

**Thursday
13 September 2018**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 13 September 2018

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: On today's Order Paper, it is noted that on 16 September 1918, Lieutenant Colonel Lord Alexander George Boteville Thynne, DSO, Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, Member for Bath, was killed in action in France. We remember him today.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trade Co-operation: UK and Israel

1. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage trade co-operation between the UK and Israel in the (a) information and (b) agricultural technology sectors. [906889]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The UK and Israel have an important trading relationship in information and agricultural technology, which we are strengthening through our dedicated trade promotion team at our embassy in Tel Aviv. We have established a UK-Israel tech hub, which helps to create partnerships between British companies and innovative Israeli technology businesses. This is part of our confident, outward-looking approach to Britain's trading future.

Mr Hollobone: From online banking security to prescription drugs to cherry tomatoes, Israel has become an international technological and trade powerhouse. Every day, millions of Britons are benefiting from Israeli inventions and produce, even if they do not realise it. What progress is being made in the UK-Israel trade working group to ensure that this vital trade relationship continues to prosper after Brexit?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend is right. Our trade with Israel currently stands at £3.9 billion in goods and services, with our exports up 7% in the past year. The Prime Minister met the Israeli Prime Minister in February 2017 to set up the joint trade working group, and I would like to thank the Israeli Government for their close liaison. We are dedicated to the continuity of trade and, once we leave the European Union, to having an ambitious new trade agreement that will provide even greater benefits than those we currently have.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not know whether the Secretary of State listens to my favourite programme in the morning, "Farming Today", but is he aware that, following the publication yesterday of the Agriculture Bill, there is a great deal of concern in the farming community about the Bill and about the possibility of having a decent trading relationship, with high-technology components, after Brexit?

Mr Speaker: Particularly in relation to Israel.

Dr Fox: Thank you, Mr Speaker; I was wondering whether there was going to be even a tentative link to the question. The tech hub is there to help British businesses to get access to the innovations that come out of Israel across a range of sectors. It is worth pointing out that Israel is an extraordinarily innovative country and has more start-ups per capita than any other country on the planet. Where we can get UK businesses across a range of sectors to get access to such innovation, it is always a positive outcome.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The latest computers used in the House of Commons use Intel 7 and Intel 8 cores and above, and Shazam, Skype and FaceTime all use technology developed in Israel. What more are we doing to encourage that sort of co-operation, particularly in relation to computer technology?

Dr Fox: As I have already said, the key to that is the UK-Israel tech hub. This relates not only to the area of computers, which my hon. Friend has mentioned, but to FinTech, cyber-security, biomed, retail technology and the creative industries. These are all prime areas for co-operation between the United Kingdom and Israel, and we should celebrate that relationship and the benefits that it brings to both our populations.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In the context of the agriculture sector, what representations have been made about trading with illegal Israeli settlements, which in the long run further jeopardises the two-state solution that the UK is supposed to aspire to?

Dr Fox: Our trade relationship with Israel is clearly set out in the agreement that the European Union has with Israel, and that is the agreement that we will roll over as we leave the EU. We will want to have a further ambitious trading agreement. We believe that the extension of trade in Israel and in the wider region contributes to not only the prosperity but the political stability and security of the region.

Trade and Investment: India

2. **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of UK trade and investment with India. [906890]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): India is a key partner for the UK, and bilateral trade between the UK and India was £18 billion in 2017, up 15% on 2016. The UK and India are among the top four investors in each other's countries, and the Secretary of State will be visiting India in

December to attend the annual joint economic trade committee and to continue to build on this important relationship.

Neil O'Brien: In my constituency, we are lucky to have a lot of firms doing business with India, which is an incredibly exciting market. Will the Minister tell us a bit more about what the Government will do to try to drive further trade, particularly between the east midlands and India?

Graham Stuart: I am pleased to say that trade between the east midlands and India is performing well and grew by 11.4% in 2017, with success stories such as Royal Enfield in Bruntingthorpe. We are supporting visits from the midlands engine to India, and I was in India with Prime Minister Modi at the Move Global Mobility conference only at the weekend.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): If the Minister was with Mr Modi at the weekend, I expect that the subject of student numbers came up. India will want something in return for an expanded trade and investment programme, so what exactly is the Minister offering? I am not against increasing student numbers, but is he? Will he be honest with the British public?

Graham Stuart: That is an interesting question from the Opposition, as is so often the case, given that, from memory, student numbers from India grew by 32% last year. There is absolutely no cap on Indian students coming here, and I would hope that the hon. Lady, representing her constituents and the wider country, would promote the positive message that we are open to Indian students. There is no cap, students are growing in number, and we want more of them.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): The potential for growth in trade between India and the UK is enormous and should be backed up by further trade missions. However, may I suggest that the next trade mission should take Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury? He would be able to talk to some of India's incredible entrepreneurs and perhaps learn about wealth creation and the fact that greater trade between India and the United Kingdom will lift millions of Indians out of poverty.

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. There are so many things that we can do jointly with India. As I said, we had the mobility conference at the weekend, which was about cleaning up our air and our transport. India has set targets for 2030 to ensure that at least 30% of vehicles produce zero emissions, and we have said that 100% must produce zero emissions at the tailpipe by 2040. Working together, we can do more.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response to that question. The cultural, historical, economic and educational links between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and India are enormous. Will the Minister outline how he believes that will continue post-Brexit? Will he also ensure that all the regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can benefit?

Graham Stuart: The Board of Trade was established precisely to send out a message about the benefits of trade and relationships with countries such as India to every part of the United Kingdom. We plan to work with Northern Ireland to ensure that it is part of the whole suite of offers that we provide using our posts right around the world.

Free Trade Agreements

3. **Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con):** What steps he is taking to consult on potential new free trade agreements. [906891]

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The Government are committed to an inclusive and transparent trade policy. On 20 July, we launched a 14-week online consultation, allowing the public to provide views on future potential UK trade agreements with the US, Australia and New Zealand and, of course, the potential accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Jack Brereton: We have huge potential to increase exports, particularly in the fantastic ceramics industry in Stoke-on-Trent, so I thank the Minister for that response. Will he update the House on the progress that is being made with the US-UK trade agreement, which is so important for that industry?

George Hollingbery: It is important to point out to my hon. Friend and, indeed, to the House that our duty of sincere co-operation means that we are only exploring information at this stage since we may not, cannot and should not explore actual free trade deals. However, the UK-US trade and investment working group has now met on four occasions and will meet again in November in Washington. We want our future trade agreements to work for all sectors and regions of the UK, including the UK's highly valued ceramics industry in Staffordshire, for which my hon. Friend is a doughty champion. The Secretary of State will be chairing the consultation in Birmingham on 1 October. My hon. Friend recently wrote to me requesting a meeting for that particular sector, and we will be exploring dates shortly.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): A potential free trade deal with the United States of America is reckoned to be worth about 0.2% of GDP, but the loss of GDP with a mere FTA deal with the European Union is 6%, which is a loss thirty times greater than the gain from America. Even if the Minister got an equivalent free trade agreement with the rest of the world, he would need a world population of 15 billion—twice the current population—to make up the gap. There are only 7.5 billion people on earth. Where are the Government going to make up the gap in GDP loss that this Brexit is costing the United Kingdom?

George Hollingbery: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that the British people voted in a referendum to leave the European Union and that is exactly what we are organising. We are in the middle of negotiating with the EU on a wide-ranging and comprehensive package of proposals that will allow trade to continue with the EU hopefully much as it does now.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Minister's last answer was very interesting. Do the Government agree that free trade agreements are good? If, unfortunately, the Chequers proposal is rejected by the European Union, would not an alternative be a free trade agreement with the European Union based on the Canada model?

George Hollingbery: I merely repeat what I said before. The Government are negotiating to put in place a deep future trade agreement with the European Union, and we believe we will succeed in that endeavour.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): At the moment we have a free trade agreement with Colombia through the European Union, but the new President of Colombia, Iván Duque, has said that he wants no more free trade agreements, probably including with the United Kingdom if we are to leave the EU, and that he wants to renegotiate the deal with the EU. If we were to be able to roll over a new agreement with Colombia, would we make sure it had very strong human rights protections?

George Hollingbery: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are negotiating with our partners who are currently signatories to agreements with the European Union to create continuity for businesses and to make sure those agreements are put in place. The elements to which those countries have already signed up will be included in those agreements, and I hope he will take some comfort from that.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We trade effectively without them. They often come with producer-interest strings attached. They might be nice to have, but we do not need them, do we?

George Hollingbery: Last time I stood at this Dispatch Box, I said that I was not entirely sure I understood a particular question.

We will negotiate free trade agreements that are to the benefit of the United Kingdom—we have offensive and defensive interests—and, when we conclude those agreements, I have no doubt they will be good for the United Kingdom.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I apologise on behalf of my colleague, who is not here and for whom I am standing in.

This 14-week consultation period is probably the only period in which the public will have a chance to have their say on the free trade agreement. Does the Minister agree it is vital for those people who are concerned about changes in food regulation, and for those people who are concerned about the diminution of the high standards we have here, that they take the opportunity to input into this consultation and make their voices heard, as they did so successfully in previous campaigns on, for example, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership?

George Hollingbery: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. It is right that members of the public should feed in all their concerns. One of the reasons why we are running this consultation is for exactly that purpose. I back her encouraging people to take part in the consultation.

Indeed, when I was in Scotland recently to meet the Scottish Government, I also met Trade Justice Scotland to discuss exactly these sorts of issues.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The Government's current consultation process has a worrying lack of transparency. No mandates have been published and no explanation has been given of which sectors are being considered or of what chapters may be included. Will the Minister commit to working with businesses and civil society to develop a consultation process that is more transparent, that looks at the full range of issues and that allows proper engagement on the big questions regarding our future trade? The current one is just simply not good enough.

George Hollingbery: In that case all I can say to the hon. Lady is that she simply does not understand the consultation process. There are 14 weeks in which the public themselves may come back to us with all their input. We are very clear that we will be exploring widely and deeply with all sectors of society, and indeed all sectors of business and all those with an interest. We have set up the strategic trade advisory group to do exactly the sorts of things she is asking for, and I am confident that this is the most open consultation on free trade agreements this country has ever undertaken.

Export Strategy

4. **Leo Docherty** (Aldershot) (Con): What progress the Government has made on implementing its export strategy. [906892]

6. **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What progress the Government has made on implementing its export strategy. [906895]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): I would like to thank my noble Friend Baroness Fairhead for all her hard work in driving forward the launch of the Government's export strategy, in her role as Minister for Trade and Export Promotion. We launched the Government's export strategy on 21 August. The strategy has four pillars—encourage, inform, connect and finance. Our ambition is simple: it is for the UK to be a 21st-century exporting superpower.

Leo Docherty: I welcome the Secretary of State's remarks. How will the strategy help increase exports in the aviation, defence and aerospace industries, which are so crucial to Farnborough in my constituency?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend, who is a very strong advocate for those sectors, makes a good point. They are strong export sectors for the UK, and the Government's export strategy will build on their success, further encouraging and assisting companies to export. We will do so by providing more information and connections to overseas markets, supporting companies at overseas events and providing better access to export finance.

Helen Whately: The overall growth in the value of UK exports is strong, but the growth in the number of companies starting to export is not so strong. Will my right hon. Friend advise what he is doing to help companies start exporting for the first time?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend, as usual, makes a telling point. I congratulate businesses up and down the country who export their goods and services overseas, but our survey suggests that some 20% of companies could be exporting at the present time but do not. That is around 400,000 companies whose export potential is not being fully realised. My message to those who could export but do not is to look at the success of our current exporters—if they can, so can you.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The north-east is the only region that exports more than it imports. Employers, employees, trade associations and trade unions all agree that a no deal Brexit will destroy jobs. What is the Secretary of State doing specifically to protect north-east businesses from a no deal Brexit, and to ensure that we continue to export successfully around the world?

Dr Fox: What the Government are doing is to try to ensure that we get a good deal with the European Union—a free, open, comprehensive trade deal that enables our businesses to continue to trade with the substantial market that is the European Union.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Many small businesses in my constituency tell me that they have never exported outside the European Union and do not have plans in place—particularly in relation to a no deal Brexit, if that was to happen—for how they would export outside the EU. They do not have people who are experts in customs arrangements outside the EU. What practical help can the Minister give to small businesses, to ensure that they can trade outside the EU?

Dr Fox: That is a very useful point. Members of the House who have used the export hub and had the export hub visit their constituency have seen the benefits of the very practical help that can be given to small businesses. We have been encouraging UK Export Finance to help more small and medium-sized enterprises trade. We have put UK Export Finance experts in the field, so that they may better understand overseas markets, regulatory frameworks and cultural issues. Our new trade commissioners around the world are there to provide better help. If the hon. Gentleman has not yet had the export hub in his constituency, if he contacts the Department we would happily arrange a time for a visit, so that small businesses in his constituency may get one-to-one advice on the opportunities and help available.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I very much welcome the export strategy, but given that international trade is a reserved matter, will my right hon. Friend look at extending his Department's footprint north of the border, so that more Scottish businesses may take advantage?

Dr Fox: We already have a footprint, but it is very clear, emphasising the point that my hon. Friend correctly makes, that it is a reserved matter, so it is the duty of the Government to ensure that all UK citizens, in whatever part of the kingdom they reside, have the same access to help when it comes to trade; and that is what the Department for International Trade provides.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Federation of Small Businesses describes the export strategy as lacking “definitive detailed interventions”. The Secretary of State would do well to take note of what the FSB says. SMEs are vital to our export success, so I suggest, before he gets carried away by his own complacency, why not listen to what small businesses are saying?

Dr Fox: We spend a great deal of time doing so, and in fact I was deeply encouraged by the welcome that we received for the export strategy from the FSB, the chambers, the Institute of Directors and the Confederation of British Industry, who do not share the Labour party's anti-trade, anti-capitalist, anti-wealth agenda. The Labour party increasingly seems to see the model it prefers for Britain as the Venezuelan model.

Trans-Pacific Partnership

5. **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the UK's potential accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. [906894]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): We are preparing ourselves to be able to take a decision on potential CPTPP accession in the light of the ongoing public consultation and the process of accession for new members being established. We are also undertaking further work to understand the opportunities that CPTPP presents, including by engaging with existing members.

Richard Graham: I share the Secretary of State's enthusiasm for the potential of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and greater trade with the countries of the Pacific rim in general. Will he confirm that nothing in the proposals currently being negotiated with the EU would prevent our being able to accede to the TPP? Does my right hon. Friend agree that although it is of course entirely for Malaysia to decide its role in the TPP, both its involvement and our accession would be good for all involved?

Dr Fox: The CPTPP states currently account for more than 13% of global GDP—they comprise a combined GDP of around \$11 trillion. Their economies are projected to grow to more than \$14 trillion by 2023. It is self-evident that if Britain is able to take advantage of growing markets, a country that has a much more ambitious export strategy can benefit hugely. Malaysia will be able to take advantage of the improvement in our bilateral trade.

12. [906902] **Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): To what extent is our accession reflected in the work programme of the Board of Trade? Will the board make it a priority to begin the formal process of our accession to CPTPP?

Dr Fox: The work of the Board of Trade is primarily about supporting exports and investment. The board itself does not have a role in trade policy, but the Department is fully co-ordinated with partners across the CPTPP and ready to discuss with them the great potential that exists for the United Kingdom. We should want to extend our trading horizons as we leave the European Union. We need to raise our ambitions, extend

our timelines, and widen our geographical horizons if we are to maximise the benefits to the UK of the opportunities that Brexit will bring.

Topical Questions

T1. [906904] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): My Department has responsibility for exports, inward and outward investment, and trade policy. I am delighted to announce that on my recent visit to China, I received approval from the Chinese Government to ease restrictions on the import of UK dairy products. That will be worth a quarter of a billion pounds over the next year and will be of particular benefit to Northern Ireland. I congratulate the many people involved in that effort, including my officials and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Such success shows the benefit of collective effort, and I look forward to similar collaboration to support British companies to secure business around the world.

Later today, I will travel to the G20 summit in Buenos Aires.

Mr Hepburn: Given that more than 60% of the north-east's exports go to the EU, what preparations have the Secretary of State and his Department made for there being no Brexit deal, which could lead to firms in the north-east being hit with tariffs of up to 80% overnight?

Dr Fox: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have already published a number of papers in preparation for no deal. I have just left a Cabinet meeting, to which I shall return later, at which we are looking into that very subject. The best thing that we can do is to get an effective comprehensive trade agreement with the European Union so that all the countries of Europe—the EU27 and the UK—can continue to get the benefits of free and open trade.

T2. [906905] **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): As chair of the all-party group on the furniture industry, I welcome the publication of the Government's export strategy and draw my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's attention to the Long Point exhibition that will take place in my constituency next week. The exhibition acts as the global shop front for quality upholstery manufacturing. Will the Minister outline what plans the Government have in their export strategy to support the furniture industry to increase exports once we have left the EU?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): There is no greater parliamentary champion of the furniture industry than my hon. Friend—I am delighted to congratulate her on that. For businesses and sectors of all sizes, the export strategy sets out a new UK export challenge, a smarter offer to help them to export, and a new framework to maximise our impact. The Long Point exhibition in my hon. Friend's constituency next week will be another excellent opportunity for her and us to promote the furniture industry.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): What proposals has the Secretary of State made to his counterparts ahead of this weekend's G20 ministerial meeting to avert the threat by the President of the United States to pull the United States out of the World Trade Organisation, and to ensure that the WTO can continue to function despite America's refusal to approve appointments to the WTO's appellate body—or has he made no proposals?

Dr Fox: I have had conversations with a number of my trade colleagues from Japan, Mexico and Canada all ahead of the G20 meeting. That is a very good opportunity for us to recommit ourselves to the concept and practice of free and open trade and the rules-based system based on the WTO in Geneva. We should be pointing out that protectionism has never ended well, and that the benefits that we have introduced in terms of the elimination of poverty and the support for our global security agenda are based on free trade. It is also worth saying that the alternative to a rules-based system is a deals-based system, which would upset the balance of global trade. Incidentally, let me point out to the hon. Gentleman that he will find that the power to withdraw from the WTO is not a presidential power, but one that would require approval by Congress in law.

T3. [906906] **Gillian Keegan** (Chichester) (Con): Africado is Tanzania's biggest exporter of avocados, exporting more than 2,500 tonnes a year to British supermarkets such as Waitrose and Tesco. The project, which was kickstarted by UK aid, has transformed an abandoned coffee plantation into a thriving business that employs 2,000 farmers. Following on from the Prime Minister's visit to Africa, what steps have Ministers taken to improve trading relationships with emerging markets?

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): I thank my hon. Friend for her very encouraging story from Tanzania. Britain is, of course, an international leader on development and my Department is working with the Department for International Development to ensure that global prosperity is at the heart of future policy. Our first priority is to deliver continuity in our trading relationships as we leave the EU. In the future, the Government will explore options to expand our relations with developing countries. DIT will be focusing on unilateral preference schemes and schemes to help to break down barriers to trade that exist in many countries.

