them to get in touch. I am sure the Minister and all hon. Members in the Chamber would wish to join me in congratulating Dorset ME Support Group and Peter, as well as the many other support groups that exist across the country.

I will briefly highlight two constituents’ stories about their journey with ME and how it has affected them and the people around them. The first comes from Megan, who is still at school and has detailed to me the impact of ME on her education and quality of life. The following extract sets out the huge challenges she faces daily as a young person with ME, and it speaks to the lack of independence or control over their lives that some sufferers face. She says:

“I suffer with ME and it has a huge impact on my education. My grades have dropped far below where they should be and I am just not very happy at school in general. As a result of my ME I suffer with low mood and some anxiety more recently. I have had ME for about 18 months now.”

Megan encouraged me to attend the debate, saying

“it would educate you so much on the struggles me and many others face in everyday life.”

I thank her very much for that encouragement and for taking the time to travel to London today to witness our proceedings this afternoon.

One specific point I would like the Minister to consider is the raising of awareness of support groups—not just in Dorset but across the whole country. Megan made the very good point that the Dorset ME Support Group was not recommended to her or her family by any medical professional; they had to search it out for themselves. She says of that group:

[Michael Tomlinson]

"I know that we are lucky in this area to have that, but it's something that I really think should be available to everyone."

I agree. Will the Minister consider what formal mechanism might be put in place to ensure that sufferers and their families are informed about such national and local groups?

As the hon. Member for Glasgow North West said, ME not only affects the sufferer but has a wide-ranging impact on families, partners and friends. Another constituent of mine, who is a family member of a long-term ME sufferer, says:

"As my daughter suffered from this debilitating condition for many years, I have personal experience of the devastation it can cause. It came close to costing both of us our careers and certainly changed the course of her life."

Those brief snapshots, along with the other accounts we have heard and those we will doubtless hear in due course, remind us that this condition takes its toll on the quality of life of everyone that it comes into contact with—not just the 250,000 sufferers who live with it day in, day out.

My final point is obvious and has already been made, and it is about the importance of research. While there is currently no cure for ME, there are treatments that can help to ease symptoms, although no one form of treatment may suit every patient. I am pleased that the Medical Research Council and the National Institute for Health Research welcome high-quality applications for research into all aspects of ME, and I am told that £2 million has been invested in ME research as a result. However, as has already been said, that is a very modest amount indeed. More research into effective treatments is necessary, so that ME sufferers in my constituency and across the country can live as normal a life as possible.

2.12 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to take part in this important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for introducing it and all other hon. Members who supported the application for a three-hour debate; we will certainly need it with the number of hon. Members who wish to speak.

I owe my knowledge of ME to friends who have suffered from it and, particularly, to constituents who have written poignant letters to me about their experiences and the hurt they have suffered when people just would not recognise that they had a condition—whether we call it ME, chronic fatigue syndrome or a post-viral condition. All those different elements make ME a problematic condition.

I mainly want to thank my constituent and friend, Dr Charles Shepherd, who is in the Gallery and to whom I mainly owe the few words I will say. He has advised the ME Association for many years now. Along with Dr Chaudhuri, he has written a book on ME. Hon. Members might like to go through it if they have a few moments; I went through it again last night. They will be staggered by some of the things that they did not know. However, I have to say that it is not the easiest read. It is very technical and very medical, but this is an incredibly technical and medical disease, which is why we do not know enough about it.

I will try to avoid the points made by other Members, but I make no apologies for going through some of the points made to me by Dr Shepherd. I also mention Sarah Reed—the wife of Andy Reed, the former Member for Loughborough—who has for a long period of time also suffered from ME and has been in touch with me about it on many occasions.

On medical education, it is quite clear that GPs, in particular, have no experience in how to diagnose this disease, so there is a need for training at both undergraduate and postgraduate level to make sure that doctors become more aware of what the condition looks like and the ways in which they could begin to treat it. That continuing lack of medical education adds to the misery that our constituents have faced. Dare I say it, it behoves the Minister—I know he will be tied in what he can say—to say something about the training programmes that we should expect our doctors to go through. It is vital that ME is understood not only by junior doctors but all the way up through the profession. We have understood, from some of the arguments on research, that there are still those who are not necessarily as keenly aware of ME.

Michelle Donelan: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is about awareness not only among doctors but among teachers, employers and the wider community? The lack of knowledge in those sectors exacerbates the conditions that those with ME suffer from, and that causes great distress.

Dr Drew: I agree, and the hon. Lady makes her point strongly. All I will say is that I will concentrate mainly on the medical side of things. However, everybody needs to be more aware because of the numbers—two in every 1,000 people are thought to suffer from the condition.

We have heard a lot about the PACE trial and the need for NICE to rewrite its guidelines, so I do not really want to labour those points, other than to say that it is not helpful that cognitive behavioural therapy and graded exercise therapy are still suggested as the appropriate way forward after ME diagnosis. We know for all sorts of reasons that that is not so. I am sure the Minister heard that and will want to comment on it.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent was diagnosed with ME but, after going for a private test, it turned out to be Lyme disease. That shows the lack of knowledge and the confusion in the medical profession between those two conditions and others.

Dr Drew: If my hon. Friend reads Dr Shepherd's book, he will see some of the overlap between Lyme disease and ME, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North West mentioned. That is why this whole area needs proper diagnosis and a proper investigation into some of the research implications.

On research, as has been made patently clear by other Members, most of the research is self-help. That is not good enough. This is a major condition that affects lots of our constituents, and yet they are asked to raise all the money for research themselves. That is not good enough, so we clearly ask the Government—as the Minister will have heard—and the research councils to give ME the priority that it deserves.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I hope the hon. Gentleman will support my campaign to get the Government to invest in the Invest in ME Research centre of excellence in Norwich. I did not mention that it has a really good chance of forging first-class links with not only European biomedical research institutes but institutes in the United States and Asia, where other groundbreaking research is being done. The Government should support and invest in success.

Dr Drew: I think that was aimed more at the Minister than me, but I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. I gather that the National Institutes of Health in America has begun to grapple with this and to put some quite serious funding into it. ME is an international condition, so we should hope that the Medical Research Council is also able to provide that level of support.

We have heard about the impact of ME on people who go for benefits interviews with the Department for Work and Pensions. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North West mentioned, it is difficult to get those who judge people's conditions to understand how variable ME is. When people are going for employment and support allowance, personal independence payment or, as has been the case more recently, universal credit, account needs to be taken, when practitioners are making decisions, of the fact that the condition is variable. Sadly, all the evidence is that that is not fully understood. Again, this matter is not the Minister's responsibility, because it overlaps with the remit of the DWP, but I hope that he can take away from what has been said here today the fact that the DWP needs to be much more aware of what the condition entails, rather than making judgments on what they see the person performing in front of them.

I think that the most important point of all is that we all could put pressure on our local clinical commissioning groups to show greater recognition of how important it is that they fund ME, in terms of both support for the individual patient and looking at how they commission the moneys that go into the services. Clearly, this remains a Cinderella subject, but given the numbers affected and the misery suffered by people with the condition, that is not in any way acceptable, so I hope that as a result of today—again, the Minister will hear this—we might all be able to go out and talk to our CCGs about what evidence they can provide us with to show that they are properly funding treatment of this condition. As we all know, what has happened in the past has been totally unacceptable. Let us hope that there is a better world now and that we can all play our part in ensuring that this condition is treated with the seriousness that it deserves.

2.21 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. Like other hon. Members, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who has shown great stamina in fighting for this cause and who set out the position at the outset of the debate with great detail and authority. I therefore do not want to repeat what she said, but will just make a few points.

I said in the application for the debate that the reason why I thought we needed to have it was that ME has terrible PR. That was a slightly flippant thing to say, but

the real point I wanted to make was that it is a forgotten illness—and I think it is forgotten for two reasons. The first is that the symptoms are relatively intangible, and the second is that the condition has been disparagingly referred to in the past by a name that has stuck. The hon. Lady referred to it—yuppie flu. It is important that we debate this condition today, not because there are not other illnesses out there—of course there are—but because the sufferers, some of whom we see in the Public Gallery, have been voiceless too long and it is for Parliament to give them their voice.

I want to take this opportunity to thank three remarkable ladies in my constituency: Louise Beaton, Linda Hending and Rachel Ephgrave. With their courage, dignity and stamina, they have educated me and given me the opportunity to speak on their behalf. With that opportunity, let me begin by slaying some myths. The first myth is that of yuppie flu. ME is a thing. The US Institute of Medicine published in 2015 a report that analysed more than 9,000 scientific articles about ME. What did it conclude? It stated:

“The primary message of this report is that ME/CFS is a serious, chronic, complex, multisystem disease”.

In addition, as we have heard, the World Health Organisation has categorised it as a neurological condition in paragraph G93.3. Let the message go out today to those people who may have a dim awareness of ME that it is a condition; it is recognised as a condition; and it deserves to be treated as a condition.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West has already referred to the impacts of the condition. I will not repeat those points, other than to note this. When we talk about its affecting an estimated 250,000 adults and children in the UK, that is important because it allows us to put it in context with other conditions and the way they are treated. For example, there are 11,000 or so new cases of brain tumours each year, according to Cancer Research UK. The late and much missed Baroness Tessa Jowell did a brilliant job of encouraging the Government to fund additional research into brain cancer, and none of us, least of all anyone in the Public Gallery, would begrudge that a penny, but £40-odd million has gone into that and it is right to note that the number of ME sufferers in the UK is considerably more than 11,000.

I also want to slay the myth about the kinds of people who suffer from this condition. I happen to know from my own constituency that the people we are talking about include former GCHQ workers, lawyers and teachers. It is heartbreaking to see lives curtailed and potential going to waste.

The symptoms of ME have already been referred to, but they bear emphasis. They include post-exertional malaise, muscle and joint pain, cognitive difficulties, noise and light sensitivities and digestive problems. We know all that, but there is one additional point that I want to mention. Although ME patients, contrary to another myth, are no more likely to suffer from poor mental health or emotional problems than the general population, adults with ME are six times more likely to die by suicide—six times more likely. When one considers the impact of the issues referred to very expertly by the hon. Lady—noise and light sensitivities and so on—one might be forgiven for saying, “Well, it's not that serious, is it?” But the cumulative effect is so oppressive that it can lead people to take their own lives.

[Alex Chalk]

In the time left to me, I want to underscore two points. First, on welfare benefits, the overwhelming majority of respondents to an Action for ME survey on the issue felt that assessors had insufficient expertise. We of course understand that assessors cannot be expected to be experts in every single condition, but they do need to understand in respect of ME that the way someone presents on a particular day could give an entirely misleading picture of their condition. Why? Because the sheer effort of going to present themselves on that occasion can have long-term implications, and also the effects can be cumulative. People have good days and bad days, but that variability is not currently taken into account sufficiently and it must be.

That brings me to the second point. The issue about the NICE guidelines has been very well traversed by other hon. Members and I will not say anything further, other than to add this. Clinicians and experts will say, “Follow the evidence,” and of course they are right. Most of us in this Chamber believe in experts; we value experts and expert evidence, but patient experience is also evidence. It is quite wrong to put it in a category of material that can somehow be overlooked or, indeed, disparaged. It seems to me that there is an overwhelming body of material that suggests that the 2007 guidelines, which happily are now being reviewed, have to be seen in the context of a large body of evidence from patients that suggests that they are not working as they should. Patient evidence is evidence—that is the key point.

My final point is in respect of research. In the United States, a huge amount of research is taking place. There will be those who say, “Look, public money is extremely precious; public resources are precious.” That is absolutely right, but we know from the United States that research is having an impact. Work in the United States has led to new insights into the metabolic, immunological and neurological abnormalities of ME. Although the Department of Health and Social Care has repeatedly cited a lack of high-quality research proposals for the lack of investment, I hope that it will be able to take into account what is coming from the United States to give it some encouragement that there is scope for real advances. I underscore the point that £40 million is going into brain cancer research following the wonderful advocacy of Tessa Jowell; that places the lack of investment going into ME research in rather sharp focus.

I conclude by paying tribute to the silent sufferers of this cruel disease in our country. Let the word go out from the House of Commons: they shall be silent no longer.

2.29 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) on advancing a comprehensive and compassionate case on behalf of ME sufferers and I congratulate her on encapsulating the issues so well. Her constituents will be very proud of her; she can be assured of that.

As someone who has had the opportunity to speak on behalf of ME sufferers over the years, before I came here in 2010, one frustration of my former life as a councillor and as a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly was that if I put “ME” on a disability living

allowance form, as it was then, that I was filling in for a constituent, and went to the GP and said, “I need a wee letter to support this person who has ME”, they would say, “They have what?”, and I would have to explain. That is in the past now, thank goodness, and I can honestly say that in the past few years there has been a better understanding from GPs and doctors in my constituency. They have come round from not understanding ME to understanding it, so when someone needs a form to be filled in, it is filled in right; if they need a support letter, that happens too. That is very important.

It was my pleasure to support the hon. Member for Glasgow North West at the Backbench Business Committee, so I wanted to make a contribution today.

Carol Monaghan: I should have paid tribute to all hon. Members who supported my application for the debate, and who came along to make representations to the Backbench Business Committee, like the hon. Gentleman. I see several of them present, and I thank them.

Jim Shannon: We are always very pleased to support the hon. Lady’s proposals to the Backbench Business Committee.

This is an emotive issue. Many constituents have contacted me in anger, frustration and hurt as they simply feel that their illness is not understood and that successive Governments and some in the Department of Health and Social Care have shown no desire to gain an understanding—I say that respectfully, and I understand that some might say that healthcare is devolved. That is not the case for everyone, but it is certainly how many of my constituents have said that they feel.

We are fortunate to have a Minister who has a deep interest in this subject matter. He is in deep conversation with his Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge), at the moment, but I am sure he will turn round shortly and be aware of my contribution. I am sure that he will respond constructively.

I want to thank MEAction, Action for ME, the ME Association, the ME Trust, Blue Ribbon for the Awareness of ME, the Centre for Welfare Reform, Forward-ME, ME Research UK, the Welsh Association of ME and CFS Support and Hope 4 ME Fibro NI in particular. All those organisations—there are lots of them—have furnished us with lots of information, and I thank them. I particularly thank one constituent, Sally Burch, who ensured that I had all the details and information to help me. She comes to see me regularly and fills me in on all the details.

ME is a chronic fluctuating neurological condition that causes symptoms that physically affect many bodily systems, commonly the nervous and immune systems, and affects an estimated 250,000 adults and children in the UK, as other hon. Members have said—it is not just an illness in adults. Approximately 7,000 people in Northern Ireland and about 17 million people worldwide have ME.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of children with ME. It has an impact on their education because of the lack of access to consistently available home education where that is necessary. Does he agree that the Minister may want to take that up with his colleagues in the Department for Education?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, which gives me a chance to say that I have constituents who have had to be home-schooled for the simple reason that they have ME. I am aware that the illness affects not just adults, but children, and I have seen the effect on their education as well.

Very few of the hospital-based ME services provide a domiciliary service for people who are unable to attend an out-patient department. There is now only one hospital service that has dedicated in-patient beds for the assessment and management of people who require hospital admission to a ward where staff have experience in dealing with the condition.

Specialist services for ME are scarce and under-resourced, as many hon. Members have said. I am ashamed to say that in Northern Ireland, my home nation, there are no services, which makes it all the worse. We have a non-functioning Assembly, as many hon. Members will know, which means that trying to initiate something is even more difficult now than in the past. The only way to get the attention and dedication that is needed to treat ME is to ensure that it is correctly classified, which has not happened so far.

The briefing I received provided so much information that it would be impossible to go into all the details in the short time that I have available, and I will not try to do that, but I will highlight the problem of the 2007 PACE trial that my constituents raised with me. In 2007, NICE recommended graded exercise therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy for patients with ME. That guideline was based on weak evidence from small trials, so the much larger PACE trial was designed as a definitive test of such therapies. It cost some £5 million and was funded mostly by the Medical Research Council, with, uniquely, some funding from the Department for Work and Pensions. PACE researchers reported that with cognitive behavioural therapy and graded exercise therapy approximately 60% of patients improved and 22% recovered. The treatments were claimed to be moderately effective and safe.

However, PACE's claims ran counter to patients' knowledge and lived experience. My constituents told me that that was not how it really was. That led some to examine the trial's methods, and they found two considerable problems. First, the objective results were poor. After a year of therapy, the graded exercise therapy group's increase in walking speed was less than half that achieved in three weeks by a sample of class II chronic heart failure patients receiving graded exercise. The trials were suspect before we even got the information.

Secondly, after the trial had finished, the PACE authors lowered the threshold they used as the definition of improvement—it was as if they had taken the figures and manipulated them to get what they wanted. That inflated the number of participants who were classed as recovered or improved. In some cases, even patients whose condition had deteriorated during the trial were classed as recovered. I believe in miracles—I know they happen—but that was not one of them, because people had not recovered.

After spending more than £200,000 fighting a freedom of information request, Queen Mary University of London, PACE's data custodian, had to share access to the data. Subsequent re-analyses have shown that changes to the criteria for recovery and improvement distorted the results.

All that was highlighted to me during a constituency meeting with Sally Burch and other ME sufferers, including a wonderfully intelligent constituent of mine who had noted the questions that I had asked at Westminster and the letters that I had written to the Minister about the trial. She explained her day-to-day life. I knew her day-to-day life as a healthy person, so now that she was not, I could clearly see the difference. She said that her treatment and care are not acceptable.

Hope 4 ME Fibro NI, of which many of my constituents are members, underlined its opinion on the need for ME inclusion in the medical curriculum after the charity hosted an ME educational event on 24 May at Queen's University Belfast, which nearly 400 medical students attended, as did many lecturers. They all have the same interest in ME: how we go forward, what the PACE trial did and whether it helps us. If it does not help us, let us highlight that. The results of the charity's questionnaire are revealing and clearly demonstrate the desperate need for ME to be included in the medical curriculum. Other hon. Members have spoken and will speak about the need for research. We are looking for many answers, as always, but if there was one particular issue that we were looking for help with, it would be the research. Perhaps the Minister will give us the encouragement that we need in his response.

ME is a serious illness, which seriously affects so many in our communities. These people are not lazy and they must not be made to feel like that. To say to an ME sufferer, "Get up and have a walk. You will be fine," is tantamount to saying to someone with a bullet in his leg, "Stick a plaster on it, ignore the blood flowing down and soldier on." We must send the message that that does not work and is not helpful. We in this place must ensure that diagnosis and care are appropriate, which is not the current situation, so I fully support the calls of the hon. Member for Glasgow North West.

On behalf of my constituents, and all constituents across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, I am asking not simply for words of understanding from the Minister, but for action to be taken to change the "Get up and get on with it" mentality to an "I will help you to get up and get on with it, and find a way to facilitate an easier way of living your life" mentality.

In this debate, we want to highlight ME and show what the problems are. We look to the Minister for action; we need his help to make it happen. We need something practical that can and will help, and that will give encouragement to our constituents and to all ME sufferers across this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

2.39 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Rosindell, for calling me to speak.

I am here to speak today partly because constituents have been in touch to ask me to do so, but also because I have a very good friend who has been affected by myalgic encephalomyelitis, or ME, since about the age of 15 and she is in her early forties now. When I say "affected by" ME, that means that she did not go on to college and she has never held a job. She is not at the worst end of the spectrum of severity, but I think I can probably best describe her condition as just almost constantly feeling rough. So, it is like either having flu or migraines, or aches and pains.

[Kerry McCarthy]

I am aware of my friend's condition. Obviously, it is one thing to read up on the condition or to hear accounts from constituents who come to see me, and I have had constituents with ME and fibromyalgia, which is a similar condition, come and talk to me. However, when someone has a very close friend with ME, they know that every time they try to make a social engagement with them, it will always be, "Well, Lucy will come if she's up to it that day." My friends and I are all planning to watch the football together on Sunday. However, we will not know until Sunday morning whether Lucy is well enough to attend, and half the time that she does come along to events, it is possible to tell that she is struggling with a migraine or flu, but she just desperately wants to see her friends. That really brings home just how debilitating a condition ME is.

As the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said, there is a cumulative effect with ME. People make such a big deal of having a cold, or just feeling a bit under the weather, or feeling hungover. Lucy feels like that most of the time and obviously there are other people with ME who are completely bedridden or who cannot bear bright lights. I had a member of staff whose younger brother came to her wedding in a wheelchair, because he had ME. So it affects people in many ways.

However, in some ways the cruellest impact of ME is the fact that sufferers are not believed and that it is a hidden illness, so to speak. The ME campaign group, Millions Missing, recently held an event in Bristol, where friends and relatives of those with ME laid out pairs of shoes to represent some of those who are suffering from the illness, which effectively renders them invisible, and they also read out stories of the battles that their friends and family members had gone through, as well as expressing their determination to see real change happen.

The organisation Action for ME used to be based in the centre of Bristol but is now based just outside. What really hits home is its *raison d'être*, as set out on its website, which says the organisation exists

"to take action to end the ignorance, injustice and neglect faced by people"

who have ME. Most other campaign groups for medical conditions do not have to start from there; their starting point might be to raise awareness of the symptoms of particular conditions, or to make calls for treatment. To have to start from the point of view of emphasising the injustice and neglect, because so many people deny that ME exists, just shows how much of a battle we have on our hands.

It was an excellent speech by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West. As she said, ME affects around 250,000 people in the UK. I will just cite one of my constituents, who contacted me to stress the lack of support and understanding that had been experienced when dealing with medical professionals; there are many people with ME for whom it takes a long, long time to get a diagnosis, because of that lack of support and understanding.

My constituent got in touch to share the story of her close friend's 28-year-old son, who has had ME for last couple of years. She said that the impact on his life has been catastrophic. He was a highly skilled and highly

valued journalist for a national newspaper, with a busy and vibrant professional and social life. Since contracting ME, he has been unable to work and is now living at home with his parents, who act as his carers. He has severely limited energy, he is in constant pain and he has obtained no relief or satisfaction from the treatments currently available through the NHS, his GP and the specialists to whom he has been referred. His parents have been left to research and self-fund investigations and treatment themselves, which is plainly not good enough.

In Bristol, we have a chronic fatigue syndrome/ME centre, but it has no doctors and focuses primarily on training in activity management. One of my constituents who received treatment there was highly complimentary about the staff, but she echoes the view of many other patients that occupational therapy is an inadequate approach for people with a highly disabling, multi-systemic disease.

The current National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guideline recommends treatment consisting of graded exercise therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy, but it has been criticised by all ME charities, patient organisations and representatives registered with NICE as stakeholders. We have already heard from a few people today about that.

Michelle Donelan: On that point, one of my constituents is a 15-year-old who finds the graded exercises very debilitating; actually, they make her condition worse, which has been echoed by ME charities and the ME community. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to look at graded exercise again in the new NICE guidelines?