T4. [906907] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Trade statistics published last week by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs show an increase of £643 million in Wales's exports to the EU over the past year. The data also shows a decrease of £32 million in exports to non-EU countries. Is not the reality that the best opportunities for Welsh exporters in the future lie with staying in the single market and the customs union?

Dr Fox: As I have already pointed out, it is advantageous for us to have an open, liberal comprehensive trading deal with the European Union, but it is also important that we open up trading opportunities elsewhere, which was why I found it utterly depressing that the Labour party voted yesterday against the EU's free trade agreement with Singapore, which is a chance generally to open up

trade. That is another example of how the Labour party has been captured by the anti-trade hard left to the detriment of the United Kingdom's interests.

T6. [906909] **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): ARC Marine and Artificial Reef Construction Company will be the first recipients of a Torbay Development Agency trade bursary to support their ambitions to export. What role does my right hon. Friend see for this type of work at a local level in promoting exports, and how can his Department help to support it?

Dr Fox: At a general level, joining up across Government and working with local partners to help businesses to overcome trade barriers is a key principle in the Government's export strategy. I am encouraged that joint working between the Torbay Development Agency and my Department will allow ARC Marine to visit the wind summit in Hamburg in September. That is another good example of how collaboration can help local businesses.

T5. [906908] **Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): According to the Department's annual report, the team in the north-west has among the lowest job creation numbers for the whole of England. What more can be done to boost exports from the north-west?

Dr Fox: I think that it is in line with our ambitions elsewhere. Businesses themselves were very clear. They wanted us to inform them better, so we have upgraded our great.gov.uk website. They wanted better encouragement from their peers, so we have set up a new online community to ensure that that can be done. They wanted better finance, which is why we have been improving links between UK Export Finance and small and medium-sized companies. They wanted better connectivity, which is why we have now published, in advance on our website, where Ministers will be visiting. That means that companies looking for market access, or indeed getting a deal over a line, can know when Ministers will be visiting and ensure that they are in contact with us.

T7. [906910] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): We have a thriving local economy in Corby and East Northamptonshire, a large share of which is driven by small and medium-sized enterprises. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to help them to export more, particularly to the United States?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend asks two questions, the second of which is about our relationship with the United States. In our working group, we have had specifically dedicated discussions about how we might help SMEs on both sides of the Atlantic to improve that trade. Of course, one of the key elements of that is UK Export Finance. I am very pleased to say that, in a real change from previous practice, last year around 78% of the contracts that UK Export Finance placed were with SMEs. That is a real change that makes a difference to real businesses.

T8. [906911] **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): In 2016, according to Office for National Statistics figures, UK services exported to the EU and

European Free Trade Association countries were worth £105.5 billion. What plans do the Government have to secure EU and EFTA export markets for UK services in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

Dr Fox: That is a very interesting question. Our services exports to the world's most open market—the United States—comprise 65% of our exports. For non-EU countries, the figure is about 50%, and for the EU itself, it is only 38%. In the future, I would like to ensure that our services exporters are given the free access to European markets that they can currently take advantage of outside Europe.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): As the Secretary of State knows, the UK is the largest investor in Tanzania, a proud Commonwealth nation to which I have just been appointed trade envoy. Will he be good enough to outline what Her Majesty's Government will do to strengthen that relationship as we leave the European Union?

George Hollingbery: I welcome my hon. Friend to his post as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Tanzania and wish him luck. As the Prime Minister made clear on the visit on which I joined her at the end of August, partnerships based on mutual interest are key to the UK's offer. The presence of a proactive Department for International Trade and broader prosperity team, and UK Export Finance's risk appetite of £750 million for Tanzania, further show that commitment. We are working with the Department for International Development to align trade and investment policies throughout Africa and the developing world.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): A report from the University of Sussex three days ago identified that a third of UK exporting firms have lost business due to Brexit. How will the export strategy help to secure existing jobs in export?

Dr Fox: As usual, the right hon. Gentleman seems to have overlooked the fact that UK exports rose to a record £429 billion in the 12 months ending in July 2018. We are witnessing a very strong UK export performance, and the Government aim to see that continue by achieving a comprehensive trade agreement with the EU, and taking advantage of market liberalisation and new free trade agreements elsewhere. The Government are committed to that process; I just wish that we had seen more commitment to it from the Opposition this week in Parliament.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Fifty-one per cent. of the north-west's goods exports go to non-EU countries, which is hugely important for Greater Manchester. What discussions has the Mayor of Greater Manchester had with the Department about Greater Manchester's trade strategy as we leave the EU?

Dr Fox: I am happy to have discussions with a range of stakeholders, including the Mayors, local enterprise partnerships and any other parts of government infrastructure. I am happy to have a meeting with the Mayor of Greater Manchester, but I have not yet had a request for a meeting following my letter to him in July 2017. I am perfectly open to making my diary available.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Shared Parental Leave

1. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to promote the take-up of shared parental leave. [906866]

5. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What steps her Department is taking to promote the take-up of shared parental leave. [906870]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): The Minister for Women and Equalities takes her responsibilities to the House very seriously and regrets that she cannot be present this morning because she is attending an important Cabinet meeting on EU exit. If there are any urgent matters, she will of course be available to discuss them with colleagues this afternoon.

Earlier this year, the Government Equalities Office and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy ran an award-winning £1.5 million communications campaign to promote the take-up of shared parental leave. That was supported by revised guidance and case studies, making it easier for parents to understand and access the scheme.

Christine Jardine: The introduction of shared parental leave was a momentous step forward for families and for parents in work, with families no longer being held back by outdated stereotypes. Unfortunately, however, official figures show that only 2% of eligible parents have so far taken up the scheme. Many fathers say that they are worried about taking leave because of a perceived negative effect on their careers. What are the Government doing to encourage cultural change to help men to feel that they can take leave, to encourage companies to do more to bring men's leave pay in line with maternity pay, and to make companies publicise parental leave and pay policies that help to reduce discrimination?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady has hit on the point that this is about not just businesses, but cultural change. That is why we are building the evidence base to understand what works best in encouraging a parent to take up shared parental leave. There are 285,000 parents or couples who can access this scheme across the country, and we encourage them to do so. We are also funding a research programme, which I will disclose more about in response to the first topical question, that will deliver evidence-based tools for employers on what works in closing their gender pay gaps and addressing their employees' parenting responsibilities.

Stuart C. McDonald: No awareness campaign on shared parental leave, however welcome, can lead to a significant increase in uptake while structural issues—the fact that men still, on the whole, earn more than women, for example—are making it really hard for families to make this choice. What will the Government do to follow international best practice and make parental leave more accessible and affordable?

Victoria Atkins: Again, we are conscious that this is not just a matter for businesses; it is about cultural change as well. That is why our evidence-based programme will, we hope, bring real results. We look constantly at what other countries are doing to encourage parents to share their parenting responsibilities while maintaining their place in work, because we know that work helps women through financial independence. We want to do all that we can to help parents to maintain their careers while, of course, bringing up their children in a loving family environment.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Just as women should have equal opportunities to work, men should have equal opportunities to be active parents, but they face many barriers to doing so. Will my hon. Friend assure me that she and the Government will be keeping a close eye on their shared parental leave policy to make sure that it achieves its ends?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who does a great deal of work on gender issues. Before making any changes to shared parental leave and pay schemes, it is important to evaluate the situation, and we will be doing that this year. We will look carefully at what the evidence tells us, and also learn from other countries, before committing to a particular course of action.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Take-up of shared parental leave has been reported to be as low as 2%, and the low rate of shared parental pay is often cited as a reason for that low take-up. Does the Minister agree that if we are serious about tackling the gender pay gap and maternity discrimination, we need to introduce properly paid, stand-alone statutory paternity leave?

Victoria Atkins: As I said, we have to look carefully at the repercussions of any changes to shared parental leave. For example, we want to help self-employed mothers in this space. If they qualify for maternity allowance, they are allowed to share parental leave and pay with an employed father or partner. We are not ruling out providing further support for working parents. We very much agree with the principle of equalising benefits for the self-employed. However, as part of our response to the Taylor review of modern employment practices, it is important that we consider making changes to this area only after careful thought and consideration.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Many colleagues have highlighted their concern about take-up being just over 1% and I must push the Government further. Will the Minister spell out what exactly this Government will do to ensure that taking up the scheme is a real option for parents?

Victoria Atkins: First, I welcome the hon. Lady to her role. I am sure that working with her across the Chamber in the coming months will be a pleasure.

As I said, I am going to make an exciting announcement in response to the first topical question about our detailed programme looking not just at shared parental leave, but at other gender equality issues in the workplace. This Government are committed to leading the world in this space. As part of that, we will evaluate how shared

parental leave is working, and get the message out that someone who is a working parent should ask their employer whether they are able to take shared parental leave.

Universal Credit Roll-out

2. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the roll-out of universal credit on women. [906867]

8. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the roll-out of universal credit on women. [906874]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): Job coaches working with people claiming universal credit treat all people as individuals, whatever their gender, and can provide personalised support to help people into employment and help them make progress at work. Universal credit also provides a safety net of support for those not in work. We have worked hard with partners to support vulnerable customers such as victims of domestic abuse, and Jobcentre Plus has recently launched a campaign to provide additional support for women, including those who are single parents.

Patrick Grady: What is the Minister's message to young mothers such as those supported by Home-Start Glasgow North, whose fantastic tartan tie I am wearing today, if they find that the lack of second earner work allowance in universal credit is a barrier to second earner mothers wanting to enter or re-enter the labour market? Will she raise those concerns with the Department for Work and Pensions and ask that the roll-out of universal credit be halted until those anomalies are sorted out?

Sarah Newton: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his tie. A good friend of mine has volunteered for Home-Start, and I know that it is an extremely valuable organisation. Of course, we want to ensure that any parent, including women who are lone parents, have the opportunity to balance their caring responsibilities with employment. We know that that is really important for women, and that it is important for children to grow up in a home where someone is working. I am always happy to raise any concerns, and perhaps we can have a meeting, but universal credit is working, and it is helping people into work.

David Linden: The Minister mentioned domestic violence. Will she support the amendments to the domestic abuse Bill being brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), which would introduce split payments of universal credit as a default option for survivors of domestic violence?

Sarah Newton: Of course, all of us in the House need to work day and night to do everything we can to prevent the appalling atrocity of domestic abuse and violence in our country. It is everyone's responsibility. In the DWP, we take the support of victims of domestic abuse and violence very seriously, and we are working with Women's Aid, ManKind and a range of other charities to ensure we provide that support.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The Work and Pensions Committee, on which I sit, recently published a report calling on the Government to see whether universal credit can offer more help to victims of domestic abuse. Will the Minister consider our findings?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent contribution to the Select Committee. We are always looking to see what more we can do to support victims of domestic abuse and violence, and we will take very seriously any suggestions from the Committee.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I have to keep up with the propensity of colleagues one moment to bob and then to cease to bob, but Chichester is bobbing again and should be heard—Gillian Keegan.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): Work coaches are critical to the success of the roll-out of universal credit, and the team in Chichester are brilliant, but can my hon. Friend outline what training is available specifically to help work coaches to support women and to spot the underlying issues that victims of domestic violence may be suffering from?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for visiting her jobcentre. I strongly urge all those who are calling for the halting of the roll-out of universal credit to go to their jobcentre and meet the work coaches, to see the excellent work they are doing and the personalised support they are able to offer all their customers. We have worked closely with Women's Aid and ManKind to ensure that it is a mandatory part of every work coach's training to identify potential victims and to help them get the support they need.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The Minister mentioned single parents. As she will be aware, 91% of lone parents are women. Does she agree that the new conditionality requirements for lone parents under universal credit will have a hugely disproportionate impact on women? Will she make representations to the Department for Work and Pensions about that?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I simply do not agree with her. As I said, the relationship that a claimant builds up with their work coach is a personal one, and the support is tailored to that individual. We ensure within universal credit that women or, indeed, men who are bringing up children are able to balance their desire to work with their caring responsibilities. It is not until the youngest child in a family starts school that the job coach begins a conversation about the journey to work. It is not until the youngest child in a family is three that those conversations about getting into work begin to happen.

Gender Pay Gap: Reporting Process

3. **Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the reporting process on the gender pay gap. [906868]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): May I first thank the hon. Lady for her role in introducing gender pay gap reporting? I have good news because it has

emerged that 100% of employers identified as in scope have reported in the first year. I think that may be unprecedented in Government schemes. My thanks, as I say, to the hon. Lady, to everyone in the Government Equalities Office involved in making that happen and of course to the employers. That represents more than 10,000 boards across the country having board-level conversations about closing the gender pay gap, but reporting is just the first step. Employers must also take action to close the gap and we are supporting them in doing that.

Jo Swinson: I thank the Minister for that response. I congratulate her on the—almost suspicious—100% compliance, but I am sure the House will agree that that is good news. It is simply unfair that people earn less because they happen to be women, have brown skin, have a disability or come from a working-class background, yet there is clear evidence of pay gaps for all those characteristics. The gender pay gap reporting has clearly made employers pay attention to inadvertent and structural biases in their pay arrangements, so will the Government consult on extending pay transparency and reporting to tackle those wider injustices?

Victoria Atkins: That is a very good point. We are committed to looking not just at gender, but BAME and issues such as mental health. This reporting is opening up conversations about gender, as I say, but we hope that, as part of that, it will open up conversations about how employers treat their workforce generally and ensure that fairness is extended to everyone regardless, as the hon. Lady says, of gender, how they look and so on. One thing we are keen to do is to ensure that, as part of the reporting, employers put their action plans out there. About 48% of companies are already doing that. We would like them to do more.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is good news and should be celebrated that 100% of eligible businesses have reported on the gender pay gap, but may I press the Minister further? What further steps will she take to see that action flows from the reporting of this gender pay gap?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. We have a packed agenda of meetings with business leaders but also with industry leaders, so that we can trickle down good practice from the largest employers, who obviously have the most resources in terms of HR departments and so on. We want to get the best practice from them and trickle it down so that we help those employers who under the legislation are required to report. My aspiration is also for employers who fall under that threshold to start adopting the same good practice as well.

LGBT Equality

4. Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What steps she is taking to promote LGBT equality in the UK. [906869]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): In July, we launched the Gender Recognition Act 2004 consultation and a 75-point LGBT action plan in response to the findings of the national LGBT survey. The action plan includes a £4.5 million fund to support delivery of these

commitments—ranging from bringing forward proposals to end conversion therapy to appointing a national LGBT health adviser. This work marks a culture change to ensure that LGBT people feel respected at every level of our society.

Dr Johnson: The “Safe to talk to me” initiative pioneered by Dr Mike Farquhar gives badges, such as the one I am wearing, to NHS staff to encourage members of the LGBT community to understand that they can raise such issues in an open and safe environment. Will my hon. Friend welcome that initiative?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she does in the national health service looking after ill children. I am admiring her badge from afar. It looks very colourful. I hope that it will draw exactly the sort of reaction intended—namely, encouraging people who perhaps need extra reassurance that they are welcome and they are safe in the NHS to talk about their needs.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that we need to do more to help our LGBT friends around the world, particularly those who are seeking asylum? Will she therefore condemn the Home Office’s approach at the moment? It is deporting one of my constituents back to Venezuela after he has applied for asylum and married someone here and lived in Britain for three years. The Home Office still says that Venezuela is a safe place for an LGBT person to live. It even recommends that his husband moves back with him.

Victoria Atkins: Of course I am concerned to hear about LGBT people in Venezuela being treated as despicably as the hon. Gentleman has described. If I may, I will take the opportunity to invite him to write to the relevant Minister. I would certainly hope that we can look into the matter in more detail.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Very recently, the Government reduced the waiting time for gay people who want to give blood from 12 months of celibacy to three months, which was welcomed by the LGBT community. Will my hon. Friend update the House on how that progress is going?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his work. I know that he campaigned strongly on this issue, and he adds colour to the House, as I am sure he added colour to that campaign. I regret that I do not have the precise figures to hand, but if I may, I will take the opportunity to write to him, and I would, of course, be happy to discuss the matter with him after this session.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): As you know, Mr Speaker, I entered a civil partnership eight years ago, yet the Government are still consulting on what to do about civil partnerships—there is a threat that you are going to abolish us! *[Interruption.]* Well not you, Mr Speaker, but the Government are threatening that they might abolish civil partnerships. There is joy, there is passion, and not so much celibacy in civil partnerships, so would it not make far more sense to extend them to straight people as well?

Mr Speaker: I enjoyed the hon. Gentleman's civil partnership ceremony which, if memory serves me correctly, took place on 27 March 2010.

Victoria Atkins: Wow, Mr Speaker—a good memory.

Chris Bryant: I am pleased you can remember it—*[Laughter.]*

Victoria Atkins: There are so many ways I could go with this. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on his civil partnership. He will know that my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) is promoting his Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill, and I will have the pleasure of responding to that as the Minister responsible. We are conducting a consultation and carefully considering the Supreme Court judgment because, all joking aside, we know that these issues matter to people and we want to ensure that our country continues to be a place of equality.

Chris Bryant: Just say yes!

Michael Fabricant: Say “I will.”

Victoria Atkins: I never mix business with pleasure, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We are running late, but I am keen to accommodate Back-Bench Members.

Sexual Exploitation: Accommodation

6. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on increasing the number of successful prosecutions of people that offer rent-free accommodation in return for sex. [906871]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): The practice of offering sex for rent is unacceptable. It preys on vulnerable people who are seeking affordable accommodation and was, I believe, the subject of a recent “Inside Out West” programme. Such behaviour is already a criminal offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, and the decision on whether to prosecute and for what offences rests entirely with the Crown Prosecution Service, rather than the Ministry of Justice. My officials have been working, including with the Home Office and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, to raise awareness of the offences available to prosecute such behaviour.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the BBC's “Inside Out West” for its investigation into this despicable practice which, as the Minister pointed out, is illegal, although it continues to target vulnerable women and men. Will the Minister continue to work with me, as we did on upskirting, and consider a code of conduct, or perhaps go even further and consider binding legislation to prevent websites from hosting these adverts?

Edward Argar: The CAP code, which is the independent Advertising Standards Authority's rulebook for non-broadcast advertising, including print and online, does not apply to classified adverts, but it does prohibit ads for illegal products and services. DCMS colleagues are

working to ensure that technology companies meet their responsibilities of preventing their services from being used for criminal activity, and they are further exploring how classified ad websites are used to facilitate crime. I would be delighted, as always, to meet the hon. Lady.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): When someone facilitates accommodation, money, food or services in exchange for sex, it is abuse. It degrades the victims, and unfortunately financially benefits the facilitators. The Government must commit to legislation that punishes those who profit from such abuse.

Edward Argar: It is a pleasure to take a question from the hon. Lady, and she is right to highlight this despicable crime. As I have said, we believe that such practices are already against the law under the 2003 Act, and as I said to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), I am happy to continue looking at what more we can do.