Kerry McCarthy: Yes. So much concern has been expressed about graded exercise therapy and many patients prefer the concept of pacing, which is balancing activity and rest to help them to manage their ME and work towards recovery. However, that approach is not currently recommended by NICE. I very much hope that the Minister picks this issue up, because it is probably the most controversial issue around the treatment of ME at the moment. I welcome NICE's decision to review its guidelines—the new guidelines are expected in October 2020, I think—and I urge NICE to listen to the voices of patients with ME.

We have heard from other speakers about biomedical research and the decades of underinvestment in that research. We have also heard that the average research spend per person living with ME is less than £1 a year and that much of that money is provided by charities rather than Government. We can also consider the economic cost of not helping people at least to find a way to manage a condition such as ME; ideally, we would find the cause of ME and a cure for it. Clearly, that economic cost is unacceptable.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The hon. Member has made a very important point about the decades of underinvestment. A friend of mine, John Peters, suffers from ME and was first struck down in the 1980s. The impact on his life has been total. He acknowledges that he would not have been able to do everything in life; he knows that there would have been ups and downs. But as he quite painfully put it to me, he has not had the

chance to fail. His is a life unlived. So, given those decades of underinvestment, it is so important that we now change things for the future.

Kerry McCarthy: Yes. This is the problem we see over and over again with NICE: how do we value quality of life? We can look at the economic opportunities that are also lost if someone has to spend a lifetime on benefits rather than working and paying taxes, but there is so much more that they could perhaps have contributed to society and that opportunity has simply been lost.

In the time that is left to me today, I will mention the benefits system. We have already heard from other Members about it. Time and time again, we see that the assessments for employment and support allowance and for the personal independence payment just cannot cope with people who have fluctuating conditions, or with people who might be able to pass a test but who feel absolutely dreadful afterwards.

My friend scored zero on the test because she was trying to be as honest as possible, and if she was asked whether she could walk up a flight of stairs, she would reply that she could. However, on a bad day it would probably take her an awfully long time and she would collapse in a heap at the top. Actually, one of the reasons she was turned down when she went for the face-to-face assessment was that the examiners said, "Well, you look very presentable and you've washed your hair." I know that she is bedridden for days at a time and cannot wash her hair, but clearly if she drags herself out for an assessment and is well enough to attend it on a particular day, she will try not to look like she has just got out of bed.

Carol Monaghan: Does the hon. Member agree that such questions are entirely unsuitable for people with many conditions but particularly for ME sufferers? "Can you walk up a flight of stairs?" "Yes, but it wipes me out for three weeks afterwards." The examiners are not interested in the "but". That does not figure in the questions.

Kerry McCarthy: Yes, we need a system that is sensitive to the people who are taking the test, rather than being a series of tick-box exercises—yes or no.

Action for ME gave some interesting evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee when it conducted an inquiry into ESA and PIP towards the end of last year. Action for ME cited one case study of a man who, as well as having ME, is registered blind; he can only just perceive some light. He said, "I'm not disabled by blindness. In comparison to living with ME, my blindness is just an inconvenience." When it came to the assessment, of course, his blindness scored maximum points, but his ME did not register at all. He said, "Actually, with my blindness I can still go out and walk my dog, but it's the ME that means I'm housebound. With blindness, I can use audiobooks, but my ME means that I just can't concentrate for any period of time." But one condition is accepted as a disabling condition, while the other is not. There is a perception that ME is just about being tired all the time but, as one ME campaigner said:

"The difference between ME and just feeling tired is the same as the difference between having a shower and drowning."

I was going to mention the case of Merryn Crofts, but my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) is here and she is her MP.

That is clearly an incredibly tragic case—the second person in the UK to have ME recorded as the reason for death on her death certificate.

Instead, I will conclude by mentioning the documentary "Unrest", a screening of which I attended. Jennifer Brea, a 28-year-old ME sufferer, documented her condition with a camera when doctors told her that her illness was all in her head. Using Skype, she connected with others around the globe suffering with ME, and documented their plight. It is a powerful and moving documentary about the realities of life for many people with severe ME, and I would encourage anyone who is looking to gain a better understanding of the illness to watch it.

2.50 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for this campaign, which she is doing a superb job of leading. I cannot remember the name of the academic who wrote to her reproaching her for the stance she has taken in the campaign, but I say to her, I think on behalf of us all, that she is doing exactly what an MP should be doing, and shame on anyone who says otherwise.

I specifically compliment the hon. Lady on her presence at the recent Edinburgh event with the hashtag #MillionsMissing—a global day of action. The purpose of that event was to raise awareness, to highlight the need for support for ME sufferers, and to call for investment in healthcare and biomedical research, which is an excellent summary of the purpose of today's debate. As has been mentioned, every participant in that event was invited to bring a pair of shoes, but what touched me deeply in the event publicity was that those pairs of shoes symbolised the millions of patients who are missing from their lives because of this devastating disease. The phrase "missing from their lives" deeply touched me.

I rise to speak just for a few minutes to highlight the experience of those who are affected by ME. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said, their evidence is compelling and should be a primary consideration. It has been upsetting for me to hear how many people, including those in the medical profession, are unaware, or lack a detailed understanding, of ME. Many persist in believing that the disease is some form of mental illness or neurological disorder. A constituent in Stirling told me that as recently as 2011 they were told, "There is no such thing as ME," after collapsing at work. She has since been diagnosed with severe ME.

There are many distressing stories about the treatment of people suffering from ME. Another of my constituents was told repeatedly by different doctors that her ME was a psychological problem, and was referred on multiple occasions for psychological assessments. It took her two and a half years to get a proper ME diagnosis.

Carol Monaghan: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern about the aspect of "medically unexplained symptoms" diverting ME down the psychological path?

Stephen Kerr: I absolutely agree, and I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention.

[Stephen Kerr]

I cannot speak too highly of Helen Hyland, a constituent of mine, who has done so much to raise awareness of the condition across the UK in her role within the ME Association. She has also done so much to educate me as her Member of Parliament about this disease. Soon after my election as the Member of Parliament for Stirling, Helen reached out to inform me of what I could do to help the campaign. I am grateful that my office and I have been able to work with her to highlight ME to GPs in Stirling. I am not sure how they have responded to a letter from their Member of Parliament advising them to be careful about how they diagnose those who have the symptoms of ME; I am sure that is a different story.

Helen has been involved with the ME Association since her husband took his own life, a year after being diagnosed with ME. The way she told her children, who were very small at the time, of her husband's passing outlines how hard ME is to cope with. She said:

"Imagine a Dr Who monster getting inside and taking over Daddy's head and body. The harder Daddy fights, the harder the monster fights back. The monster always wins".

For people with ME and those around them, the diagnosis is crucially important. To be told that they have a medically recognised condition is validation for them, yet there is still so little known about this illness. There is no easy way of diagnosing it, no clear treatment, and no known cure. That has to change. Along with many others, I will continue to support the ME Association and any campaign that pledges itself to combating ME.

I will now turn to the first-hand account of a lady called Jules Smith, who wrote to me and asked me to make her voice heard in this afternoon's debate. I will do that because her story, as touching as it is, is not her story alone, but the story of many others. She wrote to me:

"For over ten years I was a therapist and devoted my life to helping others as best I could.

I first became ill about 8 years ago but kept going and put it down to general aches and pains. I finally had to give up what I loved in November 2016 with a final diagnosis of severe ME in May 2017.

I've been to psychology to be told it's all in my head, pain management to be told to push through the pain and physiotherapy who told me my muscles were so weak there was nothing they could do!

I've been on so many prescribed medications and vitamins; last year I was taking in excess of 22 tablets a day and yet I would still crash.

I am 90% house and bed bound and my GP has exhausted all avenues for me therefore—as I was told—"you must try and manage your illness as best you can."

I had been told that graded exercise therapy would help me starting off by stretching then low impact sports like walking. I'm an ex-runner who was capable of running a 10k every week so I was familiar with pushing through the pain barrier and grading my exercise but it has made me more severe. I feel like my life is just wasting away; I get all my prescription medications on repeat, I get a telephone appointment with my GP every once in a while, and that's it!

My husband works long shifts with the Scottish Prison Service and I'm home alone for at least 10 hours a day; sometimes I have to crawl on my hands and knees to get to the bathroom and I can go days on end without being able to bathe or shower as I'm just too exhausted to move!

I feel like so many others that we are just left to rot; I feel like my mental health is now suffering as I become more and more isolated from society and there's no one to help me and many others just like me.

I am severely fatigued to the point that I cannot stand upright otherwise I get so dizzy I'm about to faint. I also have severe laboured breathing but there's nothing recommended but rest and resting doesn't cure ME.

I don't wallow in self-pity. I spend what time I can online being an advocate for Action for ME and Millions Missing Scotland and whenever I can, I offer support to other members of the social media groups I am in and share my stories and experiences.

I have a devoted and caring husband who does everything he physically can to look after me but it's tough when I'm home alone for so long with no care.

I try to do what I can to keep my spirits up but on days when I crash for no reason and I can't watch TV, or read a book, I have to have my curtains drawn and be in a darkroom. Sometimes I even need soft silicone earplugs to block out any noise as I get cognitive dysfunction too!

This is not living Stephen this is just existing!"

I thank Jules for allowing me to share her story in the debate. I am grateful and feel privileged that I was allowed to let her voice be heard today in Parliament.

2.59 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. May I first say how moving and graphic the speech from the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) was? I am so pleased that I was here to hear it.

I shall speak briefly because much of what I would have said has been said already, but I want to add my voice to all those demanding that we take ME seriously—that in the future, doctors and the medical profession do what they can to find out what causes it and to deal with that, but also to make lives bearable and strive to find cures if we possibly can.

I first became aware of ME some 30 years ago when two young relatives—close relatives, although not in my immediate family—contracted ME. They suffered for a long time during their childhood and youth. The condition is much improved now, but I became aware of the medical profession's lack of belief in ME. They were constantly told that it was a psychological problem, not a medical or physiological one. We now know better.

There has been discredited research, such as the PACE trial—and others, no doubt—which is now being dismissed, and not before time. However, the medical profession and, indeed, Governments will grasp at things that encourage them to do nothing, or not to do something that is very difficult. To deal with it is very difficult.

We heard from the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan)—she has just left her place—who is the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Lyme disease. I also belong to that group, because I had a very dear friend who suffered terribly from Lyme disease and who was not diagnosed for years. She suffered terrible psychological and physical problems, as well as marital break-up and so on. If people are not properly diagnosed and are not given the proper treatment and sympathy, they can suffer even worse than they do with the disease.

[MIKE GAPES *in the Chair*]

The conditions vary enormously. People suffer very different symptoms, and some people suffer very severe symptoms. I had one constituent who, like so many

others, could not get out of bed for long periods and had to live in a darkened room because looking at light was too painful. The idea that such people would have their condition dismissed as some sort of psychological phenomenon is complete nonsense and utterly cruel.

I have taken up this issue in the recent past, prompted by an old friend, Dr Ian Gibson, who was a Member of Parliament for one of the Norwich seats. He wrote to me about the PACE research, dismissing it as nonsense in the very strongest terms. He asked me to table a series of parliamentary questions, which I did, and I like to think they had some influence on the Government's thinking. I hope the Minister will recognise the depth of feeling about the appalling way ME sufferers have been treated for so long, and start to take steps to correct that.

We are used to having experts tell us things and deferring to them, rightly in many cases, but of course sometimes experts get it wrong. Sixty or 70 years ago, some doctors were known to recommend that patients take up smoking because it would be good for their health. No doubt, some of those people died of lung cancer later on. It was a terrible thing to do, and some of those doctors should have felt rather guilty about that afterwards.

There was a particular case in the 1960s of a noted famous psychologist who wrote books about psychiatry that were regarded as bibles by young people. His view was that there was no such thing as mental ill health; it was just a different way of viewing the world. He was famously debunked when he was speaking at a conference to an audience of schizophrenics. They got up and said, "You are trying to tell us we are well. We are telling you: we are not." People are suffering, and they are constantly being told that they are actually well—that they are just putting it on, or, as he said, that it is an alternative way of viewing the world. At the end of his life, that famous psychologist publicly recanted on the radio, after he no doubt caused much suffering to many people through his life.

We must always make sure that there is a proper evidence base and that statistics are properly measured. We had a paper circulated to us that shows that the PACE statistics were false. They just did not work. We want more resources put into making sure that proper research is done and that ME sufferers are properly supported financially and medically. We have to find what causes it. We have to find cures where we can, and we have to make the lives of people who suffer from ME a lot happier in future.

I have said more than enough. I wanted to add my voice to all of those who have spoken so brilliantly today, in particular the lead speaker, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who made a brilliant and eloquent speech that I am sure we are all very grateful for.

3.5 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for securing this very important debate.

Merryn Crofts, who has already been referred to in this debate, is one of just two people in the UK who have had myalgic encephalomyelitis recorded as the

cause of death. She was my constituent and lived in Norden in the Rochdale area of the Heywood and Middleton constituency. I spoke with her mum, Clare, this week, who told me that the reports about Merryn in the newspapers did not really cover the whole of Merryn's condition. Clare wanted to be here today to hear the debate, but could not travel to London because of a new baby in the family, so I hope that she is able to watch the debate back home in Rochdale. I send my best wishes to her and to the new baby.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): As do all of us.

Liz McInnes: Indeed, from all of us. Merryn met all the diagnostic criteria set by NICE, and the Canadian consensus criteria, for a diagnosis of myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome. Merryn was totally bedbound. She physically could not get out of bed. She suffered so badly from postural hypotension that she blacked out if placed in a sitting position or even if her bed was raised slightly. She was hypersensitive to noise, light, touch and movement. She suffered so badly from pain—head, muscle, neurological and stomach pain—that she could not get out of bed. Her GP had worked in a hospice for 10 years, looking after cancer patients, and said that in that job she could not always take away pain, but she could manage it. In Merryn's case, the GP said that her pain was unmanageable. Although Merryn was on diamorphine and ketamine, she was still in pain. Any kind of stimulus, even just a nurse walking in to the room, was an exertion to Merryn. She was permanently on syringe drivers and receiving injections. She was permanently nauseous.

The terms ME and chronic fatigue syndrome are often used interchangeably, but Merryn's mum tells me that fatigue was the least of Merryn's symptoms. In her view, the use of the term chronic fatigue syndrome should be abandoned, as myalgic encephalomyelitis is about so much more than just fatigue.

Merryn was only 15 years old when her illness started. For the first year, she was not housebound and she used to go out in a wheelchair, but as her condition worsened she became unable to go out. She went from a young girl who loved life, with passions for drama and acting, to a housebound patient, whose family had to do more and more for her, even things like chatting on her behalf on social media—simple things that she was no longer able to do on her own.

I mention social media because Merryn was helped a great deal by the online ME community. Her mum tells me that Merryn always wanted positive support and was very choosy about who she communicated with. She did not want to speak with people who exuded negativity, but she was part of a big online ME community, which included people such as ballet dancers and sportspeople. That raises the issue of whether research should look at the lifestyles of those who contract ME and whether there is a susceptibility that can be exacerbated by leading an active life and pursuing strenuous sports or vocations.

Merryn's mum is critical of the PACE guidance given by NICE and attributes the worsening of Merryn's condition to it. She tells me that Merryn thought she could push through the condition and keep going, although her family really wanted her to slow down. Sadly, it was only when the family contacted a private

[Liz McInnes]

medical practitioner that Merryn was given the advice to slow down and told that she needed to rest. The specific advice given was,

“Whatever you feel you can do, only do 50% of it.”

Merryn’s mum feels very strongly that had Merryn been given that advice when her condition started, she might not have gone on to develop severe ME, and she strongly urges that the NICE guidelines should be reviewed. Merryn’s mum said,

“If the PACE trial were a drug, it would have been banned by now.”

I hope and I am sure that the Minister will refer to that in his response.

Merryn’s family are still very involved in the ME community and they run the “Merryn’s Legacy” Facebook page, which raises money for research and includes fundraising activities such as skydiving and climbing Ben Nevis: impressive feats that are done on behalf of the ME community as representative of the things they would like to do but are unable to because of their condition. The fundraisers do those activities on their behalf.

We need to invest more in research into ME. The best research, as has already been mentioned, is being done in the States. Here it is very much funded by charities and tends to concentrate on psychological issues rather than physical changes such as inflammation of the brain and changes to the central nervous system, and we need to do much more research into the physical aspect.

Nancy Klimas is a major ME researcher based in Miami. She has more than 30 years’ professional experience and has achieved international recognition for her work on ME. She compares patients with severe ME, like Merryn, with those in the terminal stages of HIV/AIDS infection in terms of the levels of pain that they suffer. Many comparisons can be drawn between HIV/AIDS and ME. When HIV was first identified it was thought to be incurable and a certain death sentence, but incredible research has produced advanced treatment with retrovirals, which, although they do not provide a cure, can be used to manage the disease, and it is no longer the death sentence that it was.

In comparison, ME is not seen as a death sentence, but, as Merryn’s case sadly shows, it can be fatal. It is also described as a kind of living death. The work done on HIV/AIDS shows how powerful good research can be. I hope that in future, following investment in ME research, we may also see great advances made in the treatment and knowledge of ME.

We also need to invest more in training for our doctors, especially general practitioners who are the clinicians likely to be the first port of call for those suffering with ME. Our GPs need the skills to recognise the signs and symptoms and to signpost patients to the appropriate specialists. I hope that the Minister might be able to refer to those points in his response. I am immensely grateful to Merryn’s family for sharing so much with me and for allowing me to tell her story.

3.13 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for securing this debate and for

speaking so passionately. I stand with her and all the people affected by ME in not allowing the voices of ME sufferers to be silenced by anyone for any reason.

In Plymouth, ME affects between 500 and 1,500 people. I agree with the sentiments expressed by hon. Members in the Chamber today that it does not get the amount of attention it deserves, in many cases because of the stigma that has been attached to it for far too long. I have heard people shrug off the condition as laziness or as something in people’s heads. Attacking the stigma and the people who peddle it needs to be an important part of how we build the case for proper action on ME.

A few days ago I mentioned on my Facebook page that I wanted to speak in the debate and I asked for stories from people in Plymouth. I have done that before for various debates and have always been struck by the level of honesty and directness that comes from people simply telling their story, not as a politician but as a person. I will share some of those stories today mainly because the speeches before mine have expertly and succinctly explained the problems with the PACE trial and current treatments. I want to make sure that those voices are heard. One word came through in nearly all of the posts on my Facebook page and on my Twitter, and that word was “invisible”. People with ME feel that they are not believed, that their condition does not matter and that nothing is being done about it. I want to address what it means to be invisible and what we can do.

Jules wrote:

“Just getting up the stairs lays me out for hours. Having a shower leaves me laid out in a darkened room. I can’t work anymore (believe me not for want of trying!) I can’t do drama, Rock Choir or Zumba in fact just making a cup of tea leaves me as exhausted as Zumba used to! I lay alone at home. I live vicariously through FB. I still get out when I can but it will usually cost me days or weeks in bed. I am one of the ‘lucky’ ones. I am not totally bed bound. But I pay for this with my invisibility. I ‘look’ so well! No one can see my pain. I smile and say I am fine then go home to bed.”

The word “invisibility” is key here. People talk about it time and again in terms of how the condition affects their lives and relationships—my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about that—and how it often makes them doubt their validity and whether they are telling the truth.

Several people told me about how having ME also affects their mental health, which the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) talked about earlier. Catherine wrote:

“I first became ill just before my 21st birthday. I spent weeks needing to be cared for full time by my parent—including being carried by my dad because I was unable to walk. I am always in pain, have difficulty doing things that most people take for granted and lost much of my long-term memory. Long term it affects my memory and focus, my ability to function on a daily basis. I am constantly tired no matter how much I sleep. I have lost friends and needed to give up a career in teaching that I loved. I walk with a stick much of the time, especially in the winter...because my balance is bad and I fall easily. I suffer depression, bouts of anxiety”,

and

“problems that can be very embarrassing and never know whether the next flare might put me back where I started.”

ME is not simply one thing on its own. We need to recognise that mental health problems can stem from the experience of living with ME. It adds to the condition and is not just a part of the condition itself.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend, I have heard from many constituents affected by ME who asked me to come today to make their voices heard. He made the point about invisibility earlier, but some of the people who are not able to get out do things from their beds. For example, one of my constituents organised the lighting up of the Tyne Bridge in blue last year, so there are things that people do to make sure we get the message across.

Luke Pollard: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I am a big believer in digital. As colleagues in the House know, I often talk about it. The ability of digital communities to connect the ME community to help them share experiences and realise they are not on their own is especially important, and I pay tribute to all the people like my hon. Friend's constituent who do so much.

I want to talk about the effect of ME on young people. The condition affects people of all ages, but sometimes the most acute effects are felt by those whose lives have effectively been taken away at such a young age. Dawn reached out to tell me about her son who is 16 years old and suffers from ME. It was initially brushed off as a migraine and a growing pain and she was told children sometimes get stomach aches. She wrote:

"My intelligent, sporty, active son has now spent over two years virtually housebound. This horrible illness has robbed my son of his teenage years. He only has one friend, has huge gaps in his education, won't be at the School Leavers' Assembly, nor the prom. He had to give up football and badminton, his real loves. And all we can do is wait until he gets better."

The stories of young people with ME are especially powerful, because we all recognise the potential in young people and what amazing things, given the right opportunities and support, they can and will do. For many young people with ME that potential is taken away, and it is especially acute because losing time during their school years affects not only their education but their societal development and the friendship networks they build around them.

Kate Green: My hon. Friend will be interested to hear of the 17-year-old son of my constituent, who first contracted the illness as a young child. It took seven years to get a diagnosis. That is an incredibly large proportion of a young person's life in which to suffer appalling ill health with no proper medical intervention.

Luke Pollard: Absolutely.

I want finally to mention Maya, who got in touch about her sister, who is affected by ME. She says:

"Chronic illnesses need far more support and recognition than they get."

Her sister—like Maya herself, who has fibromyalgia—"faced repeated uphill battles to get the help she needs, and that's even been with health professionals.

It's so little talked about that even doctors and nurses have been stumped as to how to help her. This disease cripples and takes lives and we need to be doing more."

There is something that we can take from the debate today, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Cheltenham in relation to brain tumour research—the fact that the power of talking about a condition can bring about change. We saw that with Baroness Jowell,

and it is happening today with motor neurone disease, as it is global MND Awareness Day. People are talking about their condition. We also see it in the work on fibromyalgia being done by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins). It is a matter of talking about things that are not often talked about. The importance of debates such as this is in raising awareness. People with ME are not invisible. They are as human as we are, and need to be seen and heard. That means investing in proper medical research and in medical education for practitioners, and in a relentless fight against stigma for all people with ME.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The hon. Gentleman began by talking about stigma—the stigma of laziness or of something "in the head". We all know that the sort of people afflicted by ME are certainly not lazy. As to its being in the head, there may be some psychological causes of ME but it is none the less an illness, and to treat it as if it were not is to reinforce the stigma that has been so damaging with respect to mental health.