Maternity Discrimination

7. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What recent steps she has taken to tackle maternity discrimination. [906873]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): My hon. Friend asked this question at the previous Women and Equalities questions. I suspect he is keen to know what is happening with the pregnancy and maternity discrimination consultation, which we said would be published over the summer. I would like to reassure him that we intend to publish the consultation shortly.

Nigel Huddleston: It is a pleasure to be the first to congratulate the Minister on her appointment. Recent studies suggest that businesses, in particular small businesses, are not sufficiently aware of maternity discrimination rules. What can we do to increase that awareness?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend raises an extremely good point about this challenge. To be honest, the awareness of the rights and obligations among small businesses and individuals is a challenge. To help to tackle this, ACAS has produced and promoted new guidance on pregnancy and maternity discrimination but, regarding this question, we are also looking at improvements that we can make to gov.uk.

Access to Abortion Services

9. **Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Government are taking to ensure access to abortion services for women that travel to England from Northern Ireland. [906875]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): Since June 2017, women from Northern Ireland have been able to access abortion services in England free of charge. We have also introduced a central booking system to simplify the process and there is support for travel costs where appropriate. The numbers of women from Northern Ireland accessing abortion services in England and Wales has increased as a result: up 25%, to 919 in 2017, which is the highest level since 2011.

Stella Creasy: Recently, the Government announced that they will echo Scotland in giving women the right to take early medical abortion pills at home. In Scotland, however, there is a residency test for this healthcare, which, if copied in England, will deny the 28 women a week who are now coming from Northern Ireland for an abortion in the UK, that choice of procedure. Will the Minister pledge to work with the Department of Health and Social Care to prevent that happening, or will she now listen to the Supreme Court, which said that this was a human rights abuse in the first place? Let us get on and give our Northern Irish sisters the right to access healthcare and abortion at home, just as our sisters around the rest of the UK have.

Victoria Atkins: Department of Health and Social Care Ministers only have the power to approve English homes as a class of place for medical abortion. The definition of what “home” means in this context is not straightforward and will be determined as we take this work forward. DHSC officials are working with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to develop a protocol that will set out criteria for which places should be covered by the term “home”, as well as contradictions for use at home and other relevant issues. We will look at how the schemes are working in Scotland and Wales and learn from their experience. The hon. Lady knows, on the wider point of abortion, that we call upon representatives in Northern Ireland to get their act together and get the Assembly working again, so that Northern Irish people can make their decision on this very important topic.

Employment Opportunities

10. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to promote employment opportunities for (a) men and (b) women in sectors in which they are proportionally under-represented. [906877]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Through the industrial strategy and our response to the Taylor review, the Government’s ambition is to increase the earning power of men and women throughout the UK, and to support the creation of good-quality jobs. Where women are under-represented in sectors of the economy, the Government are actively supporting business-led reviews to increase participation and the representation of women.

Mr Hollobone: Male teachers are massively under-represented in primary schools. What are the Government doing to put that right?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He raises an important point. He clearly recognises the value and benefits that more men entering into primary school teaching can bring. We are committed to developing a diverse teaching workforce and to undertaking a range of activities to achieve that. We convened a roundtable with the sector to discuss equality and diversity, and to drive progress to meet these challenges.

Islamophobia

12. **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to tackle Islamophobia. [906880]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): Let me be clear; the Government deplore hate crime, and we are determined to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to get on in life free from harassment and fear. We are strengthening the cross-Government working group on anti-Muslim hatred. My Department and the Home Office fund Tell MAMA, which is the leading service for recording anti-Muslim incidents and supporting victims.

Sandy Martin: What discussions has the Minister had with social media companies about improving the way in which they take down anti-Muslim and Islamophobic hate crime messages from their platforms?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: it is important that we continue dialogue with social media companies. Across Government, colleagues are already having such discussions with social media companies, and it is important that anything that incites hatred is taken down immediately. I hope that the social media companies are listening.

Topical Questions

T1. [906881] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): The Government are committed to ensuring that the UK is an international leader on gender equality research, so that employers have the tools and knowledge to act on their gender pay gaps. We are investing £3.1 million in research on gender equality in the workplace over the next two years. That includes £2 million in the gender and behavioural insights programme, to help us to understand what works to change employers’ behaviour and improve gender equality in the workplace. In June, we launched the workplace and gender equality research programme—a two-year programme that will invest more than £1 million in new research and deliver evidence-based tools for employers on what works to close their gender pay gaps. That reflects the Government’s strong commitment to ensuring that evidence supports employers and employees.

Jessica Morden: Research from Wales TUC showed that as many as 85% of women who took part in its survey felt that the menopause had adversely affected their working life. Will the Minister press colleagues to consider workplace policies on the menopause, so that women get more support and employers cannot ignore the welfare of women with menopausal symptoms?

Victoria Atkins: One of the advances of this Parliament is that we are beginning to talk about the menopause and its effects more than we did three, four or five years ago, and I think that that is a good thing. I very much take the hon. Lady’s point about encouraging employers to recognise the effects of the menopause as part of

their treatment of employees. That goes to the point that we have been talking about, whether it is the gender pay gap or the treatment of black and ethnic minority employees and others. It is about employers treating their workforce fairly in a way that gets the most out of people's potential and makes them feel valued.

T6. [906886] **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): Mrs Darlington's Jams in Cheshire was set up by Marion Darlington in 1980 from her farmhouse kitchen. It has expanded to produce more than 400,000 jars of jam every year and to export all over the world. What steps are the Government taking to help women who want to follow in Mrs Darlington's entrepreneurial footsteps?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): There are now 1.1 million women-led small and medium-sized businesses in the UK, and I want that number to grow, having been a small business owner before I arrived in this House. It is fantastic to hear about my hon. Friend's constituent, Mrs Darlington, and I am pleased to hear about her success. The Government-supported Start Up Loans company had given loans worth nearly £450 million, nearly 40% of them to women, by March this year. We also have 38 growth hubs across England providing information and support to anyone—that includes women—who wants to start and grow their own business. I wish Mrs Darlington continued success.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): We welcome the fact that upskirting has been made into a specific sexual offence. It cannot be right, therefore, that victims of revenge porn are not afforded the protection of anonymity. The Government's new victim strategy, which was released on Monday, failed to address the lack of protection for victims of image-based sexual abuse. When will the Government close this loophole in law and give all sexual abuse victims the protection that they deserve?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): The hon. Lady has raised this matter with me on previous occasions, and I know that she will welcome what is in the victim strategy. She highlights an important issue. As she will be aware, in terms of tackling the publication of upskirting images and voyeurism online and via social media, the Law Commission is looking, as part of the DCMS-commissioned review into online abuse, into the sharing of intimate and sexual images. I believe that that is the right way for us to proceed with looking at the important issue that she rightly highlights.

Amber Rudd (Hastings and Rye) (Con): The Government have responded today, in a written ministerial statement, to the inquiry that I requested—as the then Minister for Women and Equalities—into whether we needed a national buffer zone system for abortion clinics. They have concluded that we do not. May I ask the Minister what arrangements individual councils or areas will have in the absence of such a system?

Let me add that I welcome the conclusion reached in the written ministerial statement. Now that I am able to travel slightly less conspicuously, I took the opportunity to visit the abortion clinic in the constituency of Ealing

Central and Acton to take a look for myself. I observed that there was no longer any harassment taking place, which I believe continues to reflect the conclusion in the statement.

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question, and, obviously, for her work on this issue.

I asked for the written ministerial statement to be issued in advance so that Members would have an opportunity to question me about it today. Having looked at the evidence, we have discovered that 363 hospitals and clinics in the country offer abortion services, and that in 36 of those locations there have been demonstrations, or protests—however people wish to phrase it. On the basis of that evidence, we have concluded for the moment that we should continue the current scheme of enabling councils to apply for public space protection orders which target their localities, but we will of course keep this matter very much under review, because we want to ensure that people who need to access such services can do so safely.

T2. [906882] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): LGBT youths are significantly over-represented among young people facing homelessness. Will the Government support a shift to mandatory monitoring of gender and sexual orientation by publicly commissioned homelessness services?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this issue. I know about the work that she does alongside the Albert Kennedy Trust, which does fantastic work in supporting young people. We recognise that 24% of homeless young people identify as LGBT. That is a shocking statistic, and one that we cannot ignore in the LGBT action plan or in the rough sleeping strategy that we have just announced. We have committed ourselves to undertaking research, along with the Government Equalities Office, on the nature and scale of the problem. We have also committed ourselves to taking concrete next steps to address LGBT homelessness in the first annual “refresh” of our strategy, which the research will inform.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The arrival of Blake Bridgen on 8 September means that my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) will have the opportunity to engage in shared parental responsibility. Can the Minister assure me that we will continue to promote the “share the joy” campaign, so that other men can benefit from shared parental leave?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so, and I am delighted to hear about my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen). That was news to me, and I am sure that we all share his joy. I look forward to his taking some shared parental leave—if that is permitted under house rules.

T3. [906883] **Fiona Onasanya** (Peterborough) (Lab): My constituent came to the United Kingdom when she was 12, but her immigration status consistently made education, work and benefits inaccessible. She now

faces being deported for being unable to contribute financially to the system. What steps is the Department taking to support black and minority ethnic women who are suffering at the hands of the Government's immigration policy?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady will, I hope, understand that I cannot comment on cases on the Floor of the House, but if I can extend an offer to meet her—or arrange for the relevant Minister to meet her—I will of course do so.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): May I take up a point that was made earlier? During the summer recess, I visited Corby jobcentre and met the very dedicated staff there. They told me unequivocally that universal credit was working locally. Is it not the case that more women are in work, and that universal credit is helping that?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I thank my hon. Friend for taking time out of his summer recess to visit his local jobcentre. If more Members were to do the same, they would see that not only are more women in work, but many more older women are in work—and, indeed, that we have record levels of employment across our country, and wages are beginning to rise. We all want people to have more money in their pockets.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we are running very late. I must ask colleagues to put single-sentence questions, and let us also have very brief replies.

T4. [906884] **Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab):** Midlothian is home to some fantastic, world-leading science and innovation institutes, but my young, female, particularly working class constituents feel that they cannot access them, especially the jobs at the very top. What is the Minister doing to help?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady is right to raise that question. The number of women now accepted on to full-time science, technology, engineering and maths courses has increased by 25% since 2010, but we are working hard to drive that figure up further. In my constituency, for example, BAE, from the private sector, is working with education providers and university technical colleges to drive women and young people into those areas, but the Government need to keep working to close the gap further.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The victims strategy rightly focuses on domestic violence, a scourge of our society. How does the Minister propose to make sure that women are aware of what he is proposing?

Edward Argar: We have, through the media, statements in the House and, I hope, colleagues such as my hon. Friend, done everything we can thus far to make people aware of the strategy, but we will continue to promote it so that everyone is aware of what we are proposing and how it will help them.

T5. [906885] **Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):** It is extremely important that the injustice suffered by the WASPI women is not allowed to slip

off the political agenda, because many women in my constituency are suffering terribly as a result. Will the Minister stand up for women and commit today to urging the Chancellor to put in place transitional arrangements at the autumn Budget?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady will be aware that £1.1 billion of concessions have been made, and it is really important to note that as a result of our reforms, more than 3 million more women will receive £550 a year more by 2030.¹

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Forced marriage is outlawed in this country, but it still happens, and schools do not do enough about it. It does not help either that children can get married at 16 in this country. Will the Minister meet me and Jasvinder Sanghera from Karma Nirvana to discuss this issue?

Victoria Atkins: It was a pleasure to sit in for my hon. Friend's 10-minute rule motion on exactly this point last week, and I would be happy to meet her to discuss the marriage age. Forced marriage is illegal, of course, and the Home Office is doing a great deal of work to spread the message around communities particularly affected by it that it is simply not acceptable in the 21st century.

T7. [906888] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab):** I am pleased to say that the 220,000 member-strong Women's Institute has joined more than 20 other national organisations, 77% of the public and more than 150 MPs across the House to support my private Member's Bill to measure the true levels of UK hunger. Does the Government's continued resistance to my Bill not show their indifference to rising levels of hunger on their watch?

Victoria Atkins: It does not show that at all. The Government have a record of trying to push people into work, because we see work as the best way of tackling hunger and poverty. That is why we are trying to make universal credit taper more easily—so that when people get into work, they keep more of their own money. It is also why we raised the threshold at which people start paying income tax—again so that the lowest paid keep their money rather than paying it to the state. It is also about extending educational opportunities to children so that when children leave our schools they have had a good or outstanding education.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What progress has my hon. Friend made in developing the legislation required to remove caste as a protected characteristic from the Equality Act 2010?

Victoria Atkins: I always look forward to the six-weekly question from my hon. Friend on this matter. The Government completely oppose any discrimination on the basis of a person's origins, including any perceptions of their caste, which is why we issued a public consultation on caste and the Equality Act. It ran for six months and closed in 2017. We responded in July and now propose to ensure there is appropriate legal protection against caste discrimination through reliance on existing case law. In our view, this shows that a statutory remedy

1. [Official Report, 9 October 2018, Vol. 647, c. 2MC.]

against caste discrimination is already available. As for a date, I am afraid he will have to keep pressing me, because, as he will appreciate, machinations are in place.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am pleased that today the previous Home Secretary's review of abortion clinic protests has seen the light of day—and that the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd) is in her place given the last episode of "Bodyguard". However, the conclusions are a bit disappointing as the word "women" does not occur in there once; the review talks about pregnant persons. It seems to say that a disproportionate number of women must be affected before any action takes place. May I suggest that the Minister has a meeting with her boss,

the Home Secretary, me and the Chair of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, because there are other ways of proceeding than the blanket ban that the Government have rejected?

Victoria Atkins: I commend the hon. Lady for all the campaigning and other work she has done to stand up for her constituents and those visiting her constituency for the services provided by the clinic there. I am of course happy to meet her and the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee to discuss this issue further. We will keep it under review. We are particularly interested to see how the public spaces protection order in Ealing is working. We understand from Marie Stopes that it considers it to be working well, but of course we will keep it under review.

ROYAL ASSENT

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

Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018
Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018
Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018.

Point of Order

10.51 am

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At 9.55 this morning, ensuring it was then too late to question the Secretary of State at International Trade questions, his Department released a written statement saying it was concerned about breaches of export controls and the conduct of licence applicants. We have been challenging this Government for many months to tighten export controls in relation to military and dual-use goods in Saudi Arabia, Honduras and the Philippines. Is it not discourteous to this House to deny Members the opportunity to question Ministers on which companies have given rise to concern and which country destinations are suspected of illegitimate use? Have you, Mr Speaker, received any request from Ministers to come to this place and allow a proper discussion of these disturbing matters? There is now a three-week recess and many will feel that what I have referred to as a discourtesy is in fact an outrage.

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is yes, it is discourteous, and it is highly regrettable that Members have not had the opportunity to question Ministers about this important matter. It would have been open to the Government to make an oral statement to the House and it might have been judged seemly for that to have happened, so I share the hon. Gentleman's sense of unease and disappointment, to put it mildly, that we find ourselves in this situation, but unless an oral statement is volunteered there is no immediate remedy. Knowing the hon. Gentleman as I do—he and I came into the House together 21 years ago—I know that he is nothing if not persistent, and he will seek to use the Order Paper and the opportunities presented in the House upon our return fully to probe the Government on this subject. I am sorry that that will have to wait for some time, but his opportunity will come if he is patient.

Bedford Prison

10.53 am

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on the Government's plans for HMP Bedford.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): May I begin by paying tribute to the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this urgent question? We spoke briefly on the telephone yesterday. I know that he is a champion of the interests of the people of Bedford and Bedford prison, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to discuss this in more detail.

I begin by setting the broader context of what is happening at Bedford prison and will then talk more specifically about what we need to do to resolve the serious issues in Bedford prison.

A number of local prisons with significant challenges have come before the House in the past six months, of which Bedford is the latest. I want to clarify a number of things before I focus specifically on the issues at Bedford. The first is that some of these issues are fundamental to any prison. Prisons are challenging places to run at the best of times. By definition, the people inside a prison do not want to be there, and we are now facing a cohort of people in prison who have multiple needs. Nearly half the people in prison have a reading age of under 11, and nearly 30% have a reading age of under six. Very large numbers are coming to prison directly out of care at the moment, and only 18% of people coming into prison had a job beforehand.

There is also a rising tide of violence in prisons. I am pleased that Royal Assent has today been given to the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). The Bill clarifies that this is not just an issue in prisons. Assaults against police officers have risen to an all-time high, and assaults on ambulance workers have risen to a very disturbing level. It would have been almost inconceivable 30 years ago for someone to get into an ambulance and assault the paramedic who was trying to treat them. It was almost unheard of 30 years ago for prisoners to assault prison officers, yet last year there were more than 9,000 such assaults.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, in relation to Bedford prison, I will return the question of how we address violence in prisons and how the new legislation brought in by the hon. Member for Rhondda, which we on this side of the House are proud to support, will help to address some of the issues.

The second thing I want to put on record is that although there are many challenges in prisons, there have been improvements. It is worth remembering in this difficult atmosphere that some things are getting better. The situation relating to escapes and security is much better than at any time in the past. Similarly, while any suicide is a tragedy, because of our understanding of the drivers of suicide and the evidence that we gather, the measures that we are taking are beginning to work. The suicide rate is now considerably lower than it was a year ago, two years ago or indeed in the historical past, because we are beginning to address that issue. We also have a much better idea about how to deal with some of the underlying issues around reoffending. Our

first night reception centres are much stronger, as are the family links that we are able to promote. More prisoners are now actively in work or education than before, and the education strategy ensures that the education they receive is much more relevant to the workplace.

Nevertheless, as the hon. Member for Bedford and the chief inspector have pointed out, there are three very significant challenges in Bedford. The first is a big problem around decency and conditions in Bedford. The second is a problem around drugs in Bedford. The third is a problem around violence, particularly assaults against prison officers in Bedford. How do we deal with this? Bearing in mind that there are underlying problems in all local prisons and that the problems we are talking about—decency, drugs and violence—are familiar from inspections in other places, what is it that gives me some hope that we can turn this around? Do we have a plan to turn this around?

The answer is that there are prisons out there in the country—local prisons with similar problems to Bedford—that are already showing that we can tackle these issues. Hull is a good example, as is Preston. There has also been a significant improvement in tackling exactly these kinds of issues in Leeds over the past three months. In Bedford, we put the prison into special measures some months ago, and we are now beginning to see some key improvements. We are seeing improvements in the physical infrastructure, more investment is going into windows, the mental health provision is better than it was, areas such as the showers and the segregation unit are better than they were, and we are now bringing in a more experienced management team.

However, that still leaves those three fundamental problems to be dealt with. How do we deal with them? Addressing the issue of drugs is first a question of technology. We have done a lot to understand the criminal networks through gathering intelligence on how the drugs are getting in, but there is much more we can do to get the right scanners in place to investigate the drugs being carried in people's bodies, and to spend money on the scanners to investigate drugs being put in the post that is getting into the prison.