Luke Pollard: Absolutely. I think those were the most words I have heard the right hon. Gentleman say since I was elected. He is famous for short questions. I agree entirely, and the challenge of addressing stigma is understanding, because stigma builds where there is not a clear evidence base, and there is no understanding of what is happening to an individual—we do not know whether it is one or many things. That is why medical research is essential. It is also why understanding how the condition changes day to day is important—as is the way the Government prepare and support individuals. The DWP assessments are a great example. The assessment system at the moment is built around a system that does not adequately recognise the day-to-day lived experiences of those with ME.

We can carry on the relentless fight that is needed against stigma, to encourage more research, if we keep talking about ME and remember that people who have it are not invisible. They have a voice and must be heard.

3.23 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve beneath your benevolent oversight, Mr Gapes. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) is on the Opposition Front Bench, and am also pleased to see the Minister. Those two people combine deep humanity with real understanding of how illness is examined, and how stereotypes and stigma can be challenged. Above all, I pay tribute, as everyone who has taken part in the debate would wish to do, to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). I was one of those privileged to support her in applying to the Backbench Business Committee. It is interesting that sitting with her at the table were members of the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru, Labour and the Conservative party. There were no Liberals there at the time, but the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) was present earlier.

We supported the application for a debate so strongly not only because there is a crying need for some proper authoritative research at last but because of the personality of the hon. Member for Glasgow North West and the

[Stephen Pound]

way she argued her case. She is not just a great humanitarian, but a scientist. She was a physics teacher, and is a pilot. She understands the importance of empirical evidence and data, and wants to see scientific evidence. On the occasion of our application, someone said that encephalomyelitis is probably the illness with the worst public relations officer ever, because there is no other illness so badly presented, or about which so much nonsense is spoken, or that has so many stigmas and stereotypes. One reason I supported the hon. Lady was that she seeks to cut through all the nonsense, get back to proper, hard scientific evidence, and move away from some of the dismissive, cruel and frankly painful comments that are made.

There are a number of arguments in favour of proper analysis and, subsequent to that, treatment, research and proper therapeutic assistance for what is a ghastly, debilitating illness. There is the economic case. In September 2017 the Optimum Health Clinic Foundation produced a detailed breakdown, in which it was calculated that the illness costs the UK economy more than £3 billion a year. That is an argument that can be made, but I would go beyond Gradgrind, and that sort of desiccated, calculating machine politics, to the humanity.

I want to talk about one particular group—children and young people. I am sure that it has already been mentioned that 21 years ago Dowsett and Colby produced detailed research showing that the biggest cause of long-term school absence was, as Members may guess, encephalomyelitis. Let us imagine the situation. A child at primary school has the symptoms of encephalomyelitis but does not know the name, probably could not pronounce it, and does not know what it is. However, they cannot get themselves to school. I am not talking about the schoolboy, with his

“shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school.”

I mean a child who simply cannot get out of bed or off the sofa or couch, and to school. What happens to such a child? I will tell the House—often they are referred to social services. Child protection referrals are often made because a child misses school. Imagine the impact on that child, family and school. I have known you long enough, Mr Gapes, to know that you have the milk of human kindness flowing through your veins. Can you imagine what it must be like for a primary school-aged child who is suffering from something terrible that they cannot even put into words to be penalised for it—interrogated and asked to prove that they are ill when they can hardly bring themselves even to speak or raise the energy to make their case? How cruel.

In some cases, the parents simply will not know. One reason I am so particularly keen to get some proper empirical data and research is that a family can have four, five or six children, and one suffers but the others do not. Imagine how the one child must feel, and how the other children will react to the one child. Can we imagine anything more brutally cruel than a situation in which a child is trying to pursue their education but is physically incapable of doing so? The great lesson that we learned from Sure Start—and, earlier, from the Jesuits—is that getting things wrong in the first seven years usually means they are wrong for life. If a child is suffering in the way I described, in the first few years in primary school, I despair for their future.

We must cut through all the mist, fog and obfuscation—the stigma, and all the words and insulting expressions—and do some research. Is the condition psychological, physical or psychosomatic? What is it? We know it cannot go unaddressed any longer. We cannot allow another generation to grow up incapable even of giving a name to what they suffer from. If diagnosis is not possible, what is the prognosis and the therapeutic response? What is the health service doing? What of primary care and the GP service? If they do not have the data, they cannot produce a cure. I do not make the economic argument, although obviously it is important. We need productivity and economic activity. However, it is above all the sheer humanity of the case made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West in her brilliant speech that will have swept along everyone who heard it today. We simply cannot allow this situation to continue any longer. It is too painful, cruel, counterproductive and dangerous, and we are losing young people.

I know that there is mature-onset ME—it is not just children who are affected—but the people it affects have good advocates, and great speeches have been made on their behalf this afternoon. I want to make the case for children, because they can very seldom make that case for themselves. I look to the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West. Today is the day when we finally start to take encephalomyelitis seriously and stop condemning people suffering from this ghastly, debilitating disease. Today is the day when we say, “Yes, we understand the pain people suffer. Yes, we are going to do something about it. Yes, we respect you. Yes, we value you. Yes, today we are going to start investing in diagnosis, analysis and, God willing, a cure.”

3.30 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for securing this debate, for setting out the issues so powerfully, and for sharing the sad case of Merryn Crofts, which the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), her MP, elaborated on.

I want to say to Professor Sharpe that it is not my hon. Friend's conduct that is unbecoming; it is his. Sending such emails does nothing for the reputation of the scientific research community, and he should apologise.

People with ME and related conditions do not believe their voices and concerns are properly listened to. With that in mind, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who shared with great compassion Jules Smith's story, which deeply affected Members from across the House. We sometimes talk about health issues in this House abstractly without fully conveying the impact they have on people's lives. Well, not today.

Action for ME and the ME Association are both well represented in the Public Gallery today. Along with many other organisations, they do vital work to champion and support the 250,000 people across the UK who suffer from this condition. On its website, Action for ME tries to increase people's understanding of ME by asking people to imagine a number of situations:

“Imagine having months off from work because you are so ill, so pole-axed by fatigue and pain, that you are no longer able to tell the time when you look at the face of a clock. Imagine you can no longer read even the shortest paragraph because your power of concentration is reduced to zero.”

One of my constituents, whom I have subsequently met twice, wrote to me about the experience of living with ME. She said:

“One of the things that society needs to get to grips with is the fluctuating nature of ME where an individual may appear to be fine one day, yet the next day they are bed ridden or much worse, or they may appear fine but really aren’t. Unless people have x ray vision, they cannot see the brain, spine, muscles, heart, cells and so on of another individual. The condition fluctuates not only from day to day and week to week, but it can vary from hour to hour. And of course there is the aspect of...post exertional exacerbation of symptoms. That is, after exertion their ME symptoms often flare up”—

although that can be delayed.

“For one person that exertion may be as little as getting up to brush their teeth, for another it may be that they worked 4 hours that day instead of the 3 that would have been manageable. This could leave them ill the next day or being off work for a week. There can also be a sudden and severe decline in symptoms. For example, an individual may have gone out that day feeling ok, but whilst out they suddenly reach saturation point and their levels of physical fatigue and pain may be intolerable.”

That is the experience of 250,000 people in the UK. It is important that we do much more as a society to find a cure for this disease. Sadly, the majority with ME do not have access to adequate care and resources. Shamefully, they also face ignorance and injustice from people who should know better, including medical professionals and the Government. Many primary care professionals receive minimal training on ME, and it continues to be dismissed as “medically unexplained”.

Treatment for ME currently focuses on addressing the condition’s symptoms, but, as we have heard, concerns have been raised many times about the recommended treatments, such as cognitive behavioural therapy and graded exercise therapy. Like other Members, I am glad that NICE is reviewing its guidelines, and I hope ME sufferers are at the heart of the review’s outcomes.

The Government’s welfare reforms are causing a lot of heartache and stress for millions of people, including people with ME, many of whom struggle to access welfare benefits. The written evidence that Action for ME submitted to the UK Parliament’s Work and Pensions Committee’s inquiry into personal independence payments and employment and support allowance assessments, which the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) touched on, raised serious concerns about how the welfare state treats people with ME. Its research found that assessors do not have a sufficient, or even basic, understanding of the condition, and so cannot carry out accurate assessments of people affected by it. That causes assessors to misinterpret the condition, wrongly diagnose it and file inaccurate reports, which have dire consequences for people’s benefit entitlements.

That basic lack of understanding of ME is forcing individuals down the mandatory reconsideration and appeal route to get access to the benefits they are rightly entitled to. Some 76% of people with ME who are forced to do that believe that the initial assessment failed to represent their condition or needs properly; 52% believe that the assessment was not conducted fairly or appropriately; and 32% say that the amount they were awarded did not cover or meet their needs.

That experience is familiar to one of my constituents, whom I assisted recently. She has ME and other medical conditions, and she told me that

“ESA and PIP assessments are designed in a way that discriminates against people with ME and other fluctuating and unseen conditions. This causes untold distress and harm to people with ME, who already feel very vulnerable and unheard.”

She also believes that the assessments have led to her condition deteriorating, and that

“without a shadow of a doubt”

she would have been able to go back to work a long time ago if it was not

“for the recurring relapses caused by a system that is supposed to support you while ill and while trying to recover, and instead it causes harm. It is exhausting, demeaning and damaging to recovery.”

She feels that

“people with ME often feel ridiculed, abandoned and even bullied and abused. It is a highly vulnerable place to be when your basic needs (and in some cases your continued existence) and the way you are treated and viewed by society is dependent upon the understanding of those with power”.

I am sure she is not the only one who feels that way.

I accept that ME can be an invisible condition, but surely the Government can take that into account so people receive fair assessments. As my constituent said, “the more people who begin to learn the truth about this devastating condition, the sooner people with ME can begin to be treated with the respect and dignity that people with serious medical conditions are entitled to.”

As a society, we need to challenge ourselves better to understand this condition, and that should start with the Government. The Scottish Government have funded a project to educate health and social care professionals, and improve the health and social care support available to people with ME. The Inform ME project will develop a peer mentoring, self-management support network to build confidence and reduce isolation among people affected by ME.

We have heard today that it is accepted that not enough research has been done to increase the knowledge of the different forms of ME. However, the UK CFS/ME Research Collaborative was created in 2013, and it is hoped that greater attention will be brought to this area. It is true that ME has received far less research funding than other conditions with a similar prevalence and disease burden. The funding has tended to be for psychological and behavioural studies, rather than biomedical research. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West outlined, the Scottish Government are taking steps in this area and have recently announced a PhD scholarship focused on improving the understanding of ME.

People of all political persuasions and none want to see a world without ME. The Minister has listened to many strong views this afternoon. I know he is eagerly awaiting the outcome of the NICE review, but I hope he will take on board and reflect on the points that have been made today—in particular, those relating to GET and the DWP’s procedures for ME. I hope we can help people living with this condition sooner rather than later.

3.39 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for her excellent speech setting the scene today and for securing this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

the time for it. I also thank all hon. Members who contributed. A great number of them did so: the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), the hon. Members for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), and my hon. Friends the Members for Stroud (Dr Drew), for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) all made excellent and moving speeches. I thank the many other Members who made excellent interventions. The packed Public Gallery and the number of Members attending and speaking in the debate on a Thursday afternoon shows the strength of feeling on the subject not only in Parliament but in the nation as a whole—more should be done to help people with ME. They should get the help, recognition, support and treatment that they deserve and need.