Decency is fundamentally a question of spending money, which is why we are putting an extra £40 million into addressing basic issues, such as windows. That is not just about producing decent living conditions for prisoners—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is always a pleasure to listen to the mellifluous tones of the Minister of State. I simply advise him that, in delivering his disquisition thus far, he has exceeded his allotted time by only 100%, so I hope that the hon. Gentleman is approaching his peroration.

Rory Stewart: My apologies for taking up so much of the House's time on this issue. To return in my final minute to the serious issues that we are dealing with today, this is about decency, drugs and violence. Dealing with violence fundamentally has to be about having the right training and support for the prison officers on the landing. They need the right legitimate authority to challenge acts of violence. They need training and equipment—body-worn cameras and CCTV—to do that. They need the law that has been introduced by the hon. Member for Rhondda. Above all, however, prison officers

need management support, standing with them day in, day out, to challenge the acts of violence, to take the action to punish them and to do so in a calm, legitimate fashion. Only by restoring order and control will we be able to address the many other issues, including education, rehabilitation, decency and drugs, that we need to deal with to protect the public.

Mohammad Yasin: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I thank the Minister for his phone call yesterday and his answer today. I have been raising concerns with his Government about levels of violence in HMP Bedford since my election. In May, it was placed in special measures, and officers fear serious assault every day. The situation is getting worse, not better. Will the Minister explain what the Government are doing differently this time to resolve the systemic failures at the prison?

Bedford prison is designed to hold 300 men, but at the last count it was holding more than 420. How can any prison operate safely with such overcrowding? Will the Government take urgent steps to reduce pressure on the system? The prison building itself is not fit for purpose, and I have been to see it for myself. The cells are cramped, I could smell drugs, and the building is very old. How can we expect to rehabilitate serial offenders if we cannot provide them with even basic facilities and dignity? The consequences of not getting things right are far reaching for society.

The people who live around Bedford prison are affected, and our emergency services are frequently tied up on long call-outs. Reoffending levels are high. Prison officers fear for their lives at work and are leaving the profession in droves. The Minister told us that he is putting in new managers, but how will that solve the recruitment and retention crisis among frontline prison officers? Will the Minister commit to an action plan that will make Bedford prison safe, bring in experienced officers, vastly improve facilities and properly invest our penal system before we have another riot on our hands?

Rory Stewart: Bearing in mind your warning, Mr Speaker, I will try to deal with those four quite different questions briefly, but they are serious questions that are worth spending a little time on. The question about numbers is a good one. During the previous Labour Government, the number of people in prison rose from about 40,000 to nearly 80,000—the prison population nearly doubled—so we inherited a prison estate with an enormous number of prisoners. That involves a serious conversation right across the House about the number of people we wish to put in prison, and that goes beyond this question about Bedford. However, we will undertake to look carefully at the population of Bedford prison and at the ratio between prison officers and prisoners, and we will come back within 28 days to the chief inspector of prisons with an answer laying out a plan.

The second question is on the building at Bedford, which of course dates from the early 1800s, as the hon. Gentleman said. Although we have a new wing in place, a lot of the physical infrastructure is very difficult, which is unfortunately true not only of Bedford. A third of the current prison estate was built before 1900—these are Victorian prisons—which is why we will be spending the money to create 10,000 new prison places with modern accommodation. There is a very clear relationship

between old buildings and this type of problem, and only new investment and new builds will solve it.

On recruitment and retention, Bedford has, as the hon. Gentleman knows, quite a challenging job market. Wages have been rising, employment figures are quite high and Bedford is relatively close to the commuter belt, which means we have had some struggle recruiting and retaining.

We now have 3,500 more prison officers in place than we had in 2015. We need to invest more in training them, and we need to invest more in making sure they stay.

The hon. Gentleman's final point returns to the question of violence. We do not want to fool the House. Turning around violence in prisons like Bedford will be a long, hard road, and that violence has deep roots. Part of this is about historical staffing numbers, and a lot of it is about new attitudes in society—the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill, tabled by the hon. Member for Rhondda, addresses the assaults—and a lot of it is about new types of drugs.

There is no magic wand, but investing in making sure that we reduce the number of drugs coming in, making sure we have decent living conditions and, above all, building up experienced staff with the right management to challenge that violence on the landings day in and day out, hour in and hour out, is the only way that we will make these prisons safer.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): This report is particularly damning, and it is the fourth such report in recent times. It talks of men who are locked up for 23 hours a day without food or lavatory paper.

I accept that the Minister is doing his level best to sort out the situation, and I wholeheartedly support his reforms, including those to increase the number of prison officers and to work hard on rehabilitation, but if we are to continue incarcerating this number of people, we simply have to ask the Treasury for more money so that we can do it safely. Does he agree?

Rory Stewart: We are definitely putting in more investment, and we need to put in more investment. That is why we are spending £40 million on additional improvements in the existing infrastructure, and that is why we will spend well over £1 billion on building new prisons, but the urgent problem we face will not be addressed overnight by new prisons. These prisons will take serious time to build, and the problem will have to be addressed on the landings and outside the cells by legislative measures such as the Bill tabled by the hon. Member for Rhondda, by body-worn cameras, by CCTV, by training and, above all, by management and support for staff.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The chief inspector of prisons has spoken of the continual and unchecked decline in standards at the prison over the past nine years. He also said that, at times, it felt like the prisoners were in control. This is the prison with the highest rate of assaults in the country. Some 77% of prison officers at HMP Bedford have less than one year's service.

That is the reality, so I am disappointed that, in his seven minutes, the Minister said a lot but avoided the specific question at hand on HMP Bedford. I thank my

[Richard Burgon]

hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for his tireless work on exposing the failings at the prison. As we have heard, this is the fourth jail in just 12 months to be issued an urgent notification. Formally, the Minister has to publish a plan of action for the prison within 28 days, but we need answers today.

The Government's recent solution to the widespread failure at HMP Birmingham was to increase prison staff and reduce prisoner numbers there. Will the Minister commit today to a similar increase in staff and reduction in prisoner numbers at Bedford? There was a riot at Bedford in November 2016. What have the Government done since to improve the situation, bearing in mind what the chief inspector of prisons has said?

Whose fault is it that in the latest annual performance figures, HMP Bedford is still labelled as a prison of serious concern? It remains one of the most overcrowded prisons in the country—40% over capacity. What has the Minister done, and what have the Government done, to tackle overcrowding there since the 2016 riot?

More widely, what plans do the Government have to end overcrowding across the prison estate, given that over half of prisons are overcrowded? The proportion, by the way—people on the Government Benches will not like to hear this—is even higher in private prisons. Finally, if more staff and fewer prisoners was the answer to HMP Birmingham's problems, will the Minister commit today to an emergency plan, with new Treasury funds, to end overcrowding and end understaffing across the prison estate?

Rory Stewart: Essentially, the hon. Gentleman posed three questions. The first is whether we recognised the problems in Bedford following the 2016 riot. We certainly did. The riot in 2016 was very disturbing, and since then we put the prison into special measures. So we absolutely agree with the criticisms made by the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), and by the shadow Secretary of State, and indeed by the inspector. That is why we put Bedford prison into special measures; that is why we anticipated this inspection report.

The second question was, how many of these urgent notifications are coming? Fundamentally, as I laid out at the beginning of my speech, this is a problem that exists in many of our local prisons. It is not an issue that specifically exists in cat D prisons, or in the high security estate, or particularly in the female estate. This is an issue in prisons such as Bedford, Exeter, Nottingham and Liverpool, and, as we discovered, Birmingham.

What is the solution? The shadow Secretary of State asks whether the question is a private/public question. It is not an ideological question. Two of the best local prisons currently in the country, Forest Bank and Thameside, are private prisons. Bedford is, of course, a public prison. He asked whether we would look at the ratio between prison officers and prisoners, and rightly pointed out that in Birmingham, as in other prisons, when we face these kinds of problems, often we temporarily reduce prisoner numbers and bring in additional prison officers. I can undertake that that is something we will be examining during the 28 days we have; we will prepare a plan and come forward with an answer for the chief inspector. It is a very reasonable proposal, and it is one we will consider very carefully.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): During my all-too-brief time working with my hon. Friend, he clearly recognised and was up-front about the real difficulties in the prison estate. Will he take the opportunity to tell the House the ambition he has for improvement, specifically work to be done in the 10 target jails, such as Hull, Nottingham—also under urgent notification—and Wormwood Scrubs?

Rory Stewart: We have chosen 10 of our most challenged local prisons in order to prove that we can turn them around. One of the problems over the last few years is that we are developing a situation in which people are beginning to feel that there is no solution to these prisons. I believe very strongly that these prisons can be turned around. That is why I have said repeatedly that if I do not succeed in turning round the 10 prisons for this pilot, I will resign. Why is it that I am confident that we can turn these 10 prisons around? Because the fundamental problems in these prisons are relatively straightforward. They are problems of decency, they are problems of drugs, they are problems of support and management on the wings. I believe that we have demonstrated in the best of our local prisons that with the right support and the right investment we can do that, and that is what we propose to do in those 10 local prisons, and what I would expect the House to judge me on doing over the next 12 months.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What we see today, yet again, is the horrendous impact of austerity cuts on the state of prisons. Prison staffing levels are down by almost one third since 2010, and that contrasts, by the way, with a 14% increase in Scotland over the same period. So we join the calls for significant new resources for new prison officers, for increased staff retention and for equipment and training in the forthcoming Budget.

Specifically on overcrowding, the prisons Minister has spoken about keeping a close watch on how the presumption against short sentences is working in Scotland, but surely he must see that placing people for a few months in institutions like Bedford or Birmingham is utterly counter-productive. He has explained exactly the complex needs that prisons just cannot address, particularly in a short period of time. So instead of watching, surely the time is now for acting on short sentences.

Rory Stewart: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting question. Connected to the question of crowding in prisons is the question of how many people are sentenced. The two are clearly related. The Scottish Government have led on the question that the hon. Gentleman now raises: what is the point of sending someone to prison with a three-month sentence? What does that achieve? In effect, it means that somebody is in prison for less than six weeks. Is that really a length of time that allows them to take any kind of punishment and that will deter anybody? Above all, is it enough time to rehabilitate someone—to really turn their life around so that they do not reoffend? The evidence suggests that very short sentences are in fact likely to lead to more reoffending than a community sentence. It is an issue that we need to look at very carefully.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In May 2016, the inspectorate of prisons rated Bedford as “not sufficiently good” on the four healthy prison tests. Since then, there has been a prison improvement plan, the prison has

been put into special measures, and there has been a comprehensive action plan, yet when the inspectorate went back this September, Bedford's rating on three of those healthy prison tests fell to 1, or "poor", while its rating for resettlement remained at "not sufficiently good". Am I wrong to say that that seems to suggest that the people running Bedford prison are simply not up to the job?

Rory Stewart: The question is absolutely right. In 2016, when the previous inspection report was published, Bedford prison was already in trouble. It then got significantly worse. There was a riot at the end of 2016, and it is extremely difficult to recover from a riot. When a riot happens in a prison, it takes a long time for that prison to stabilise again. We put the prison into special measures, and that is a long, hard road. I have talked about some of the improvements that we have made to mental health provision and some of the support around key workers. We have now increased staffing numbers dramatically compared with where we were in 2016, and we are bringing in a new management team, but it takes time to turn around deep-rooted problems of this sort. I believe that the green shoots are there, but sadly we are not going to see them overnight. That is why I am determined that we put in more investment now.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It is a very long time since I was the shadow prisons Minister and visited a lot of prisons, including Bedford, but is it not a fact that we cannot make excuses? When a prison is in a situation like the one Bedford is in, there is something wrong with the prison's culture, and if there is something wrong with the culture, it is to do with the quality of the management. Should we not look into that? When I was Chair of the Education Select Committee, we visited prisons and looked at prison education, and we learned a lot by going to Scandinavia, where they have similar challenges but handle them better.

Rory Stewart: That is absolutely correct. First, it is a fact that there are some very, very good, very dedicated prison officers who are doing a very good job, and it is worth paying tribute to them.

One challenge that we face is that we have a lot of new prison officers, partly because we have been doing a recruitment drive—we have 3,500 more officers than we had two and a half years ago. A lot of these people have not developed the five or 10 years' experience on the wings that are really needed to learn how to exercise legitimate authority. What can we do about that? We can improve the training courses, with a particular focus on violence before the officers arrive in the prisons; we need much more mentoring, with experienced officers alongside new officers; and we need to make sure that people own the wings again—that a particular designated officer is responsible for a particular wing. In the end, though, it is absolutely right that in some prisons—unfortunately, this is the case in Bedford—with some of the less experienced staff, they are backing off the prisoners. They do not have the confidence, experience and training. That is what we need to build up to get the right form of legitimate authority.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): In general, the use of body cameras by police forces has produced very positive results. Will my hon. Friend update the House on what progress is being made in rolling them out across the prison estate?

Rory Stewart: The Prison Officers Association confirms our view, which is that body-worn cameras have made a real difference. One of the things that we need to do is make sure that when people are issued with them, they use them. Being able to record an assault on a body-worn camera allows the evidence to be gathered and the prosecution to happen, and it makes it less likely that a person is assaulted. That is also true of our investment in CCTV and it is true of the pilots that we have done with PAVA—pelargonic acid vanillylamide—spray. Also related is the private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), which received Royal Assent today and will double the maximum sentence for assaults on prison officers. We cannot tolerate assaults on prison officers, because we should protect them when they protect us.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): In answer to a question from the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), the Minister set out all of the problems associated with short-term prison sentences but did not go on to say what the Government were going to do about tackling the issue. May I now encourage him to do so in relation not only to that issue, but to community sentencing as an alternative to the overcrowding that we now see?

Rory Stewart: Something as serious as changing our entire sentencing policy would require primary legislation and a lot of discussion in the House. What we are beginning to air here though is that we hear very clearly what the right hon. Gentleman is saying and what has been done in Scotland. We are looking at the matter very closely. I will be up in Scotland again talking with members of the criminal justice fraternity there to learn from these lessons. What actions we take and how English law differs from Scottish law will be the key in this.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It would be almost unthinkable for us to look at delivering any other public service using facilities that are, in so many cases, from the Victorian era. Will the Minister update the House on what plans there are to look at moving away from having a prison system that is still rooted in the Victorian era as HMP Bedford is?

Rory Stewart: Victorian prisons can be unbelievably unsuitable. They can be unsanitary, incredibly noisy and very disturbing for people in them. We have problems that come simply from living in unsanitary conditions. What we are doing about that is to create 10,000 new prison places, with a new design of prison, better accommodation and more secure facilities. We will start with prisons at Wellingborough and Glen Parva, which will be the first two of six new prisons that we will be building to provide 10,000 additional places.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Minister said in his opening remarks that more prisoners were in work programmes than ever before, but the letter to the Secretary of State from the Chief Inspector of Prisons stated that HMP Bedford

"lacked a culture of work or learning."

Classes and workshops had only a handful of attendees, and nearly 40% of prisoners were found to be locked up during the working day. Those who were unlocked were found to be doing nothing constructive, and Ofsted

[Ellie Reeves]

rated the provision of activities inadequate. What urgent steps will the Minister take to reform rehabilitation in our prisons so that prisoners are engaged in meaningful activity and reoffending rates are tackled?

Rory Stewart: The hon. Lady has put her finger on the issue here. These things are all connected. The reason why people do not get into education or work in Bedford is directly connected with the drugs and the violence. Unless we can create a calm, orderly, stable environment where prison officers and prisoners feel safe, all the other stuff that we want to do around rehabilitation simply is not possible. People end up being locked up for too many hours in their cells. They are not moved safely to the classrooms. The teachers do not feel safe and we cannot deliver the educational provision. That is why we have to start with the basics. It begins with addressing decency, drugs and violence and the other stuff then must follow on.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): With reoffending costing society £15 billion, does the Minister agree that the debate should be about the modern prison estate and whether its purpose should be to rehabilitate, train and reduce those reoffending rates?

Rory Stewart: That is absolutely true. The big change in prisons over the past 20 years—and this has been a cross-party change brought about by Labour, Conservative and coalition Governments—is a huge shift towards a focus on rehabilitation. Above all, the purpose of prison needs to be about ensuring that when somebody leaves prison, they are much less likely to reoffend, otherwise, as my hon. Friend has pointed out, we see reoffending costs of £15 billion. More than that, it is the daily—day in, day out—misery that is inflicted on the public and indeed on the individuals themselves by being caught in a cycle of violence and crime.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is one thing to change the law—I am very grateful for the Minister's help in achieving that today—but quite another to ensure that the law is implemented. If we really are to protect not only other emergency workers, but, in particular, prison officers, do we not need to make sure that the police and the prosecuting authorities take this new law seriously? Is there anything that we can do on a cross-party basis to make sure that that happens?

Rory Stewart: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. A lot of focus to date has been on assaults on police officers, and it is unacceptable that members of the public are spitting at police officers. Nevertheless, prosecutions have been brought for spitting at police officers, but that is almost unheard of in the case of prison officers. Sadly, in many prisons, a culture has emerged of people almost taking that for granted and it does not seem to me that enough priority is given to investigating assaults and other crimes in prison. The police, who are under a lot of pressure with many other things to do, must be encouraged to get into the prisons, gather the evidence and work with the Crown Prosecution Service to prosecute people who assault prison officers. If that does not happen, we will never get the calm, orderly environment that we require.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): HMP Gartree is in my constituency and HMP Glen Parva is just outside it. Those who work there are good people doing a difficult job on our behalf. What more can the Minister do to drive down violence against staff and get the menace of drugs out of prisons?

Rory Stewart: Drugs can get into prison only by being flown, thrown, dragged or carried there. A secure environment with the right standards, the right checks on mail and the right bars and grilles should therefore be able to reduce significantly the number of drugs that get into a prison.

On protecting and supporting prison officers, we owe them the trials around pepper spray, the body cameras and the CCTV cameras, but above all, the staffing numbers to get the key worker schemes in place so that they can develop the relationships with individual prisoners. Prison officers also need support from their managers, particularly band 4 and band 5 managers, day in, day out, to ensure that if they are assaulted, we respond calmly and professionally and bring back order and control.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): This is the fourth prison in the urgent notification process. In the past, the response has tended to involve three things: change the leaders, put more staff in, reduce the number of prisoners. All those are sensible, but they have an impact on the rest of the estate: there are only so many leaders, new staff and places to which to move prisoners. How many more times can the Minister respond in that way before it has an impact on the whole Prison Service?

Rory Stewart: That is a very good question and challenge. This is about prioritisation. As I said, many local prisons suffer from significant problems and we currently have more than a dozen in special measures. It is no coincidence that the prisons that we put in special measures are likely to be those that go on to receive an urgent notification from the inspectors. We and the inspectors absolutely agree on where those problems are—we can see them. The issue is to which of those prisons we prioritise resources. Those moves—reducing the number of prisoners, bringing in extra staff and getting extra support—are absolutely necessary, but we need to target them at the places where the need is greatest.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Does the Minister agree that we must continue to punish those who commit the most serious crimes by removing their liberty, but that prisons must be places of safety and reform?

Rory Stewart: My hon. Friend has put his finger on the key question. Prison serves three fundamental purposes and we need to keep them all simultaneously. People must be punished for committing crimes. As a society, a civilisation and a nation, we must indicate that crime is unacceptable and deserves punishment. Secondly, people must be deterred from committing crime, and seeing a serious sentence imposed is an important part of changing behaviour. However, thirdly and fundamentally, people who come into prison must have their lives changed. That is fundamental for them, the prison officers who look after them and ultimately the public, whose safety and security depend on changing the lives of offenders and preventing them from offending again.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Like all hon. Members, I was pleased to hear this morning that Royal Assent had been given to the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). That has moved the debate forward significantly, and I note with interest the steps that the Minister set out for what more can be done. Does he believe that there are any examples from around the world that we could learn from?

Rory Stewart: We can always learn from examples around the world. We have discussed some of the lessons we can learn from Scotland. There are certainly lessons we can learn from Scandinavia. Indeed, there are even some lessons—this will surprise the House—that we can learn from the United States.

Fundamentally, our emergency workers are the most courageous examples of our society. They run into fires; they run into people who are shooting them; they literally save our lives as ambulance workers and other professionals. They must not be assaulted. That is why it is absolutely welcome that today Royal Assent has been given to a Bill that says that anybody who assaults an emergency worker will immediately receive a much tougher sentence. They protect us; we should protect them.

Scallop Fishing: Bay of Seine

11.30 am

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I wish to take this opportunity to update the House on recent developments regarding the scallop fishery in the Bay of Seine following altercations that occurred on 27 August. Any violence taking place is unacceptable, and the safety of our fishing fleet is paramount. Subsequent negotiations to resolve the dispute have regrettably not resulted in an agreement.

The scallop fishery is not governed by the quota regime that pertains for most fin-fish species, but instead by the western waters regime, which places limitations on effort for larger vessels over 15 metres. Vessels over 15 metres in size are limited by the number of kilowatt-days they spend at sea, and these units of effort are tradeable between producer organisations in much the same way as quota. Vessels of under 15 metres in length are not subject to the western waters regime and do not require an effort allocation.

The background to the current dispute is that French domestic law requires that French vessels cannot trawl scallops between 15 May and 31 October, at the latest, partly to protect the species during their seeding season and partly to maximise the scallops' economic value. Preserving the sustainability of our stocks is important, and between May and June, UK fishermen refrain from fishing in the area to avoid the scallop gestation period. Those domestic French rules do not apply to other EU member states.

The French have recognised the UK industry's legal right to fish in the Bay of Seine. UK fishermen have a smaller allocation of scallop fishing effort under the western waters regime due to historical allocation methodologies, with UK fishermen allocated 3.3 million kilowatt-days and French fishermen allocated 7.4 million kilowatt-days. As a result, since 2013, the fishery in the Bay of Seine has been subject to an industry agreement. The UK 15 metre and over scallop fishing industry has agreed to voluntarily observe this non-trawling season in the English channel, including the Bay of Seine, in exchange for more fishing effort from France. The agreement has never applied to the under-15 metre fleet since it does not benefit from the inward transfer of effort.

The agreement that had been in place for five years broke down this year because the French industry insisted that the under-15 metre fleet be included in the voluntary agreement. The UK industry was unable to carry the under-15 metre fleet regarding such an agreement, since that fleet would receive nothing in return. As a result, no agreement was reached in 2018.

On 27 August, there were altercations between UK and French scallop fishers in the Bay of Seine. Some 35 French boats confronted a smaller number of UK vessels, with reports of rocks and smoke bombs being hurled at UK mariners. The incidents of 27 August occurred as a result of the French industry's continued frustration at not being able to fish in the Bay of Seine while UK vessels were able to do so, following the failure to reach a voluntary agreement. It must be stressed that the UK vessels were not contravening any French or EU law by fishing in those waters at that time. The UK vessels were operating in an area where

[George Eustice]

they were legally entitled to fish. The area is outside French territorial waters—that is, beyond 12 nautical miles.

Under the common fisheries policy, the vessels of EU member states have the right to fish in each other's exclusive economic zones—the waters between 12 and 200 nautical miles offshore. It is then the responsibility of each country to control the activities taking place in its waters. We therefore look to the French authorities to protect our fishermen and their vessels if they choose to fish legally in French waters.

Our analysis of vessel monitoring information from 27 August showed that there were 16 vessels in the area from England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Since the incidents took place, UK vessels have voluntarily chosen to stay away from the Bay of Seine while discussions to resolve the issue are ongoing. Vessels have tended instead to fish in grounds to the east. The Fishery Protection Squadron has been kept informed of developments. Fisheries protection vessel HMS Mersey has been in the waters off the south coast since the incident took place. Fisheries protection vessels operate within UK waters—that is, the area out to 200 nautical miles from the shore, or the median line. The vessels are unable to enter the waters of another country without invitation, except in very limited circumstances: the protection of life at sea in the event of there being a threat to life; or through the right of innocent passage to enable vessels to transit through an area without interference. As the Bay of Seine is in the French exclusive economic zone, the enforcement and safety of vessels in those waters is the responsibility of the French authorities.

The UK Government have been proactive in supporting the industry to try to secure an acceptable solution for both sides. Immediately after the incidents on 27 August, my officials convened a meeting in London. UK and French officials and UK and French industry representatives met in London on 5 September. There was initial success in the talks. It was decided to renew the previous agreement involving the UK 15 metre and over vessels, as long as the under-15 metre fleet could also be brought into a deal. That was agreed in principle, subject to further discussion about a reasonable compensation package. The agreement was that there could be an inward transfer of quota for other species from the French industry to the UK industry, which could then be leased to create financial compensation for the scallop vessels affected.

The details of that package were discussed, again between UK and French officials and the UK and French industries, in Paris on 7 September. Progress was made on the dates that the fishery could be open. However, the compensation sought by the UK industry for loss of earnings during the period that it was unable to fish in the Bay of Seine was significantly different from the proposal made by the French industry.

Minister Travert and I discussed the progress of the negotiations twice, including on the evening of 7 September. Since our call, UK and French officials have shared their analysis this week and held discussions on Tuesday. There was greater understanding of the UK's evidence. However, the offer made by the French industry remained unchanged from that discussed in Paris on Friday. The

UK industry does not believe that the compensation package proposed by the French fishing industry provides sufficient recompense for its projected loss of earnings and has rejected it on that basis. The French industry is currently unwilling to accept an offer to put back in place the agreement that has applied to the over-15 metre fleet for a number of years. As a result, the talks have broken down and there remains no agreement at all.

I have written today to Minister Stéphane Travert to express my disappointment at not reaching an agreement. The UK Government have offered to assist French enforcement authorities with Marine Management Organisation personnel should they want to consider joint operations, given the risk of further altercations. I have also asked the French Government to consider the alternative options available to them. First, it seems to me that putting back in place the agreement for the over-15 metre fleet, which has stood the test of time over the last five years, would be preferable to no agreement at all, and I hope that the French industry will reconsider its position. Secondly, it is open to the French Government to lift the domestic restrictions they have in place earlier than they normally would in order to address concerns that their industry has expressed about the lack of a level playing field.

The UK industry is legally allowed to fish in the Bay of Seine. It has shown commendable restraint during the negotiations, and I welcome its co-operation and understanding. It is for the industry to decide where it fishes, as long as that is done legally. In my letter to Minister Travert, I emphasised the absolute need for safety to remain paramount. I hope that a mutually beneficial outcome might still be agreed between the two industries but, in the meantime, we stand ready to offer what assistance the French Government may wish to consider.

11.39 am

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement but, before I move on, may I say that I was very disappointed not to receive the statement until 15 minutes after I had arrived in the Chamber? This is a really important matter and the Opposition should be able to expect to receive information in a timely manner. I am sure that there has been a mix-up, but I would like assurances that I will receive information appropriately in the future.

Fishing is essential for coastal communities, and scallop fishing is an important part of that industry. About 60% of the catch is exported, with much of it being bought in France. During the negotiations with France, we know that the smaller boats volunteered in good faith to stay away from the disputed fishing grounds. However, every day that British boats are unable to go fishing, livelihoods and communities are hurt.

We all know that the French navy should have stopped this appalling violence. Now that the negotiations have broken down, what assurances have the French authorities given to make sure that this cannot happen again? We have heard that the Government are looking to the French authorities to protect our fishermen and their vessels, which are fishing quite legally within French waters. Will the Minister clarify what discussions he has had with the French Government to ensure that any future protests do not descend into violence? As we have heard, the UK vessels were not contravening any

French or EU law at the time. Will the Minister clarify what progress is being made on compensation for British fishers who have suffered damage to their boats and now face restrictions being imposed on them?

As we await the publication of the fisheries Bill, the industry looks to the Government for some backbone, and to the Minister to fight for them, their livelihoods and their communities. This matters because fishing matters and fishing jobs matter—not just to the coastal communities that rely on fishing and the processing of the catch for employment, but because this tells us a story about how Ministers will stand up for the industry during and after Brexit.

Outside the CFP, we will rely on the same Ministers who have failed to find their voice over the scallop wars to seal an annual deal with the EU over quotas, science and access to waters. Just this week we have seen a damning report by the National Audit Office on the lack of Brexit preparedness in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Serious concerns were raised about marine control and enforcement. Will the Minister outline what urgent measures he is taking to address the concerns outlined in this week's NAO report?

These conflicts over scallops raise serious questions about the approach that Ministers will take to manage conflicts and access to waters after Brexit. Ministers need to know that we in the Opposition will be following this closely. Should their defence of our fishing industry not be up to scratch, we will be holding them to account.

Our fishermen need defending. The French tested our lines over the scallop wars and now believe that they can get away with it. Our fishermen deserve better, and the Government need to step up.

George Eustice: I am sorry that the shadow Minister feels she did not receive a copy of the statement in a timely fashion. I can say that we got the statement to her as quickly as we could. I understand that it was sent to her by email at about 11 o'clock, with hard copies then brought to the House. I appreciate that she may have thought that proceedings on the statement were going to start slightly earlier, but if she feels that she did not receive it in time, I am sorry to hear that.

The hon. Lady asks for an update on what assurances we have sought from the French authorities. I can confirm that, immediately after the altercation on 27 August, I spoke to my opposite number, Minister Stéphane Travert, and the principal issue we discussed was enforcement. He gave a very clear undertaking at that point that he recognised that UK vessels were fishing legally, and he said that he had increased resourcing to ensure that the gendarmerie were able to deal with future issues by increasing the number in that particular area. I sought a similar assurance on the second occasion we spoke after the negotiations last Friday, and I have reiterated the importance of this in the letter that I have sent to him today.

We have made it clear that we stand ready to assist the French authorities if they wish. It is not unknown or unusual for officers from the Marine Management Organisation, for instance, to carry out joint work on board French vessels, and there are instances where such work is appropriate. The French authorities have not currently taken up that offer but, as I made clear in my statement, it remains on the table.

The hon. Lady asked about compensation, and we have been working hard to get an agreement. From the beginning, we have been consistently clear with the French Government that we have no legal basis to instruct or tell our fishing industry not to fish in that area, and neither have we ever done so. We were also clear with our fishing industry that we would not have told people not to fish in those areas, but the industry itself voluntarily chose not to fish there during the period of negotiation. That rightly recognised that, because negotiations were ongoing, it would be helpful to avoid further altercation. The industry took that choice, but now that talks have broken down, we must ensure that the French authorities enforce the industry's right to fish in those waters.

The hon. Lady asked about our defence of fishing interests, and I say simply that I have done this job for five years and have a good rapport with our industry representatives. We have held discussions and worked closely with them on this issue, and representatives from the UK fishing industry have attended meetings that we have convened. We have used data from the Marine Management Organisation to support and underpin the evidence base behind requests made during those negotiations. We have very much stood up for the interests of our industry, and helped to support it and to find a resolution to the dispute. As we leave the European Union—this is a much broader topic—we will become an independent coastal state again, and we will conduct annual fisheries negotiations in a new UK-EU bilateral on some of these issues. As an independent coastal state, we will have control of access to our waters, and we will negotiate the share of the total allowable catch.

The hon. Lady spoke of preparations for leaving the European Union. Although the National Audit Office report highlighted some concerns, it also recognised that DEFRA is dealing with a huge body of EU law. Indeed, it gave the Department a lot of credit for the progress we have made in many areas. We are already making preparations on fishing, including by holding meetings and discussions with countries such as Norway, Iceland and the Faroe Islands about future arrangements. The MMO is carrying out detailed work on issues such as fisheries enforcement and how needs may change, and to ensure that we have the capacity to deal with any increase in catch certificates that may be required. Many of those issues relate to the much broader topic of our leaving the common fisheries policy and becoming an independent coastal state again, but for the time being, the UK Government are doing everything they can to support our industry in this dispute over scallops.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): UK vessels have no access to scallops anywhere within French waters inside the 12-mile limit, which is very much in contrast to the position of French vessels that have access to waters within the six to 12-mile limit in the UK. Will the Minister reiterate—there has been some misunderstanding about this—that our vessels were fishing absolutely legally at the time of these disgraceful attacks? I welcome his assurance and talks with his opposite number, as well as his offer of assistance, but Brixham fishermen would like further reassurance that, when they fish in those waters, perfectly legally, measures will be in place to ensure their safety.

George Eustice: I entirely agree with and understand my hon. Friend's point. Much of the scallop fishing industry is based in Brixham in her constituency. She is right to say that the contested grounds are outside the 12-nautical mile limit—they are approximately 20 miles off the French coast and therefore not in French territorial waters. She is also right to say that in some areas the French fishing industry is able to fish in the UK's six to 12-mile zone. She will be aware that the Government have already given notice, under the terms of the London fisheries convention, to withdraw from that agreement and negotiate access arrangements afresh.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

This is a very disappointing outcome. I urge the Minister to get back around the table. We cannot have the same situation occurring next year. It is really important that, despite there being no outcome from this round of negotiations, he does not give up but keeps trying to ensure that an agreement with France is found. The fishing industry is incredibly important to Scotland. Can the Minister assure us that the Scottish Government will be involved in any future negotiations, so that our voice can be heard and our interests protected? He talks about moving towards Brexit and the sovereignty that we will apparently have over our nautical area. On negotiations with the EU about fishing rights post Brexit, will he assure us that any bad feeling created over this situation will not spill over into those negotiations?

In previous years, Scotland's voice has not been heard and the Scottish Government have not been given the right opportunity to have their voice heard in the negotiations, despite fishing being so important to Scotland. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that Scottish Government Ministers are involved in the negotiations?

George Eustice: There are a number of points that I would make. As I said in my statement, I still hope that, even at this late stage, the French industry will agree to take up the offer to put in place the agreement for the over-15 metre vessels that has stood the test of time for the last five years. It is not too late to do that. Indeed, the inward transfer of effort that they would make to enable this deal to happen is effort that would generally go unused, were they not to use it for this purpose.

I can also confirm that, when it comes to our annual fisheries negotiations, we go as a UK delegation. Alongside me in the trilateral meetings with the European Commission and the European presidency, I have representatives, including the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland fisheries Ministers. We have a well-established convention that, on issues that affect Scotland specifically, it tends to be the Scottish Minister who leads on those elements of the negotiation.

The final point I would make about the negotiations on leaving the common fisheries policy is that this side of the House believes the decision to leave the European Union was right. We are going to respect that and implement it. That involves leaving the common fisheries policy, an issue on which I know the hon. Lady's party has mixed views.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Minister will be aware that the bay of Seine is not the only potential flashpoint in the waters of European

Union member states. What assessment has he made of the potential for other issues of this sort arising elsewhere? In particular, what is he doing about the Voisinage agreement between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, which, as I am sure he appreciates, has real potential to cause some difficulty in the not-too-distant future?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend is right that there are other areas where there is potential for this. Sometimes we wish to designate marine conservation zones and we require the support of other countries to do that. There is sometimes an issue around farmed deeps. None of them, however, has resulted in the strength of feeling that we have seen around the bay of Seine and that we saw in 2012.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): At the best of times, fishing is the most hazardous peacetime occupation. In the years since I left school, no fewer than five men who were with me at Islay High School have lost their lives while making their living at sea. That is why the sort of behaviour we witnessed on 27 August is simply unforgivable. When the Minister speaks to his opposite number in France, will he impress upon that Government that we expect them to ensure lawful behaviour by their fishermen, and that this Government will do everything to protect the right of our fishermen to make their living lawfully, as they were doing?

George Eustice: The right hon. Gentleman is right, and we have made that point to the French Government. It is worth noting that the French Government condemned the violence and acted quickly to increase the resources available for policing the area and enforcing lawful fishing activity.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): As I understand it, it is crystal clear that the law and moral right are on the side of the British fishermen in this case. If the fishing is taking place outside French territorial waters, why can the Royal Navy not accompany our ships back into those fishing grounds? If we have fishery protection vessels and Type 23 frigates permanently positioned in the channel, surely the Royal Navy should be at sea with our fishermen to protect their livelihoods.

George Eustice: I understand the point that my hon. Friend is making, but these waters are outside French territorial waters but within the French exclusive economic zone. It is absolutely the responsibility of the French authorities to police and enforce fishing activity in their waters, just it is for our authorities to police fishing activity in our own exclusive economic zone.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): To reassure the UK's fishing sector of the Government's commitment and responsibility to the industry, including in the event of further such disputes, we need the fisheries Bill. When can we expect to see it?

George Eustice: During the course of this Session.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in praising the admirable and restrained way in which the UK fishing industry has acted under extreme provocation?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As I made clear in my statement, I commend the way in which our industry has behaved and the constructive approach it has taken to these talks. It is regrettable that there is not an agreement yet, but I hope there might still be one.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I love a dish of scallops with some butter and garlic, but can I eat it with a clear conscience? I support the right of the British to fish if they are legally allowed to do so, but some of the news about the fishing method used in this case suggests that it may be deeply damaging to the marine environment. Is it not time that we not only started to get on better with the French—after all, they are our allies and fellow members of the European Union—but looked again at fishing methods that involve scraping the bottom of the ocean and destroying the marine environment? Will the Minister instigate a commission to look at such methods?

George Eustice: We already have restrictions on where certain types of gear can be used, as well as technical regulations and specifications regarding the required features for bottom-towed trawler gear used for scallops. There are some regulations in place, therefore, and we keep them under review. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that this method of fishing can be damaging, but it is also the main method that we use for species such as scallops.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Can my hon. Friend confirm that the French recognise the UK's legal right to fish in the bay of Seine, and that it is the duty of the French authorities to protect British boats that are legally fishing there?