I thank MEAction, Action for ME, the ME Association and the ME Trust for the detailed brief that they sent me, and ME North East and especially the Sunderland and South Tyneside ME support group including Professor Malcolm Hooper—I first met him way back in 2010 on this very issue—for all the work that they do to campaign for better care, support and recognition for people living with ME. We have heard today in great and moving detail from numerous Members sharing tragic and very personal stories from their constituents, whom we thank for allowing their stories to be told.

ME is a neurological disease, or a disease of the central nervous system, but that does not begin to explain how devastating it can be to have to live with it—or die from it, as happened so tragically to 21-year-old Merryn Crofts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton, who was her MP, and the hon. Member for Glasgow North West for sharing her story with us in some detail—I especially thank her family for allowing that—and helping to make the case so strongly in the debate.

ME affects an estimated 250,000 adults and children in the UK and about 17 million people worldwide. Despite the fact that so many people are affected by ME, it is little understood in the medical world, leaving patients feeling dismissed, neglected and stigmatised further by their condition. That can be no surprise, as no significant research has been done into the condition, as we have heard. ME receives far less research funding than other neurological conditions of similar prevalence or disease burden. The answer to a written question from the hon. Member for Glasgow North West revealed that the average research spend per person living with ME is only about £1 a year, as she said. Also, the majority of that research spending does not even come from Government; it comes from the charity sector.

Does the Minister think that research into this condition should be left entirely up to the charity sector? The ME charity sector in the UK does a fantastic job of researching the condition. For example, the UK ME/CFS Biobank is a vital part of the ME research infrastructure and has achieved an international reputation. All the start-up costs for the ME Biobank were funded by the charity

sector, and ongoing costs are met by the ME Association's Ramsay Research Fund. Do the Government have any plans to contribute to that research?

Patients with ME feel that they have been let down time and again as research such as the PACE trial—which, sensibly, we heard about—has been found to be seriously flawed. In fact, Jonathan Edwards, emeritus professor of medicine, said that the PACE trial would be a great example

“in an undergraduate textbook as an object lesson in how not to design a trial”.

In addition, a petition signed by more than 12,000 individuals—mostly patients, but also more than 90 scientists and clinicians—and more than 50 patient groups worldwide has demanded a retraction of the results of that trial. Does the Minister agree that ME patients deserve a trial that they can trust not to dismiss their condition or recommend treatments that could make it worse? Do the Government have any plans to fund a proactive and co-ordinated piece of research on ME that patients can trust?

Given the lack of medical research into ME, healthcare professionals are, unsurprisingly, not sufficiently trained in diagnosing the condition, as hon. Members have told us today. According to several ME charities, coverage of ME in many medical textbooks remains inadequate and can be misleading or even non-existent. The chief medical officer's report and the NICE guidelines on ME set out clear timeline markers for making an early and accurate diagnosis. Both recommend that adults should normally have had the diagnosis confirmed within four months of onset of symptoms, or within three months for children and young people. However, standard medical tests often find nothing wrong, which leads many doctors initially to dismiss ME as psychological.

In 2016 a patient survey by the ME Association indicated that only a small number of patients were receiving a positive diagnosis within six months of onset. Further experiences from the charity sector suggest that a majority of patients have to wait for more than a year, and a significant number for many years, before they receive a diagnosis. That means that patients are being dismissed and stigmatised further and, more importantly, are not then receiving the care and support that they need. Does the Minister have any plans to create a care pathway for people with ME to ensure that patients are given access to the care and treatment they require in a timely manner?

In addition, has the Minister made any assessment of the effects that ME, and the delay in diagnosis of it, have on women in particular? I find it incredibly illuminating that 75% of patients with ME are women. That leads me to believe that there is an issue of women's pain being dismissed and not taken seriously by healthcare professionals. Will the Minister consider that issue in his response?

It is therefore clear that more training is required, not only for healthcare professionals but for welfare assessors. A survey by Action for ME found that 79% of survey respondents disagreed with the statement that their assessor had sufficient expertise of their condition to conduct an assessment effectively and appropriately. Symptoms of ME can fluctuate so much and are often invisible, as we have heard, so the condition is difficult to manage for patients and, it has to be said, difficult for welfare assessors to detect.

A patient may perform well during a welfare assessment, but an assessor will not see how long patients rested in order to perform tasks during the assessment, or how long it took for them to recover afterwards. As we know, the onerous and ill-conceived assessment process can result in not only an inaccurate award, but an exacerbation of ME symptoms, which can result in a long-term deterioration of the individual's health. Has the Minister had any conversations with his ministerial colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions on that matter?

From this excellent debate, it is clear that the majority of issues that arise from ME do so because the condition is so little understood. The Government should consider funding research into ME to further our understanding of the condition. The hope is that that would, in time, improve perceptions of ME and improve the routes to diagnosis, care and treatment.

3.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): I shall start where everyone else has started and thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who secured this important debate, very much. She did so along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), who has to be in her constituency today to deal with a royal visit—lucky her.

Raising awareness of this debilitating condition is critical, and the hon. Member for Glasgow North West has undertaken significant work in this area over a number of years. Thirteen—lucky for us—Back Benchers spoke in today's debate. I counted 25 Members present at our peak, which is excellent. I spend a lot of time with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in Westminster Hall, it must be said, but that is a lot of MPs for a Tuesday afternoon, let alone a Thursday afternoon, so that is excellent.

As we have heard, ME, otherwise known as chronic fatigue syndrome, is an incapacitating condition with a plethora of symptoms, primarily characterised by long-term fatigue, chronic pain and post-exertional symptoms of malaise, to name but a few. There are many more and we have heard some excellent testimony of those from Members on behalf of their constituents.

As so many have said, the underlying causes of the condition, which for brevity I will call ME, are still poorly understood. There is no one diagnostic test to identify it, and although some people can and do improve and recover, there is currently no cure. That is a hard reality to face. Although the severity of symptoms and therefore the impact vary, ME can lead to poor attendance and affect outcomes at school for young people. I have a constituent in exactly that position with whom I am in regular correspondence—I will not name her but she knows who she is and I wish her and her mum well. ME can result in significant or indefinite time off work or job loss in adults; reduction or complete cessation of daily activities, which can lead to isolation and strain within families and the breakdown of marriages; and overall poor quality of life. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) said, it can lead to almost no life for some people and their loved ones.

I am surprised that other than the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), nobody mentioned “Unrest”. I know it well. Some constituents came to see

me to tell me about the film. It had screenings in Winchester and Chandler's Ford in my constituency, which were oversubscribed—packed to the gunwales—and there was not a dry eye in the house. I pay great tribute to Jennifer and her partner Omar who made that film. I am sure there were times when it gave Jennifer's life a great purpose, but I am sure there were times when she wanted to say, “Get that bleeping camera out of my life!” There is a touching moment at the very start of the film when she says that when she was a young girl, she want to eat the world “whole”, because she wanted to see it all and do it all. That went to the heart of her great disappointment that she was so sick.

Jennifer set out very clearly and movingly the sheer ups and downs of this condition. For some, it is almost a constant down. I was struck by watching her at the Princeton University reunion day, during the rather surreal procession through the streets by old boys and girls from Princeton. She so enjoyed seeing old friends that day and looked full of life, but within an hour of it finishing she was absolutely poleaxed on the floor, saying that she felt her eyes were being pushed out of her head from the inside. It was horrible to watch.

It was interesting how the film moved around the different wild and crazy treatments that are out there on the internet. If hon. Members google any condition, they will see lots of wild and crazy treatments, but that is particularly the case with ME. One of the saddest things in it, although it covered it well, was the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) raised of the suicides resulting from this condition.

Millions Missing was mentioned by many Members, and I see some people wearing T-shirts in the Public Gallery. The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) is right that it has had some bad PR, but it is getting its act together. Millions Missing is an absolutely brilliant way of encapsulating the problem. A number of Members mentioned the shoes; I was particularly moved by the messages on the shoes. They were outside Richmond House, where the Department of Health used to be, as part of the Millions Missing campaign. The mission was to write what you miss; somebody had written on a pair of ballet shoes, “I miss dancing in these shoes.” That was really moving and a human way of putting it. I might touch on the film again a little later.

Stephen Pound: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I was not implying any absence of PR skills on the part of the advocates and the people who suffer from this debilitating disease; I was anthropomorphising the actual disease itself. I stole the words of the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) when we pitched this debate to the Backbench Business Committee, because he was not in Westminster Hall at the time.

Steve Brine: That is so unlike the hon. Gentleman. Good clarification.

The stigma quite rightly has been mentioned by pretty much everyone who have spoken today. We recognise that people with ME have encountered significant stigma, in part due to the unfavourable media representations of the condition that not only go back to the 1980s but have continued in recent times. I have seen a clip of Ricky Gervais in one of his otherwise amusing stage shows, when he says of ME, “Yes, that's the one where

[Steve Brine]

they say I don't want to go to work today." Ricky Gervais is a very talented comic, but given that he is quite active on Twitter, perhaps he could retract that and apologise to the ME community today. Perhaps he could put #ME so we can look out for it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) made a very good point about mental health; it is totally wrong and insulting to say it is all in the head, but it also goes against the grain of what we are talking about in modern-day healthcare: the parity between mental and physical health. There must be a parity, and to suggest that that somehow lessens it is wrong. His intervention was timely and good.

The physical impacts of the condition have an impact on mental health, as other hon. Members have said. I am also the Minister with responsibility for cancer, so I speak in lots of debates in Westminster Hall and we talk about the mental health impact of cancer—the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) knows all about them. A recent example was when we talked about the mental impact of blood cancer. People with ME often report that the legitimacy of their symptoms has been questioned by family, friends, employers, healthcare professionals—yes—and society as a whole. Lest hon. Members did not understand it from my opening remarks, let me clear that Ministers—especially this one—are not among that group of people.

That stigma can and does play a part in the development of the co-morbid symptoms of depression and anxiety, particularly for young people—I will come on to them in a minute—who keenly feel the consequences of the resultant social isolation at that moment of their development. As we have heard, suicide is not unheard of. We know that those who experience stigma often also experience discrimination, which has a profound negative effect on their lives. That is unacceptable, so I welcome the debate as a forum to raise awareness of ME and talking about it. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) mentioned that MND is being talked about, and he is absolutely right. He is a very good communicator, and I think this will probably be one of his next Facebook Live sessions.

Luke Pollard *indicated assent.*

Steve Brine: He is nodding. It is important that we raise awareness and educate people, including me, about the condition and its impact on people's lives.

I will now turn to the two issues that have primarily been debated today, research and treatment. On research, the Government invest more than £1.7 billion a year in health research via the National Institute for Health Research and the Medical Research Council through UK Research and Innovation. The NIHR and MRC welcome high-quality applications for research into all aspects of CFS and ME, which would certainly include the biomedical research that the hon. Member for Glasgow North West spoke about in her opening remarks.

Since 2011, the MRC has funded seven projects on CFS/ME totalling £2.62 million, and it is ready to support further applications of the highest scientific quality, which is required to make those scientific breakthroughs. My hon. Friend the Member for North

West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) is no longer in his place, but he spoke about the Norwich Research Park—didn't he push that a few times?—which sounds very promising. I look forward to hearing more about it, and I feel certain that he will tell me.

The MRC has had an open cross-board highlight notice on ME since 2003. It was updated in 2011 alongside a bespoke funding call in that year. ME research remains an area of high strategic importance for the MRC. Applications that focus on the underpinning mechanisms of ME are encouraged, with priority areas including immune dysregulation—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, I am distracted by someone shouting about stopping something outside—I think he is saying, "Stop ME!". The priority areas include pain, improved sub-phenotyping and stratification of ME, and mechanisms of ME in children and young people.