George Eustice: I can absolutely confirm that. The French Government have confirmed to me that they recognise that English vessels have a legal right to fish in those areas, and that they recognise their responsibilities to enforce fishing activity in their economic zone.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I have to declare an interest, because my daughter and her partner operate a fishing vessel out of Porthdinllaen. Given how this violence augurs ill for future relationships with EU countries' fishing fleets, what discussions has the Minister had with Welsh Government colleagues about the protection of scallop beds and other non-quota species in Welsh waters?

George Eustice: Many of the technical regulations that would be introduced in the inshore area are the responsibility of the Welsh Government, who already have the freedom to introduce such technical restrictions. With a devolved issue such as fisheries, we work very closely on all such matters. That includes reaching a shared approach to international discussions, as I mentioned earlier, with the Welsh and Scottish Governments and the Northern Ireland Administration.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The Minister has already said that the British boats were in those waters entirely lawfully, and that the French authorities should have prevented violence. I saw some reports suggesting that there was a French police boat on station in the vicinity when the incident occurred. The Minister said that he had put pressure on the French authorities to

act. Are there any legal mechanisms, via either the European Court or any other institution of the European Union, that can require the French to take action to prevent outrages of this sort?

George Eustice: Within the European Union, there is the European Fisheries Control Agency, which has a co-ordinating role in respect of the enforcement functions of all member states. On those countries that are not in the EU and our future agreements, arrangements for mutual agreement on enforcement are a common feature of international fisheries negotiations.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): This incident surely reinforces the case for the strictest regulation and monitoring of all sea fishing, so will the Minister assure us that such events will never be permitted to occur in Britain's historic fishing waters when we have left the common fisheries policy?

George Eustice: When we have left the common fisheries policy—I know that the hon. Gentleman has campaigned for that, alongside a number of Conservative Members—we will become an independent coastal state, and there still will be annual negotiations on fisheries. Disputes of this nature probably will not go away, because we have them occasionally whether we are in the EU or outside it, but we must always strive under international law to resolve our differences and secure mutually acceptable regulations.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The sight of boats from Torbay being attacked while lawfully fishing on the open sea was as shocking as it was unacceptable. The sea is not a place where the law does not apply. It is right to be talking to the French authorities about securing peaceful outcomes and stopping confrontation on the sea, but has the Minister also spoken to his counterparts about the possibility of using the criminal law to deal with those who use violence against our people?

George Eustice: As I said earlier, decisions of that sort, including decisions to bring prosecutions, are very much a matter for the French enforcement authorities, and I know that they will be looking closely at some of these issues.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is obviously right and proper that our fishermen are allowed to fish in safety and within the remit of the law, but what reassurances can the Minister give to fishermen—the Government are on this never-ending prism of having to Brexit no matter what—about the post-Brexit process for negotiating with the European Union? Can he also reassure the agriculture and farming industry? The National Audit Office is saying that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is not ready for Brexit, so what is he going to do about it?

George Eustice: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we already have comprehensive arrangements for reaching agreements on fisheries with countries that are not in the EU—with the Faroe islands, with Iceland and with Norway—so we know the methodology. There is the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission, which we will rejoin, there is the North Atlantic Fisheries Organisation, which we will also rejoin, and there are other international forums.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It must have been terrifying to be rammed and pelted with rocks and smoke bombs. Will the Minister reassure the House that the safety of British fishermen will be paramount in the Government's considerations and actions, and that aggressive and dangerous acts directed at the British fishing fleet will not be tolerated?

George Eustice: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. As I said in my statement, we regard safety at sea to be paramount, and that has been our key message to the French authorities since this incident occurred. Indeed, I restated its importance in my letter to Stéphane Travert today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for coming to the House to make his statement, and also for the meeting that we had on Monday to discuss this matter.

The safety of our fishermen is vital. Fishing vessels from Northern Ireland were present at the first incident, on 27 August, fishing in legal grounds. Fishermen in boats from Portavogie, in my constituency, are intending to go into those grounds before the end of this month, as they do each year. Will the Minister assure me that our boats will be given safe passage and that their security will be protected? Will he state clearly and unequivocally that their safety and security will be guaranteed?

George Eustice: Yes, I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. I have made it clear that this is the responsibility of the French authorities, the grounds being in the French exclusive economic zone, but we have underlined the importance of the matter to the French authorities, and they have agreed and recognised that and have condemned the violence.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is fair to say that the whole country stands with our fishing industry, which acted entirely properly, and is appalled by the violence. The Minister talked a bit about his discussions with his French counterpart. Can he say anything about any discussions he might have had at EU level?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend will be aware that we envisage resolving such issues ourselves in the future without having to go to the EU to do so on our behalf. Enforcement is an issue for national enforcement authorities, so at this point it is not appropriate for the EU to get involved, but if there were a failure of some sort with the French enforcement procedures or authorities, that would be a matter for the European Fisheries Control Agency.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Does the Minister believe that one way to solve this impasse might be for the French to lift restrictions on their own smaller boats fishing in this region?

George Eustice: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is an option. In the absence of being able to put back together the agreement for the over-15 metre boats, we have suggested to the French Government that they consider ending the current restrictions earlier than normal.

Business of the House

12.6 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 8 October will include:

MONDAY 8 OCTOBER—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 9 OCTOBER—General debate on baby loss awareness week, followed by a general debate on children's social care in England. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 10 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Agriculture Bill.

THURSDAY 11 OCTOBER—General debate on the victims strategy.

FRIDAY 12 OCTOBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 15 October will include:

MONDAY 15 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Offensive Weapons Bill.

All Members should welcome the introduction of the Agriculture Bill yesterday on what was Back British Farming Day. After 50 years of this country being subject to the common agricultural policy, the Bill will return control to the United Kingdom, enabling us all to deliver not just a boost to food production but a cleaner and healthier environment for future generations.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on his Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on his Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018, both of which received Royal Assent today. Finally, I wish everyone a productive conference season and look forward to welcoming all Members back to the House in October, when we will be looking forward to UK Parliament Week.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, although we seem to be back to announcing just business for a week and a day. If not today, perhaps at the next business statement, could she give the House the recess dates for February and Easter? People want to plan. She has not made any statement about sitting Fridays either, which both I and the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) have raised. I say that partly because there are only six months to go until we leave the EU, and it seems that the EU is signalling that there will be a deal in November. There is a lot of legislation to be scheduled and effectively only January, February and March in which to debate it.

I assume that the Trade Bill and the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill will be returning from the Lords. When will we get to debate them? The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), just told us that the fisheries Bill would be published this Session. Could the Leader of the House be more specific? And when will the immigration Bill be published? There are also more than 800 statutory instruments to be scrutinised. It would be helpful if the Government could make a statement setting out the timetable for all this legislation.

I agree with the Leader of the House about Back British Farming Day yesterday—everyone was wearing their sheaves of wheat. She will know of the importance to farmers, their workers and the wider rural economy of agricultural wages and the compensation scheme for bovine TB cases. These public policy issues are of great importance to hon. Members on both sides of the House, so I hope she noticed yesterday that a prayer and a revocation motion were tabled in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. I am talking about early-day motions 1627 and 1628.

[That the Environment and Rural Affairs (Miscellaneous Revocations) Order 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 739), dated 19 June 2018, a copy of which was laid before this House on 20 June, be revoked.]

[That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Cattle Compensation (England) (Amendment) Order 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 754), dated 21 June 2018, a copy of which was laid before this House on 25 June, be annulled.]

Will the Leader of the House ensure that those two orders are debated in Committee as soon as possible?

The Leader of the House was right: on 10 September the Boundary Commission laid its report. It is astonishing that the Government want to go ahead with these boundary changes; it is a blatant power grab. There are no plans to reduce the number of Ministers; we have an overpowering Executive in the House with a weakened Parliament in which the voice of Back Benchers will have less weight in the House proportionally. The Electoral Reform Society says that if the number of Ministers remain unchanged, 23% of all MPs and 45% of Conservative MPs will be obliged to vote with the Government, which is an historical high.

The Government should support the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan)—it is much better; it is an up-to-date Bill with up-to-date figures, but he is still waiting up in Committee Room every Wednesday for his money resolution—unless, of course, the reduction of 50 MPs will be those 50 from the European Research Group. I say that only because the Prime Minister's plans are being torn apart from within her own party. The Prime Minister appears to be up for mandatory reselection—sorry, mandatory deselection by a party within a party. The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) has warned of a “catastrophic split” in the Conservative party if the Prime Minister attempts to force the Chequers plan through Parliament.

Last week at Prime Minister's questions, the Leader of the Opposition raised comments by the National Farmers Union that a no deal Brexit would be an “Armageddon scenario”, and we should add the following to that: Panasonic is to move its European headquarters from London to Amsterdam in October; Unilever said on 11 September that it was going to end its dual Anglo-Dutch structure and make Rotterdam its main headquarters; and Jaguar Land Rover has written to the Prime Minister to say that no deal would put “tens of thousands” of jobs at risk. On science and research, the Government's own technical notes state that UK institutions would no longer be eligible for three Horizon 2020 funding lines and no deal will cost the UK research £520 million a year and lack of collaboration with our scientists and friends across the globe.

No deal would also have an impact on our security. The National Police Coordination Centre warns that the

“necessity to call on military assistance is a real possibility”

after we leave the EU with no deal. New impact papers published today say driving licences, passports and phone bills will all be affected with a no deal, and the technical paper on aviation has not been published—I presume not to alarm the country that planes will have difficulty landing. Can the Leader of the House say when that will be published, and will she schedule a debate on the impact on our country of a no deal when all the technical papers are published?

The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and his family have faced a difficult time; I want to say that it is not in our name. I hope the Leader of the House will condemn the wall of sound that came from her side when the Leader of the Opposition raised the plight of the vulnerable at Prime Minister's Question Time.

I want to thank all who were involved in the fire and safety work on the estate over the recess; they have done a fantastic job.

Last week I mentioned the application to remove Emmeline Pankhurst from Victoria Tower Gardens; Emmeline will not be moved. We celebrate two birthdays: Lord Ganesh, who apparently is the god of wisdom and prosperity. There is an event in the Jubilee Room which I encourage all Members to attend. Today was Annie Kenney's birthday, too. There is a record of Annie Kenney and Emmeline Pankhurst signing the visitor's book in St Davids cathedral in St Davids, our smallest city. They travelled far and wide to make the case for women's suffrage. Finally, I remind Members that the fantastic “Voice and Vote” exhibition closes on 6 October, and I encourage everyone to attend it—and wish everyone a happy conference recess.

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady's enthusiasm for the amazing work of the suffrage movement, and once the “Voice and Vote” exhibition ends, her party colleague the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) has the fantastic international women's conference planned. The House has agreed that women from around the world will be able to sit in this Chamber and talk about some of the amazing achievements of women. We all look forward to that, and there is plenty more this year to celebrate around the Vote 100 events, which I am sure we will make the most of.

The hon. Lady asked for the dates of recesses and sitting Fridays; they will be available in due course. She asked about legislation, and I can tell her that the customs Bill has finished its passage through both Houses and awaits Royal Assent and that the Trade Bill is still in the Lords. In terms of Brexit legislation, we have introduced seven Brexit Bills this Session, including the Agriculture Bill, which was introduced yesterday. Four Brexit Bills have had Royal Assent already—the withdrawal Bill, the Nuclear Safeguards Bill, the sanctions Bill and the haulage Bill—and we will bring forward the remaining Brexit Bills, as the hon. Lady mentions, on immigration, fisheries and the withdrawal agreement. We hope to do so later this year when the House returns and that final deal is negotiated.

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

The hon. Lady asked about statutory instruments that have been prayed against. As she will know, it is a matter of parliamentary convention that, when a reasonable request for a debate has been made, time should be allowed for it. We have demonstrated in this Session that the Government are willing to provide time in line with the convention and to accede to reasonable requests made by the Opposition.

The hon. Lady asked about boundaries. The Boundary Commission reports were laid before both Houses on Monday, and Members will want to consider the recommendations carefully. In accordance with the existing legal requirements under the provisions of the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986, the adoption of the Boundary Commission's recommendations will require an Order in Council that must be approved by both Houses. It will take time to prepare what is an enormous SI, so it will be some time before that can be brought forward for approval.

On the hon. Lady's comments about the private Member's Bill of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), as she knows I have answered urgent questions, an emergency debate, an Opposition debate and many other questions on this issue in recent weeks. She knows, too, that Parliament itself agreed through primary legislation the process for reviewing boundaries only a few years ago. Millions of pounds have been spent on this review, and it would not be right to undertake another costly review at the expense of taxpayers until we have made further progress with this one.

The hon. Lady mentioned mandatory reselection, and I was very concerned that she might have been about to air the Labour party's problems in public. The catastrophic splits we are seeing in the Labour party are of great concern to all of us on this side of the House for what was once a fantastic party of opposition that supported and stood up for labour—the clue is in the title—but which now seems determined to fight on appalling issues in-house such as deselecting their own colleagues, many of whom have been long-standing Members of this place, and accusing one another of anti-Semitism. Those are shameful issues that are of grave concern to all of us who care about our democracy.

The hon. Lady asks about no deal preparations. I am glad to tell the House that I have just come from the Cabinet meeting looking at those preparations and they are far advanced. As all Members would expect, the Government are preparing for all eventualities, but it remains our expectation and intention to get a good deal with the European Union that works for the United Kingdom and our friends and neighbours in the EU. May I just say that planes flew before we joined the EU? It is slightly extraordinary that people really think that planes would be grounded; that is just not the case.

Finally, the hon. Lady asks for a debate on Brexit. On Monday we had a whole day's debate on Brexit, and there was the sum total of three Labour contributions. I therefore think that we have provided the time and the Labour party has shown its complete lack of interest.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): In our time, too much of politics is dull and apologetic and too much of life mechanistic and technocratic, and none more so than what we build; from the

brutal behemoths of supermarkets that destroyed our high streets to bland housing estates that are no different from Cumbria to Cornwall and from London to Lincolnshire. So will the Leader of the House arrange for Ministers to make an urgent statement, or perhaps grant a debate, on beauty and the built environment? Policies should be brought forward that will counter what the Prince of Wales has called the “dreariness and heartlessness” of urban planning so that what we leave to those born later can be as lovely as the best we inherited from our ancestors.

Andrea Leadsom: I think that all hon. and right hon. Members will share my right hon. Friend's desire to see beauty in the built environment, and I encourage him to continue with his campaign to ensure that the planning system properly allows for the kind of beautiful architecture that we all want to see.

Mr Speaker: And with his eloquence in expressing it, indeed.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for when we come back from our conference recess. As we know, she has just hot-footed it back from Cabinet, where I hope she played a productive role in arranging the state of emergency arrangements for the looming no deal Brexit. It is almost unbelievable to most of us that we have got to this point, not by design but almost by typical Tory cluelessness. Would it not be in the Government's interest for the Prime Minister simply to make a statement to the House and concede that her Chequers plans are now dead? The Mogg-ites now control large swaths of the Conservative party, and the daily militia of the party conference will almost certainly put paid to those plans. Would it not be good to get this out of the way, because there is no way that they are going to get the plans through this House?

Last week I raised the issue of the abuse of ministerial access for Scottish Conservative MPs, but all I got was a silly flippant response from the Leader of the House. This is serious stuff. Ministerial appointments are now being arranged for party political advantage. I have been watching carefully, and I have seen the meetings promoted by Scottish Conservative MPs. I have now asked for the self-same meetings, but does the Leader of the House know what has happened? Most Ministers have not even given me the courtesy of a response, and those who have done so have refused to see me. One even suggested that I should take up the matter with her in the Tea Room. The right hon. Lady is the Leader of the House, and she must have something meaningful to say about this abuse of ministerial access.

Lastly, Mr Speaker, may I wish you a good conference recess? I do not know what Speakers do during the conference recess. Perhaps there is a conference of Speakers from around the world. The House will now break so that the political hordes can head to Brighton for the Liberal Democrat conference. It is almost incredible that we stop our crucial and critical work to accommodate what are in effect annual general meetings of voluntary associations. The public are mystified by this, because we are the only Parliament in the world that breaks so that politicians can go to meetings of their parties. Will the Leader of the House get together with the shadow Leader of the House and me to design a proper recess that takes into account all parts of the United Kingdom rather than the requirements of the political parties?

Andrea Leadsom: I am deeply disappointed that the hon. Gentleman seems to be in such a bad mood today. That is most unusual. He is talking down the country and talking down the Chequers plan; I am sure that the European Commission will be listening with interest to his negative approach. I am told that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has not been asked to meet the hon. Gentleman for two years, and I am not surprised, frankly. He is not very cheery. He needs to learn that cup half full is always the better approach. I have made it clear that I am always happy to meet him; I even offered to have my photograph taken with him. If he wants to meet me to discuss a serious issue, I am very happy to do that, but in the event that all he wants to do is to run down the United Kingdom, then it is just the same old Scottish nationalists.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend arrange for a debate in Government time to discuss Crossrail and the failings of the Mayor of London and Transport for London, and to highlight the need for a Crossrail extension from Abbey Wood to Ebbsfleet?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an important issue. There are great hopes for the new Crossrail project. He will be aware that we will have Transport questions in the first week that we are back, and I think it would be appropriate for him to challenge Ministers on exactly what the plans are, to ensure that this fantastic new project opens as soon as possible.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her really active and committed support for the conference of women MPs from all around the world, which will take place in this House on 8 November this year. I should also like to return to a matter that was raised with her by the shadow Leader of the House—namely, what happened to the children of the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) yesterday, which we saw videoed and broadcast on the internet. Every Member across the House that I have spoken to has, without exception, been dismayed and appalled by what happened. Targeting a Member through their children is not about free speech or the right to protest; it is intimidation and harassment, and it is undermining our democracy. None of us wants to be featherbedded or protected from the public, but we are elected to come here to do our job and we must be allowed to do that without let or hindrance.

I ask the Leader of the House to consider—if it is acceptable to the Speaker and to the shadow Leader of the House—taking an approach on a cross-party basis with widespread deliberation and having a Speaker's conference on this issue. In this age of social media, we have to know what we and our families should be expected to put up with in the name of democracy and what crosses the line. We all saw this incident, but we know that it is not the only one that has happened. Also, these incidents involve not only children but frail, elderly parents. We are very good at championing the protection of the emergency services and the police, as we have seen in the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), because they are important

for this country, but our democracy is also important for this country, so may we ask the Speaker to have a conference so that the line can properly be drawn?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Lady for raising this issue. A number of Members on both sides of the House have also raised it with me. It is utterly appalling that someone can attack a serving Member of Parliament through their children or their parents, or even through their partner or their best friend. It is absolutely unacceptable, and we have to join together in condemning it wherever it happens. I am certainly very sympathetic to her suggestion, and I am sure that you will be too, Mr Speaker.

I can tell the right hon. and learned Lady that the Government launched a consultation on 29 July on a new electoral offence which aims to crack down on threats and abuse towards those standing for election. We need to change the way in which the public perceive those who stand for public office, not least because we want to encourage more good—and, particularly, young—people from all walks of life who want to take part in our public life. How can they possibly be attracted to it when this kind of appalling behaviour goes unchecked?

Mr Speaker: Thank you. It is of course for the House to decide how to proceed, but in response to what the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the Leader of the House have said, let me also underline that as far as I am concerned, that behaviour was despicable and intolerable. If the people who perpetrated it do not know that, I am afraid that tells us all we need to know about them. This simply cannot persist.

Mr Charles Walker (Bromley and Brixton) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on the gig economy, so that we can ensure that those in long-term casual work have a route into permanent employment? During that debate, could we also recognise that that very same economy creates hundreds of thousands of job opportunities each year for students and young people, allowing them to earn money and wrap work around their studies and holidays, and providing them with the experience that carries them into permanent work? That experience is far from evil.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has set out the fundamental dilemma clearly. The gig economy provides enormous opportunities and advances for those looking to get into work and who want flexible work. It has in part helped the extraordinary employment numbers, which show that there are over 3 million more people in work since 2010 than there were previously. On the other hand, it has great shortcomings, with insecurity and so on. The Matthew Taylor review highlighted some of those problems, and the Government will be responding and taking action to improve the rights of those in the gig economy. I encourage my hon. Friend to take this matter up in Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on Tuesday 16 October.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I know how much the Leader of the House cares about the early years of a child's life, and I understand that she is chairing a cross-Government working party on that subject. Would she be open to a Government debate on the important role of maintained nursery

[Diana Johnson]

schools, which play a really important part in some of our most disadvantaged areas in reaching out to families and helping children who are perhaps not doing as well as they could? I am concerned that the funding for those schools is secure only until 2020, so may we have a debate to ensure that the Government are committed to the future of those nursery schools beyond 2020?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising the important matter of early years and the cross-Government group that I chair. I encourage her to write to me, and I will see whether I can use some of her evidence in that group. At the same time, I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate to raise the matter directly with Ministers.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): About four months ago, this House passed the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, part of which—the so-called Magnitsky provisions—require this House to undertake a review process to hold this and future Governments to account on the sanctioning of people in this country. Will the Leader of the House inform us of the progress being made in setting up the kind of body that will do that work for the House and hold the Government to account?

Andrea Leadsom: I am aware of the amendment that seeks to ensure that we can hold individuals to account better than before. I am not aware of the exact progress, but if my right hon. Friend writes to me, I will take the matter up with Ministers on his behalf.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Since 2015, there have been several water-related deaths in my constituency, and I highlighted this worrying issue during Prime Minister's questions. Tragically, it is also an important matter for others such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) and my hon. Friends the Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), whose constituencies have also suffered water-related deaths recently. Will the Leader of the House consider timetabling a debate on water safety education for children and young people so that we can explore the best ways of stopping such devastating incidents occurring again?

Andrea Leadsom: Teaching young children to swim and to be water aware is important, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a Backbench Business debate since it sounds as though several right hon. and hon. Members are concerned about the issue. He did not mention whether those deaths were as a result of accidents or drowning due to someone being unable to swim, but there is a need to teach children about the dangers of quarries, rivers and so on.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will be aware that I have managed to secure Adjournment debates on the lack of accountability within the NHS following local consultations, so I ask the Leader of the House for a debate in Government time to alleviate the anger and concern in my constituency when consultations take place about the future of our hospital provision, or the lack of it, and are then completely ignored by the local health authorities

Andrea Leadsom: The accountability of local healthcare to the local population is an important issue that is often mentioned at business questions, and I am concerned that my right hon. Friend feels that the views of local residents have been ignored. I think he has already had an Adjournment debate, but he may like to take the matter up directly with Ministers who can answer his questions.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I regularly hear stories, both in my constituency and elsewhere, about the consequences of the shortage of midwives. It is a national issue, but north-east London has a rapidly rising birth rate, so may we have a debate, or at least a statement when we return, on the national shortage of midwives, but with a particular focus on London?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. The availability of midwives and maternity units is absolutely key. The number of people graduating as midwives has risen 51% since 2010-11, and a recent report from the Royal College of Midwives shows that the proportion of younger midwives—those in their 20s and 30s—has jumped from 34% to 45%, so there are now around 3,500 extra midwives aged under 40. There is a lot more to be done, however, so I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate about the situation in his constituency.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In recent years, I have taken a delegation to see three successive Transport Ministers in connection with support for the bioethanol industry and the introduction of E10, but a number of my constituents who work at Vivergo Fuels just outside Hull are to be made redundant owing to the lack of a decision from Government. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister to come to the House to make a statement? It is too late for those who are losing their jobs, but we could at least get an explanation of why it has taken years for the Government to come to no decision.

Andrea Leadsom: First, I understand that it is my hon. Friend's birthday today, so I wish him a very happy birthday. For once, I have beaten you to it, Mr Speaker. He is, as ever, a strong voice for his constituency, and he is quite right to raise this matter—[Interruption.] I do not know how old he is. I understand that the Department for Transport has written to Vivergo to seek a meeting to discuss the suspension of production at its plant outside Hull, and it is of course regrettable if people have lost jobs. The Department is consulting on whether and how best to introduce E10, and the consultation closes on 16 September.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I made a suggestion earlier this week that we use the 400th anniversary of the sailing of the Mayflower to the American colonies as a way of celebrating the contribution of migrants who bring their skills, talents and genius to different places all over the world. Does the Leader of the House agree that it would be useful for every Member to have their DNA tested, as I have done, so that we can see that we are all from interesting and different places?

Andrea Leadsom: Well, I am from Northamptonshire, which is a very interesting and different place. The hon. Gentleman makes a fantastic suggestion, and if he wants

to write to me, I can see whether I can progress it. I am sure that colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport would also be interested to hear his suggestion. Of course, we all celebrate the enormous contribution made by migrants from right across the world, and it is right that we continue to do so.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I join the shadow Leader of the House in wishing everyone everywhere a very happy Ganesh Chaturthi. Tomorrow marks the 29th anniversary of the attack that is marked by Kashmir Pandits Martyrs Day, about which I have tabled early-day motion 1568.

[That this House commemorates with deep sadness the 29th anniversary of the attack on senior Kashmiri Hindu leader Tikalal Taploo marked as Kashmiri Hindu Martyrs Day; notes the mass exodus in January 1990 by cross-border Islamic militants on the population of Jammu and Kashmir; expresses its condolences to the families and friends of all those who were killed, raped and injured in this massacre and also condemns the desecration of the holiest sites in Jammu and Kashmir; further expresses its concern that the Kashmiris who fled to save life and limb have still not secured justice for the atrocities committed against them; deplores those sponsoring such cross-border terrorist attacks and demands they cease immediately; further notes that the international principle of the responsibility to protect obliges individual states and the international community to take effective measures to prevent the commission of genocide and crimes against humanity as seen against the Kashmiri Hindu community; and urges the Government of India to take measures to recognise exodus of Kashmiri Hindus as Genocide and to ensure justice is delivered to Kashmiri Hindus by punishing the perpetrators of the forced exodus and excesses on the minority Hindus in the Kashmir valley.]

I invite the Leader of the House to schedule a debate in Government time on this terrible ethnic cleansing of the Kashmir valley that saw Hindus forced out of their ancestral homes at gunpoint and women raped and mutilated.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend always stands up for the communities in his constituency whose relatives and ancestors have suffered terribly, and he is absolutely right to do that. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate to raise that specific issue and commemorate the event in the appropriate way.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May we have an early debate or a statement from Transport Ministers about the management of the volunteers who give their services to our coastguard rescue service? I fear that we are heading to a crisis in Orkney and Shetland that will see substantial or possibly even mass resignations by local volunteers. There seems to be a lack of respect from many in coastguard headquarters in Southampton for the work of volunteers in our coastal communities. Whatever the reason, it is surely unacceptable that coastal and island communities should be left exposed, so if the agency cannot fix the problem, we should hear from Ministers.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is correct to raise the amazing work done by coastguard volunteers. There will be Transport questions on Thursday 11 October, so he may want to raise the matter directly with Ministers then, but he makes a good point.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The Government can be proud of the requirement for robust age verification checks in part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017. It was hoped that the system would be implemented by April this year, but it is still not in place because it requires the laying of the draft Online Pornography (Commercial Basis) Regulations. Will the Leader of the House confirm that that will happen swiftly?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this incredibly important point. DCMS and the Department of Health and Social Care are looking at options to minimise the harmful effects of social media on children's and young people's mental health as part of the forthcoming online strategy White Paper. The Government remain committed to ensuring that pornography is not accessible to children online, as is already the case offline. I can confirm that we are working hard to table the secondary legislation, and we intend to conclude the parliamentary proceedings as soon as possible.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I second the call for a debate on the gig economy. Of course it is welcome that this sector of the economy employs thousands of people across the UK, but what the archbishop was referring to, apart from the fact that these companies are not paying enough tax, is the poor working conditions in these companies.

The GMB trade union made a freedom of information request of Amazon, which showed that 600 ambulances were called to Amazon warehouses across the UK over a three-year period. Workers complain that they are being penalised for taking toilet breaks and that pregnant women are forced to stand for 10 hours during their shifts. Surely companies like Amazon can afford to treat their workers correctly and to treat them like humans, not robots.

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with the hon. Lady. It is vital that businesses treat their workers with decency and respect. She will be aware of the Matthew Taylor review, and the Government are looking at part-legislation and part-changing the rules on how workers are treated.

The hon. Lady raises an important point. I recently met young women from the Young Women's Trust who told me their stories about how zero-hours contracts can be abused and how working conditions can be completely unacceptable. I encourage her, with the support of Members on both sides of the House, to seek a Backbench Business Committee debate so that Ministers can be made aware of some of the further stories we will want to address.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Last week my constituents were hugely disappointed to learn of the Royal Bank of Scotland's announcement on closing branches in Hazel Grove, Marple and Romiley. The bank closure protocol is not working, especially when banks close branches that they previously said would remain open to mitigate the loss of others. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss this important issue and so that Ministers can bring forward practical measures to keep branches open?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a matter that is often raised in this place, the concern about bank branch closures. He will be aware that, since May 2018,

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

all banks have to comply with the access to banking standard, which commits banks to giving customers a minimum of 12 weeks' notice if they decide to close a branch—that is, of course, a commercial matter for the banks.

Some years ago, as City Minister, I was very pleased that we agreed with the Post Office for it to provide banking services for all major high street banks. Post offices often have longer opening hours and are more conveniently located for customers, so I encourage my hon. Friend to urge constituents who have raised this matter with him to look to their local post office, which often can replace the banking services they are missing.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): My constituents, US citizen Carlos Consuelo and his wife Jayne of Aberdyfi, have put their lives and their businesses on hold to conform with every family settlement visa application requirement. Can we have a debate in Government time on chronic problems of unexplained delays and failures of communication facing non-contentious immigration applicants and how these cause utterly unnecessary emotional, social and financial hardship for families?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this constituency issue, and I am happy to take it up with Ministers if she wants to write to me afterwards. On the Home Office generally, she will be aware that there is a hotline for Members of Parliament, and I am sure she has already attempted that route. She may well wish to raise the issue directly with Ministers as to what more can be done to get the efficiency in turnarounds up to a better level.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): With petrol prices rising to a four-year high, the Leader of the House will have heard the anguish of motorists and of motorist groups like FairFuelUK. Can we have an urgent statement on what the Government are doing to keep down the price of fuel for motorists? Can she use her good offices to urge the Chancellor not to raise fuel duty at the Budget, as that would be a kamikaze attack on hard-working families?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is a great champion for motorists, on which I congratulate him. He will be aware that the previous Labour Government's fuel duty escalator would have cost motorists an extra £46 billion in taxes. This Government have done everything we possibly can to protect motorists from price rises but, nevertheless, I have heard his lobbying and I will pass it on to the Chancellor.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Last Friday my constituent, Sarah Oakwell, spoke to me very movingly about the debilitating effect that ME has on her everyday life. Can we have a debate on the level of awareness, and on raising awareness, of ME right across our society?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure many hon. Members will have constituents with this awful condition, which really is debilitating and very life limiting for those who suffer from it. The hon. Gentleman is right to think that this House should debate it, and I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can share their views with Ministers.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I add my support to the comments of the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman). Attacks against politicians and their families have no place and, in particular, dissuade people, especially women, from standing for election. Many women Members of this House have told me how inspiring they find the statue of Emmeline Pankhurst. Does the Leader of the House agree that we need more women parliamentarians and more statues of great women leaders?

Andrea Leadsom: I am tempted just to say a resounding yes.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The Home Secretary recently responded to the Shaw report on immigration detention by commissioning a number of reviews. However, in his statement he failed to mention Stephen Shaw's recommendation that the practice of detaining pregnant women should end. It has been revealed that more than 100 pregnant women were detained last year, yet only 20 of them were deported. There is simply no justification for this policy. Can we have a debate in Government time on ending the practice of detaining pregnant women?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to the hon. Lady's request for a debate. It would be very well suited to an Adjournment debate, and she might be able to achieve that sooner than a debate in Government time. She raises an incredibly important issue.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I agree entirely with the comments of the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) about what happened to an hon. Member's family yesterday. Most Members of this House will have had death threats. I have certainly had death threats, I have been attacked and our home has been attacked, but when it is the family—there have been threats against my former wife and our children.

The thing I am now prepared to say that I was not prepared to say a few years ago is that, when my son was about 12, the police rang me one day and said, "Where is your son?" I answered, "Well, I think he is at school," and they said, "Can you check?" There was a social media post claiming to be the execution of my son, which obviously we did not bring to people's attention at the time. Things have got worse and worse, and I doubt there is a single Member of this House who has not had something like that.

Can we have a statement, a genuine statement, when we get back about what we are going to do about this?

Andrea Leadsom: That is a truly horrible story, and I am sure all hon. Members will be completely disgusted by that account. I am also not surprised that my hon. Friend did not raise it at the time because, of course, it would simply have encouraged further such behaviour. No doubt he will find that that is the case today. The level of abuse that Members of Parliament and others in public life receive is extraordinary, and he is right that this is incredibly serious. I have a meeting with the Chairman of Ways and Means and the director of security when we return to look at what more can be done, but I am very sympathetic to my hon. Friend's suggestion of a statement.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): My 18-year-old constituent, Ben Glean, sadly passed away last year. Ben was a fantastic campaigner for equality and had a particular interest in homelessness. His family, in memory of Ben, have started a fantastic campaign to knit and crochet hats for homeless people, premature babies and the local women's refuge. About 200 individual items have been donated to their cause. Does the Leader of the House agree that World Homelessness Day on 10 October would be a really good opportunity for Members to be able to talk about similar local campaigns and to take the opportunity to review the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and its implementation?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady's constituent, who obviously has a fantastic legacy. So many people volunteer to help with homelessness in so many ways and we should pay tribute to them all. She asked about what we could do on 10 October to celebrate people's efforts to help with homelessness; if she wants, she can write to me, or perhaps we can meet to discuss the matter further.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): This week, students returned to the University of Stirling, and a whole new generation of students are becoming used to their new life there and enjoying freshers' week. However, Scottish students have been disadvantaged by the Scottish Government's cap on funding, and some were not able to get on to the course or into the institution of their choice. Will my right hon. Friend set aside some time for a debate on how we can ensure that all students, right across the United Kingdom, can take advantage of the opportunity that should be theirs to go to an institution as world renowned as the University of Stirling?

Andrea Leadsom: I wish all my hon. Friend's constituents who are starting their new career and new courses at the University of Stirling and enjoying freshers' week the best of times and every success in their studies. I totally understand the frustration of those who cannot get on to the courses of their choice. My hon. Friend will appreciate that education is a devolved matter. It is disappointing to hear that because of the cap, Scottish students may not have got the places of their choice; in England, we have seen increasing numbers of students coming into our universities, and in particular the numbers of disadvantaged students coming into higher education have been increasing, which is great news for social mobility. I encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate to discuss further with Education Ministers the differentiation between Scottish and English students.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House imagine how she would feel if she got a letter from her bank saying that her bank accounts were to be closed down, with no explanation whatsoever? Any of us would find that very difficult, but that is what happened recently to two of my constituents, Mr Mike Jones and his wife, as well as to another constituent of mine. May we have a debate about the fact that people are not even entitled to an explanation when banks decide to close their bank accounts? There may be good reason to close them, but people should at least be entitled to an explanation, given how important bank accounts are to people's lives.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I encourage him to write on his constituents' behalf to the Financial Conduct Authority, which I am sure would be concerned to hear about the case he raises. If he wants to take up the matter with Treasury Ministers—I think they might encourage him along a similar vein—he could of course seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise his constituents' case directly.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in supporting the vital work that many local charities do throughout the country? In particular, will she join me in congratulating the completely volunteer-led charity Future Choices in my constituency, Aberdeen South, on its 10th anniversary? The Future Choices centre provides recreational activities for the disabled, who are often socially isolated in our community. May we have a debate on the importance of charities in the prevention of social isolation and loneliness?