A number of people mentioned the late Baroness Jowell. I was very privileged to meet her. I did so just the once, but I was left in no doubt about her resolve on the issue of brain tumours. Let me say in reference to her and to the research environment that, as my Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), reminded me, that journey started around the time of a Westminster Hall debate. Perhaps that is a good sign.

Our challenge with brain tumour research is the lack of high-quality research proposals that have come forward. The late Baroness Jowell was passionate about stimulating the research community to get that situation changed, and we have latched on to that. That is one of her great legacies. I would hazard a guess that her greatest legacy is yet to be reached, but that is one reason it is important to mention her today.

The NIHR has, since 2011, provided £3.37 million of funding for projects and training on ME. That might not be termed biomedical research, but as with other disorders, given that the cause and mechanisms of the condition are still poorly understood, it is important that we carry out both biomedical research, to further our understanding, and applied health research, to improve the treatment offered to people with ME now and to help to improve their symptoms and quality of life.

The NIHR and the MRC recognise that ME is a debilitating condition and are working with the UK CFS/ME Research Collaborative, which was mentioned towards the end of the debate, and with patient representatives on how best they can support a joined-up approach to encourage high-quality research into this complex disorder. I mentioned that Baroness Jowell is a good example of how to start such research. They hope to be able to update colleagues on those discussions by the end of the year, and I for one will look keenly for that update.

For Members who do not know about that important collaboration, it was set up in 2013 to promote high-quality basic and applied research into ME. The CMRC brings together researchers, major funders and charities, and provides them with a mechanism for working together in a co-ordinated and collaborative way, increasing awareness of ME in the research community—that is so important if we are going to stimulate applications—highlighting priorities for research funding and increasing such funding. Both the NIHR and the MRC sit as observers on the CMRC board.

Everyone who contributed to the debate spoke passionately, but the hon. Member for Ealing North spoke particularly passionately, and I liked his point about humanity. This is a matter of good Christian humanity in many ways.

The Royal College of General Practitioners oversees GP training in England. It provides an online course for GPs and other primary care practitioners that includes an overview of the presentation, diagnosis, assessment and ongoing management of ME. The course highlights common misconceptions about ME and considers the challenges that surround that complex condition for patients, carers and primary care professionals. It is produced as part of the METRIC study, which is funded by the NIHR.

Of course GPs can always know more and learn more, but let me speak up for them for a moment. They are called “general practitioners”. Be a GP for a day—it is incredibly difficult to know everything about everything and to be a master of all. General practice is, though, where most patients with ME are likely to be managed, certainly in the first instance. The condition is identified as a key area of clinical knowledge in the RCGP applied knowledge test content guide. The AKT is a summative assessment of the knowledge base that underpins general practice in England and a key part of GPs’ qualifying exams.

Although I understand hon. Members’ points about raising awareness among medical professionals, and as a result of the debate I will redouble my efforts to do that as part of my role as Minister for primary care, all GPs certainly should be aware of ME, and should maintain their clinical knowledge of it and other conditions, as part of their commitment to continuing professional development. Indeed, I have resolved—I have already sent a note to myself—to send a copy of the report of the debate to Professor Helen Stokes-Lampard, who currently leads the RCGP, and to ask for the college’s latest thinking about this subject.

Before any medical condition can begin to be treated, it must be diagnosed. That goes to the heart of our challenge. As the symptoms of ME often resemble those of many other debilitating illnesses—we heard about Lyme disease—there is no test with which to make an accurate diagnosis. ME, therefore, is not always easy to diagnose, to put it mildly. Diagnosis relies on clinical observation of symptoms by healthcare professionals. We understand that that can be frustrating, to put it mildly, for patients—and, it must be said, for their clinicians.

People with ME should be referred to a specialist service, where care should be based on their needs, on the type, complexity and severity of their symptoms, and on the presence of co-morbidities. That decision should be made jointly by the patient and their healthcare professionals. As the shadow Minister said, referral to specialist ME care should be offered within six months of presentation to people with milder symptoms, within three to four months of presentation to people with moderate symptoms, and immediately to people with severe symptoms. Clinicians are responsible for advising patients about available treatment options.

Of course I am aware that access to services for those with severe ME is a big and ongoing issue. Under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, the configuration of services is a matter for local NHS commissioners, who

have to be best placed to deliver services for their area. A number of Members referred to the report of the chief medical officer’s independent working group on ME, which was published in 2002. Following that, a central investment programme of £8.5 million was established to address the service gaps across England—I am responsible for the NHS in England. That included the establishment of 13 centres of expertise across the country, 36 multidisciplinary community teams for adults and 11 specialist teams for children and young people, and facilitation of access to advice on clinical management for patients, families and health professionals.

Linked to that—the Department is, of course, now called the Department of Health and Social Care—the vast majority of people with severe ME and their families will come into contact with social care services at some point. The Care Act 2014 requires a local authority to carry out a needs assessment where an adult or carer appears to have care and support needs. The local authority must then decide whether the person has eligible needs by considering the outcomes they want to achieve, their needs, and how those impact on their overall wellbeing. Where a person is assessed as having eligible care and support needs, those must be met by their local authority.

Let me say some more about children and young people, who were mentioned by a number of Members. There is a powerful moment in “Unrest” where a young lady is celebrating her birthday. She says, “I remember my 16th birthday in this bed, and my 17th birthday, and my 18th birthday”—and she goes on through; I think she was celebrating her 22nd birthday in the film. Although access to services was raised, I know that access to education is also a huge issue for children and young people with ME.

All schools have a legal duty to make arrangements to support pupils with a medical condition in school. Guidance to schools states that they should put in place arrangements that show an understanding of how medical conditions affect a pupil’s ability to learn and give parents and young people confidence in the school’s ability to provide effective support for their condition. Children and young people with ME should have an individual healthcare plan, which should normally be drawn up in partnership with the school, healthcare professionals, parents and the young person, and should be tailored to their needs.

Schools and other services should work together to ensure that children and young people with ME receive an education that is flexible and appropriate. That could mean programmes of study that rely on part-time attendance, in combination with alternative provision or home schooling, which was mentioned. Consideration should also be given to how children and young people are integrated back into school after a period of absence, when they are feeling better and, hopefully, more able physically to cope.

A lot was said about NICE guidelines, which are clearly a sensitive topic and a source of much unhappiness among Members and the wider ME community. According to NICE guidelines, recommended treatments for ME include cognitive behavioural therapy and graded exercise therapy. I know that many patients disagree with those treatments, and we heard powerful testimony about that. The NICE guideline is clear that there is no one form of treatment to suit every patient; that the personal

[Steve Brine]

needs and preferences of the patient should be taken into account; that doctors should explain that no single strategy will be successful for all patients; and that, in common with all people receiving NHS care, ME patients have the right to refuse or withdraw from any part of their treatment that they do not agree with or they think is doing them harm.

As we heard, the NICE guideline is being updated—a jolly good job, too. NICE will look at the current evidence base, including the PACE trial, which has been debated at length in the House before. Of course, we welcome NICE's decision to undertake a full review of ME guidelines. Many of the ME charities we have heard about today are registered to take part in the guideline development process, but NICE is the independent expert body responsible for developing robust, evidence-based guidance for the NHS to design services that are in line with the best available evidence, and no one should hide from the evidence. It would be inappropriate and wrong for Ministers to interfere with the process, but I feel sure that NICE will be listening to the debate and taking a keen interest in it.

Carol Monaghan: The Minister has rightly said that any patient has the right to withdraw from medical treatment. However, when the DWP is saying that patients must undertake graded exercise therapy, and when health insurance companies are saying that they must undertake graded exercise therapy, it puts the patient in a very difficult position.

Steve Brine: I fully appreciate that point—the hon. Lady put it on the record very well earlier—which takes us on very neatly to welfare benefits.

The hon. Members who requested the debate also flagged the issue of benefits. I know they would like, and are having, an ongoing conversation with the DWP. I am clearly not a DWP Minister—they wanted a Health Minister to respond to the debate, and that is what they have. The DWP obviously recognises that ME is a real and disabling condition. Entitlement to benefits depends on the disabling effects of the condition, which of course must be taken on an individual basis. When assessing claimants, healthcare professionals are expected to be mindful of the fact that many illnesses—including ME—produce symptoms that vary in intensity over time, and they are instructed not to base their opinion solely on the situation observed at the assessment. The DWP assures me that all healthcare professionals are required to read an evidence-based protocol on ME as part of their training, as well as engaging in a programme of continuing medical education that includes modules on the condition.

From what I have heard today, Members clearly feel that that is not happening—certainly not in a consistent way. I will take an action from the debate to send a copy of what has been said to the relevant Minister—I believe it is the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton)—at the DWP. However, I encourage members of the all-party group to seek more and continuing engagement with the DWP on this issue. I will certainly follow that up with them.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West, who opened the debate, and her colleagues who secured the debate through the Backbench Business Committee for raising the issues of ME research and treatment on behalf of those affected—their constituents and mine. I welcome this and all other opportunities to raise awareness within the House. Ultimately, raising awareness is what we can do, and that can lead to action and real change, as we saw within the brain tumour community.

I thank the ME charities—they are very active in my part of the world, in Hampshire—for their continuing work in this area. What has been fascinating today, as always with debates in my portfolio, is that I have not heard one single person mention their party political colours. There really is no politics in ME, and nor should there be. I want to see us come together at our true, cross-party best to focus on the needs of people with ME and see if we can move the research agenda forward in this area.

I think the hon. Member for Glasgow North West said in her opening remarks that professionals should welcome research, because evidence-based treatment is ultimately the basis of their training. I welcome such research. I echo what has been said, and on the email that she read out earlier—clearly, I have not seen it and have only heard her reporting of it; I think she will give it to me afterwards—I hope that that will be the second apology received as a result of my remarks today. I look forward to being copied into that.

As I said earlier, the NIHR and MRC are speaking to the UK CFS/ME Research Collaborative and patient representatives about how they can best support a joined-up approach to high-quality research into this complex disorder. I hope they will update colleagues about those discussions later in the year. I will end with what Jennifer said right at the end of “Unrest”:

“every book I read...said, ‘when you fall ill, either you...find the cure or die trying.’ It always ends in triumph or tragedy. But that’s not my story—at least not yet.”

That is how she put it.

4.14 pm

Carol Monaghan: I thank hon. Members once again—Thursday afternoon is not an easy time to stay behind for a debate, and I really appreciate the fact that they have done so. I also appreciate the great support from the people in the Public Gallery, many of whom are living with ME. It has been tough enough for us to sit here for three hours, so it must have been a hard slog for them. I hope they do not feel the impact of the debate too badly over the next few days.

I have been following the debate on Twitter, and it has been interesting to see the messages of support coming in for individual Members. People really are watching and were interested and encouraged by what they heard. Although we are talking about treatment and diagnosis in the UK, the repercussions are far wider. Messages of support have been coming in from Norway, Canada, the United States and right across Europe. ME affects people worldwide, and I hope the debate has given them some hope.

The debate was about more than just raising awareness. Members asked specific questions, and I am glad the Minister said that he would work with the DWP to

draw up guidelines for people with ME. We will all watch that with interest, and perhaps some parliamentary questions will go in as a result.

I was also a bit disappointed. The Minister, who is a compassionate person, talked about funding, and I think he said that the Medical Research Council is putting £2.6 million into ME research. Unfortunately, that is not for biomedical research—or little of it is. I quickly googled and found that a new research programme is taking place at Bath University, but, once again, it is at the department of psychology. That is where we have the trouble: it is not a psychology department that needs to be doing research, but a medicine or biomedical sciences department.

Members have spoken passionately on the ME community's behalf, and once again I thank everyone here this afternoon. I do not see this as the end. The fight for people with ME both here and across the world continues.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered myalgic encephalomyelitis treatment and research.

4.17 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 21 June 2018

TREASURY

ECOFIN: 22 June 2018

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):

A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Luxembourg on 22 June 2018.

ECOFIN will be preceded by a morning meeting of the EIB board of governors:

Annual EIB governors meeting

The EIB board of governors meeting will include a speech by the EIB President Werner Hoyer, a governors discussion, reappointment of the board of directors, and approval of the audit report.

Following this, EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following at ECOFIN:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 21 June meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU.

VAT "Quick-Fixes"

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach on the presidency compromise text in regards to the directive on harmonising and simplifying certain rules in the VAT system and introducing the definitive system for the taxation of trade between member states; the regulation regarding certain exemptions for intra-community transactions and the regulation regarding certified taxable persons.

European deposit insurance scheme

The Council will be invited to take note of the presidency progress report on the European deposit insurance scheme.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Insolvency directive

The presidency will provide an update on the solvency, restructuring and second-chance directive.

National reform programmes 2018

The Council will be invited to approve 2018 country-specific recommendations as part of the European semester process.

Implementation of the stability and growth pact

The Council will be invited to adopt Council decisions and recommendations in the context of both the excessive deficit procedure and the significant deviation procedure, also part of the European semester.

Convergence reports

Also as part of the European semester, the Commission and the European Central Bank will present the convergence reports, which will then be followed by an exchange of views by the Council.

[HCWS790]

Notification of Contingent Liability

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):

I have today laid before the House of Commons a departmental minute describing the contingent liability associated with the new financial framework between HM Treasury and the Bank of England (the "Bank")¹. On this occasion it has not been possible to notify Parliament in advance of the contingent liability coming into effect, which is due to the market sensitive nature of the measure.

The contingent liability arises from the new capital framework under which the Treasury commits to provide a capital injection to the Bank in the event that its level of loss-absorbing capital drops below a floor level. At present that floor is set at £500 million. The Bank's level of loss-absorbing capital will be raised to £3.5 billion during 2018-19. This is part of wider reforms to the financial arrangements between the Bank and Treasury, including clearer principles regarding risk-sharing in future Bank operations.

It is not possible to quantify the size of the contingent liability given the unprecedented nature of economic conditions required for the liability to crystallise. A full departmental minute is laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

¹As set out in a memorandum of understanding:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/financial-relationship-between-the-treasury-and-the-bank-of-england>

[HCWS791]

DEFENCE

Reserve Forces and Cadets Association External Scrutiny Team Report

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):

I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of a letter that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson) sent to Lieutenant General (Retired) Brims, the chair of the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association's External Scrutiny Team, to update him on the Future Reserves programme, and particularly on the recommendations that his team's report made. I am grateful to the team for their work.

[HCWS783]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Environment Council: June 2018

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): The next EU Environment Council will take place on 25 June in Luxembourg. My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity (Lord Gardiner of Kimble) intends to represent the UK. Welsh Environment Minister Hannah Blythyn AM will also attend.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for environment will be a policy debate on the recast of the drinking water directive.

Council will adopt the conclusions for delivering on the EU action plan for the circular economy. There will also be a lunchtime discussion concerning climate adaptation in the EU to 2020 and beyond.

On climate, there will be a policy debate on the regulation of CO₂ standards for cars and vans.

Any other business will include information from the Commission on the following legislative proposals:

- Regulation on CO₂ standards for heavy duty vehicles
- Regulation on LIFE Regulation on water reuse
- Regulation on single use plastics
- Regulation on the alignment of environmental reporting obligations

The Commission will then report on the following international meetings:

- EU for Talanoa (Brussels, 13 June 2018)
- Ninth Petersberg climate dialogue (Berlin 17 to 19 June 2018)
- Ministerial on climate action (MoCA) (Brussels 20 and 21 June 2018)

There are currently three member state-led AOBs:

- Beyond 2020—a new global deal on chemicals and waste (tabled by Sweden)
- Paris agreement compliance as an essential element of EU agreements, and enforceability of sustainable development provisions of trade agreements through the dispute settlement resolution (tabled by France)
- Obtaining ambitious results at convention on biological diversity (CBD) COP 15 in 2020 (tabled by France).

[HCWS782]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Exit

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Today we are publishing a document produced by the UK negotiating team for discussion with the EU: “Technical note—Coordination on External Security”.

This will be available on gov.uk and a copy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS788]

European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): The Government put forward three amendments to amendment 19P carried in the House of Lords on 18 June.

In these amendments, reference is made to a motion “in neutral terms”.

The purpose of this written ministerial statement is to set out the Government’s understanding of the way in which this reference to “in neutral terms” will operate in practice.

Under the Standing Orders of the House of Commons, it will be for the Speaker to determine whether a motion when it is introduced by the Government under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is or is not in fact cast in neutral terms and hence whether the motion is or is not amendable.

The Government recognise that it is open for Ministers and Members of the House of Commons to table motions on and debate matters of concern and that, as is the convention, parliamentary time will be provided for this.

[HCWS781]

General Affairs Council: June 2018

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I will attend the General Affairs Council in Luxembourg on 26 June 2018 to represent the UK. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member.

The provisional agenda includes:

Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process

Ministers will exchange views and agree conclusions on enlargement, covering the western Balkans and Turkey.

Preparation of the European Council on 28 and 29 June 2018

The Council will discuss the draft conclusions for the June European Council. The conclusions are expected to cover migration; security and defence; jobs, growth and competitiveness; innovation and digital; the multiannual financial framework (MFF); and external relations.

European Council follow-up

The Bulgarian presidency will update ministers on progress in implementing previous European Council conclusions. These covered jobs, growth and competitiveness, and other items, including the Salisbury attack.

European Semester, integrated country-specific recommendations

Ministers will exchange views on the country-specific recommendations (CSRs).

IIA implementation

The presidency will provide an update on the state of play of the implementation of the 2016 inter-institutional agreement on better law making (IIA BLM).

Rule of Law in Poland/Article 7(1) TEU Reasoned Proposal

The Council will hold a hearing on article 7. The Commission and Poland will also provide updates on this issue and member states will be invited to pose questions to Poland on its response to the Commission’s concerns on the rule of law.

[HCWS786]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: June 2018

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Defence (Earl Howe) and I plan to attend the Joint Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) with EU Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministers on the morning of 25 June. I will attend a meeting of the FAC for Foreign Ministers only that afternoon. The FAC will be chaired by the High Representative and Vice-President (HRVP) of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Luxembourg.

The joint FAC will discuss security and defence issues including EU-NATO co-operation. Foreign Ministers will then discuss current foreign policy issues including Yemen, the Red sea and horn of Africa, Jordan, and the EU global strategy.

JOINT FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS (DEFENCE) COUNCILS

Security and defence

The Joint Council will have two sessions. The first will cover security and defence during which Ministers will discuss permanent structured co-operation, military

mobility, the European peace facility, and EU-NATO co-operation. The HRVP will refer to the March European Council's tasking on hybrid threats and resilience, which will be discussed by leaders at the June European Council on 28 and 29 June.

The second session will be attended by the NATO Secretary-General, and will cover EU-NATO co-operation, preparation for the NATO summit, and military mobility.

Ministers are expected to approve Council conclusions on security and defence in the context of the EU global strategy.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL

Yemen

Ministers will discuss the latest developments in Yemen, and how the EU can best support the UN special envoy's efforts to revitalise the political process and work towards the resumption of negotiations. The dire humanitarian situation will be central to the discussion, recognising the urgent need to prevent further deterioration. The impact of the conflict on regional security and stability will also be addressed. The FAC is expected to approve Council conclusions on Yemen.

Horn of Africa/Red sea

Ministers will discuss the importance of inter and intra-regional co-operation in delivering peace, stability, and economic growth in the Red sea and the horn of Africa, including co-ordinated support to Somalia, the resolution of conflict in South Sudan, and the management of water security. The FAC will consider the impact of regional conflict on Red sea shipping routes, and of climate change on existing humanitarian challenges in the horn of Africa. While acknowledging recent positive developments, the FAC will discuss the importance of reform towards greater political freedom and human rights in the region. The FAC is expected to approve Council conclusions on the horn of Africa and Red sea.

EU global strategy

The HRVP will present the second progress report on the implementation of the EU's global strategy for the EU's foreign and security policy that was presented to the European Council in June 2016.

Jordan

The FAC will discuss recent developments in Jordan, following country-wide protests and the appointment of a new Prime Minister and Government. The UK remains committed to supporting Jordanian stability and will continue to engage positively with the new Jordanian Government, supporting them to meet their commitments to economic reform.

Council conclusions

The FAC is also expected to adopt Council conclusions on Sahel/Mali.

[HCWS785]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Tomorrow, Friday 22 June, will mark the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush to the UK carrying passengers from various islands across the Caribbean. The Windrush generation arrived in response to Britain's invitation to help rebuild the country after the second world war. The Government

value the contribution made to the UK by the Windrush generation and we are committed to do right by those who have faced difficulties in demonstrating their status under the immigration system.

I am leading a series of measures across my Department to help put things right. This includes launching a compensation scheme as quickly and as carefully as possible, to help redress what has gone wrong. The call for evidence for the scheme is now complete, and this has given individuals and community groups the opportunity to share their stories and experiences. A public consultation on the design of the compensation scheme will be opened in due course. We will be announcing details of the final scheme and how to apply as soon as possible after the public consultation has ended.

More widely, it is crucial for the Government to learn from what happened, and it is especially important to do so now. To do this we need to understand more about what happened, why it was not stopped sooner, and how we can ensure that it does not happen again. I have already announced that a thorough lessons learned review is under way within the Department to undertake this incredibly important task. In particular, the review will consider:

- how members of the Windrush generation came to be entangled in measures designed for illegal immigrants;
- why that was not spotted sooner; and
- whether corrective measures are now in place.

I have said from the outset that the lessons learned review needs to have independent oversight to make sure that it is done properly. I am pleased to announce today that I have appointed Wendy Williams to this role. Currently one of Her Majesty's inspectors of constabulary, Wendy brings a wealth of experience, including through her legal background. She was formerly the chief Crown prosecutor for Northumbria and the north-east region. As an HM inspector of constabulary, she has substantial experience of the independent, rigorous and objective assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of the operations of public bodies, in the public interest. I am confident that she will bring those essential characteristics, as well as integrity to the review.

The review will take time to do properly. The terms of reference and methodology for the review will be made available to the House before the summer recess.

[HCWS789]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Prime Minister's Trade Envoys

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Prime Minister has approved two new appointments to the trade envoy programme. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) has been appointed as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Libya and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Mozambique and Democratic Republic of Congo. These new appointments take the total number to 32 parliamentarians covering 63 markets. The Prime Minister's trade envoy programme is an unpaid and voluntary cross-party network, which supports the UK's ambitious trade and investment agenda in global markets.

[HCWS787]

WORK AND PENSIONS**Office for Nuclear Regulation Annual Report and
Accounts 2017-18**

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work
(Sarah Newton):** Later today the Office for Nuclear
Regulation's Annual Report and Accounts for 2017-18

will be published. Having consulted the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who is accountable for nuclear security, and the Office for Nuclear Regulation, I can confirm, in accordance with paragraph 25(3) of schedule 7 to the Energy Act 2013, that there have been no exclusions to the published document on the grounds of national security.

[HCWS784]

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**not later than
Thursday 28 June 2018**

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