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with my hon. Friend that the work that charities do to tackle loneliness is vital. I have some great charities in my own constituency and am very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Future Choices on its 10th anniversary. The Government recently published a civil society strategy that sets out how Government can work with charities and others to support a thriving civil society. The Prime Minister specifically recognised loneliness as an important issue when she welcomed the report of the Jo Cox commission on loneliness in January this year. The first Government strategy on tackling loneliness in England will be published later this year.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): At the UN General Assembly later this month, the global compact on refugees will hopefully be agreed. I know that the Government wish to promote themselves as friends to refugees—I have heard that answer before—but may we have a debate in Government time, after the House returns from conference recess, on how we will implement the global compact on refugees?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that this is an important issue for the Government. We have International Development questions on the Wednesday of the first week back after recess; I encourage her to take up the matter directly with Ministers.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): The cost of railway infrastructure works have ballooned massively since privatisation and are now completely out of control. May we have a debate in Government time so that the causes of this crisis can be vigorously examined and addressed?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has taken a big interest in rail matters over many years, and I have had the pleasure of working with him on some of them. He will be aware that the Government are making the biggest investment in the modernisation and maintenance of the railways since the Victorian days, with a £48 billion plan to deliver better journeys and fewer disruptions. Nevertheless, the recent problems with delays, cancellations and so on have been completely unacceptable. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a Backbench Business debate so that Members can share their concerns.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): This weekend sees the conclusion of the Scottish Food and Drink Fortnight. On Tuesday, I had the great privilege of hosting a “Taste of East Lothian” event, which was enjoyed by Members from all parties and, indeed, people throughout the parliamentary estate. May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of the Scottish food and drink industry, particularly for small producers and manufacturers?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the “Taste of East Lothian” event, which I was very sorry not to get to because Scottish food and drink is excellent and it would have been a great pleasure to attend. The hon. Gentleman is exactly right that Scottish food and drink is an important sector within the UK’s overall food and drink sector. Scottish products include smoked salmon, whisky, chocolate and shortbread—there are so many fabulous things that come out of Scotland that we all enjoy so much. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate at the very least so that we can all share in a celebration of all things Scottish.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): During the summer recess, I had the pleasure of visiting the Royal Highland Fusiliers, 2nd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland. They are based in my constituency and have had a very busy year with deployments in Iraq, South Sudan and Cyprus. This month, they will parade through Penicuik and celebrate their achievements with the community—they are very well valued in the community. There is, though, a risk that we will lose the battalion because of the planned closure of Glencorse barracks. Will the Leader of the House consider scheduling a debate on bases in Scotland, and perhaps throughout the UK, as I know that many Members will share my concerns?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the excellent work of the regiment in her constituency. We would all like to take the opportunity to thank all our armed forces for all the excellent work that they do. The hon. Lady might like to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise her particular concern about that proposed closure.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): May we have a debate on the incompetence of the Home Office? I wrote to the Home Secretary on 6 June about five specific constituents who are suffering under the paragraph 322(5) immigration rules, which are affecting highly skilled migrants, including a mother with three children who is being threatened with eviction and can see no end to the process. We were promised on 21 June that there would be a review in the next few weeks, but no such review has emerged. Too many highly skilled migrants are waiting for the Government to make a decision while living in poverty and racking up huge debts. When will we have a decision so that people can get on with their lives?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises some important specific constituency concerns. If she would like to write to me, I can take the matter up with Home Office Ministers directly on her behalf.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Every single day, another voice is added to those of the many thousands of organisations, businesses and people in this country

who are criticising the Government for taking the economy off a cliff with a possible no-deal Brexit. May we have a statement from the appropriate Minister on how many critical voices are required before the Government change their policy?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that the hon. Gentleman would acknowledge that there was a democratic vote to leave the European Union, and I think he might also like to celebrate the fact that the economy is now 17% bigger than it was eight years ago, when this Government came in. The deficit has been cut by three quarters, income tax has been cut for 31 million people, and debt will fall as a percentage of GDP next year, which means that we can spend on public services rather than on debt repayments. This Government are getting our economy back on track at the same time as fulfilling the democratic will of the people. It is absolutely our intention to depart from the EU in a way that works for the United Kingdom and for our EU friends and neighbours.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Ministers claim that the “hostile environment”; is being dismantled, but the Home Office is still charging British children of migrant parents £1,000 to prove their nationality, even though the admin fee is only £300. The Home Office also charges councils such Southwark, my own, hundreds of thousands of pounds, and it uses a premium rate helpline for councils seeking information that they are legally required to have before they are allowed under Home Office rules to provide services to destitute families. When will the Government provide time to debate how they continue to profiteer from the “hostile environment”?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that fees for visas and immigration-related matters are there to fund the service—the administration. He is not right to suggest that that is profiteering. The fee is there to fund a public service. If he wants to raise his specific concerns around particular constituency issues, he might either like to seek an Adjournment debate or, if he wants to write to me, I can take it up with Home Office Ministers for him.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent, Drew Clark, while still grieving the loss of his wife, received a letter from the Department for Work and Pensions demanding that, following her death, he repay some personal independence payment money. As Members can imagine, he was so disgusted that he ripped up the letter. My office tried to get a copy of that letter from the DWP, but was advised that, due to the automated process that sends the letter out, copies are not available. Surely we can program a system that records correspondence and, more importantly, have a system that includes compassion and common sense once a death is notified and that moves away from saying:

“We have a duty to collect overpaid public funds.”

At least there has now been a concession, and the DWP is no longer going to chase the paltry £142, but may we have a statement from the Leader of the House on changes that the Government plan to make to this system?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the experience of the hon. Gentleman’s constituent. He will be aware that we have DWP questions on 15 October—in the second week back—when he might like to take up that issue directly with Ministers.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House may be aware that the Welsh Government have recently announced more than £2 billion of investment in the Welsh railway network, but the reality is that 11% of the track receives only 1% of its investment from the UK Government. Will she arrange for the Transport Secretary to come to the Floor of the House to explain when he will be setting out plans to invest in the Welsh railway network that are actually passenger focused, rather than as with the debacle of the electrification fiasco. In that way we can ensure that, for Welsh rail users, the network is improved with investment from the people who are responsible for it—the British Government.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman seeks a very specific answer to an issue around rail investment, but what I can say to him is that the UK Government really have focused on investing in Wales. They have abolished tolls on the River Severn; introduced city and growth deals, such as the Swansea Bay city deal; introduced fairer funding for Wales—[*Interruption.*] I totally understand, but the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government are focused on improving jobs and growth right across Wales. That is our absolute focus.

With regard to the rail electrification, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made it clear at the time that, rather than going through the enormous upheaval of rail electrification, we are investing in a new fleet of inter-city express trains that will significantly enhance the travel experience without the need for the disruption that would be caused by the electrification programme.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Can we have a debate in Government time on consumer rights? My Sandyhills constituent, John Morgan, lost his deposit on a sofa bought through House of Fraser just before it went into financial difficulties. He lost that money because it had not been passed on to the manufacturer. May we have a debate on consumer rights so that other Members can raise similar cases and we can get justice for our constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: I totally understand that it is incredibly frustrating for anyone when they have bought something in good faith but are then unable to get a refund because it was faulty or whatever. The hon. Gentleman might like to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise this specific issue on behalf of his constituent.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): The excellent Save Our Schools East Midlands campaign has highlighted that 82 out of 84 schools in the city of Nottingham face real-terms cuts by 2020. This is an abysmal set of affairs. I know that the Leader of the House shares my enthusiasm for early intervention and investment in our children, so may we please have a debate in Government time about what a false economy these real-terms cuts are?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely share the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm about the importance of a good education for every young person, so I hope that he is as delighted as I am that there are now nearly 2 million more pupils in good or outstanding schools than was the case in 2010, and that now 86% of schools in England are rated as good or outstanding—up from 68% in 2010. School

funding is absolutely vital, but even more important is outcomes for children, and we see those outcomes improving consistently.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This week I met representatives from Christian Solidarity Worldwide and some people from India, and I was made aware of the persecution of people of a Christian faith and of a Muslim faith in India. Since 2014, there has been significant increase in mob violence committed by Hindu nationalist groups against religious minorities in India. Communal violence has risen by a third between 2014 and 2017, resulting in 111 people being killed and 2,384 being wounded in 2017 alone. Moreover, the growth of Hindu nationalism in that country has led to the introduction of anti-conversion laws in eight Indian states, which is very worrying. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement or a debate on these very worrying and extreme circumstances?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman often raises such important matters of freedom of religion or belief—he is absolutely right to do so. We are very concerned about the severity and scale of violations of freedom of religion or belief in many parts of the world. It is because this is a priority area that, at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, which included Prime Minister Modi, our Prime Minister re-emphasised our commitment to protecting and promoting democratic principles and human rights for everybody.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It seems that not a day goes by without another tale of woe on the high street, particularly in the retail sector. In Ellesmere Port, we face the loss of our Mecca Bingo, which is a disaster not only for the 20 or so people who work there and the wider high street economy, but for the many older people who use it as a social hub for their daily activities. We really do need some urgent action from the Government to halt this decline, so can we have a ministerial statement on what will be done to save our high streets?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely love bingo. I am very tempted to say something awful about it being unlucky for some, but that is very, very cheesy, so I will not do so.

The hon. Gentleman is exactly right to raise the issue of the high streets. There is a lot of pressure on our high streets at the moment, which is in great part due to the way in which people increasingly shop much more online. The way in which we choose to buy goods and entertain ourselves is different from that of the past. There has been a huge number of debates about our high streets, and the Government have done a lot to try to improve the business rates situation of small businesses and to allow local councils to do much more to promote their high streets, but I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a Back-Bench debate so that all hon. Members can share their views on not only the challenges on their high streets, but some of the possible solutions.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): This time last year saw a pensions transfer frenzy. Nearly 8,000 British Steel pensioners gave up their secure retirement benefits. May we have a statement and a review of the work of the Financial Conduct Authority? We need to stamp out the bad behaviour of pensions sharks such as Active Wealth.

Andrea Leadsom: I am certainly aware of the problem of cold callers and fraud in the pensions sector, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise it. It is certainly something that he might want to take up through an Adjournment debate so that he can talk directly with Treasury Ministers, who have done a lot in government to try to clamp down on fake sales, cold calling and so on, which often affects elderly and vulnerable pensioners.

Points of Order

1.9 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Individuals wishing to renew passports earlier than their expiry date are being informed by the Passport Office that Government rules since 10 September state that the expiry date of the replacement passport will be based on the time of the renewal, not the original passport's expiry date. We know that many countries demand six months' validity to allow entry, so many people are forced to apply early. Have the Government given any indication that they will inform the House about that change?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that I have received no such indication, and I first learned of this matter when the hon. Lady beetled up to the Chair to notify me of her intention to raise a point of order. It is obviously a significant matter, which the Leader of the House will have heard. I suggest that the hon. Lady might wish to pursue it with Ministers in expectation of some sort of statement or response.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It has come to my attention that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has knowingly allowed staff members to access the parliamentary estate without the correct security clearances or passes. Our police and security services work hard to keep us safe in here. Facilitating a breach of the House's security procedures should be deeply concerning to everyone who works in this Palace. Will you please confirm, Mr Speaker, whether you have grounds for taking disciplinary action against the right hon. Gentleman and indicate any further action that you are considering to maintain security?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and I assume that he notified the Leader of the Opposition of it in advance. My very clear understanding is that the matter has been resolved. I know that most Members would not expect me to discuss an individual case on the Floor of the House, but I am satisfied that the issue has been resolved.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am terribly sorry that I was not here for the beginning of business questions, when I gather that the Leader of the House referred to me in quite pleasant terms, which is very kind of her.

The Mother of the House referred earlier to yesterday's events regarding the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and his family. Against that background, where all too often politics is seen to be rough and tumble, aggressive and nasty, I wonder whether we could introduce a formal process of occasionally thanking Members on the opposite side of the House. I would then want to thank the Leader of the House for her help in getting my Bill on the statute book. I would also like to pay tribute to the person who did far more work than me on that—my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). She started the process and took it a great deal of the way. If we had more opportunities to show cross-party support for and appreciation of one another, we might end up being a better Parliament.

Mr Speaker: It is possible that that would result. It may also be in the hon. Gentleman's mind in making that perfectly reasonable suggestion that if there were such a regular opportunity, it would give him the chance to show what a thoroughly agreeable fellow he can be. *[Interruption.]* I think we will leave it there for today. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his characteristic ingenuity and to colleagues for their points of order.

Proxy Voting

1.13 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move,

That this House has considered proxy voting in the House of Commons.

Today's important debate has been eagerly anticipated by a number of Members across the House. It was, of course, scheduled for before the summer recess, but it was right that a statement on a matter of national security took precedence on that day. I am pleased, however, that we are able to hear the views of the House today, and consider the many issues surrounding the matter.

I have made my personal commitment clear—I want a House of Commons suited to our times. I pay tribute to all MPs who have helped to progress this important issue. Members of all parties have shown true commitment to making positive changes in Parliament. In particular, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) are vocal advocates of this matter. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) the Chair of the Procedure Committee, who has had to cancel several important engagements to be here for the debate today, and his fellow Committee members for their work and constructive engagement.

Over the past year, we have made great progress in modernising and opening up our Parliament for future generations. We have also debated some of the most important issues of our time, and that is where we see Parliament at its best. In this historic Session, we have sought to stamp out bullying and harassment by establishing the new independent complaints and grievance policy to ensure that everyone who works here is treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. As a House, we made the historic decision to restore the Palace of Westminster. That will create a workplace that is safe, accessible and fit for the 21st century while continuing to embrace the conventions and traditions of the House so that future generations can enjoy this place for many centuries to come.

We have prioritised ensuring that the House has the chance to debate the biggest issues that the country faces, whether on Brexit or the Government's legislative programme, on which we have introduced 38 Bills. Twenty-three of them have already received Royal Assent. The almost 280 hours spent by Parliament in debating the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 demonstrate our commitment to ensuring that Parliament plays a central role as we leave the EU.

Throughout this year, we have been celebrating 100 years of women's suffrage and I have been delighted to meet groups around the country to make the case for our parliamentary democracy. Every day, we are encouraging more women to engage in politics, as well as celebrating the great strides we have made in the past century, even though we all know there is still so much more to do.

I have carefully considered the issue before us today, and spent time speaking to colleagues of all parties. I take this opportunity to say again that my door is always open if Members want to make further representations to me on how we can make this work. We must make sure that we get this right the first time

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

and look at all the options to ensure that new mothers and fathers can effectively represent their constituents, while at the same time allowing them to secure that vital early bond with their babies.

During the BackBench Business debate on the matter earlier this year, I was pleased to be able to set out my commitment to championing early-years attachment, which has been a personal priority for me for decades. I have worked with a number of charities on this very important issue and I am pleased to chair an inter-ministerial group to look at what more support we can provide for families in the perinatal period. I say to all colleagues in this House: make no mistake, I am committed to ensuring that the Government do all they can to allow new parents to spend that vital early time with their babies.

As I said in last week's business questions, today is an opportunity for all views to be heard. While I commend the desire of some Members to introduce a substantive motion today, this will be a significant change to our voting practices and procedures, whereby Members, for the first time ever, will not have to be present to vote. I have confirmed that we will bring forward a substantive motion on the matter, but we must move forward responsibly, having had the fullest opportunity to consider all the implications.

Proxy voting will be a profound change to the procedures of this House, so we must get it right to ensure robust voting practice for generations to come. If we take this significant step now, in my view, we will have a fairer, more inclusive Parliament for future generations.

Following the debate earlier this year, the Procedure Committee produced a report that helpfully outlined how proxy voting could work in practice and how such a change in procedure could be facilitated through an amendment to Standing Orders. However, the Committee recognised that the proposals also included a number of outstanding questions, which I hope we can consider carefully today.

First, the Procedure Committee's report did not seek to evaluate the particular merits of proxy voting or indeed to compare it with other reforms that could facilitate baby leave for Members. That is not a criticism. The Committee was, after all, responding to the resolution of the House. However, if the House is to take forward such a significant change properly, it is worth airing all the options and their consequences, including potential unintended consequences.

In particular, I would welcome views from Members on whether proxy voting should just be limited to new parents, and whether we are giving the correct support to those who suffer the heartbreak of losing a child. Consideration needs to be given to the types of business for which proxy voting should be available. For example, should a proxy be counted for a closure motion, or to determine whether the House is quorate, and is it right that Members should exercise a proxy vote on matters of national security such as committing troops into conflict? Who should exercise a proxy vote on the Member's behalf? Would it be the choice of the Member to nominate, or should it be a system overseen through existing party structures such as the Whips' offices? Finally, although I recognise this is not an exhaustive list and other Members will have further questions and

points to make, what are the merits of the existing arrangements versus a new system? Pairing and nodding through can offer the flexibility and, importantly, the privacy as to their personal circumstances that many Members are looking for. Although this system has been rightly criticised in recent months, there is scope to make changes to existing systems to ensure that they are more transparent and fit for purpose.

Secondly, I would welcome views on the range of approaches, including, as I have mentioned, whether more formalised and transparent pairing or nodding through might be a simpler and more workable solution. I note, for example, that on 18 July the shadow Leader of the House made the case that

"proxy voting for those on baby leave could be introduced today without the need for debate through public agreement by all parties to nod through those on baby leave for every Division".—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 430.]

Thirdly, I would welcome views on whether there is risk in having both a system of proxy voting and other existing arrangements running in parallel, and, indeed, whether that could have unintended consequences. Would a system of choice create an obligation to choose the complete transparency of nominating a proxy, when in fact some Members may wish to have the privacy not to disclose publicly why they are absent—for example, if there were complications with a pregnancy or, of course, in instances of bereavement?

Fourthly, Members of Parliament are office-holders, not employees. Whereas many employees have line managers, Members have 75,000-odd voters to answer to. I do not mean 75,000 odd voters; I mean 75,000-odd voters, just to be clear. Many employees can arrange cover if they go on leave or on holiday, but if a Member misses a vote in Parliament, no one else can take their place. So any change in voting procedures needs to recognise the unique employment status of a Member of Parliament.

Finally, the need for clarity will be vital. Avoiding confusion or error would require advance notice to the House, meaning that the flexibility to decide at the last minute to attend a vote or, indeed, to change one's vote may not be available to that Member—and of course, if a Member chooses a proxy who is unable to attend on their behalf, not only is their vote lost. Without a robust voting system, we risk undermining parliamentary democracy at its core.

I really, genuinely look forward to listening to today's debate. Having considered the views of the House, the Government will then bring forward a substantive motion as soon as possible. It is my intention, and the intention of many Members in all parts of this House, to make Parliament as family-friendly and accessible as it can be. However, it is important that we do not compromise the integrity of the voting system through rushed or badly thought through proposals. It is important that any new system has consensus in this House, because it needs to stand up to the test of modern life. I have raised a number of questions already, and I have set out some of the issues that colleagues have highlighted to me in recent months, to which it is important that we give consideration today.

I thank all those contributing to today's debate and those who have contributed to the debate over the past few months. As someone who has campaigned, for over 20 years now, on the importance of early attachment

and the first 1,001 critical days, I am determined that we get this right and that Parliament is a role model, not lagging behind. I look forward to taking the next steps in making sure that parents get that vital time to spend focused on their new babies.

1.24 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for opening the debate. We had a Back-Bench debate on this subject on 1 February. This is the second debate, and I think, from what the Leader of the House has said, that there is going to be yet another, this time on a substantive motion.

Following the breakdown of the pairing system on 17 July, Mr Speaker, you said during the urgent question on proxy voting that

“there is concern about a potentially endless debate”, and that

“people would not want...procrastination.”—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 430.]

I am not sure what the Leader of the House was actually saying—whether she is going to take further evidence or is going to ask the Procedure Committee to look at this issue again. I cannot see how, other than through this debate, she is going to be informed as to what the procedure will be. Is it going to be a formal committee, or is it not? They are very fine, warm words, but what we want now is action, because I had understood that everyone had agreed on the principle. Labour’s business managers have tried to discuss this with the Government; they have offered to meet to resolve it. Babies will have been born and grown up, gone to school, left school and probably gone to university before the Government finally agree on proxy voting.

I, too, want to move the debate forward. It is important to do that, because I had understood that we had all agreed on the principle of proxy voting, yet this motion seems to be narrow in merely discussing proxy voting in general. I want to focus on the process of how we could take this issue forward. I thank the Procedure Committee—its Chair and other members are here—for its diligence in undertaking the inquiry to ensure that this issue does not go away. The Committee reported on 9 May. In the meantime, hon. Members such as my hon. Friends the Members for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) and for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) and the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) have all recently given birth. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) is about to give birth, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) is also pregnant. We want to act quickly.

The Leader of the House is right: hon. Members are not employees; we are here to represent our constituents, and our work in this place is undertaken in the Chamber, on Select Committees, on taskforces, in other Committees, and in our constituencies. This relates to the narrow principle of those giving birth who, for whatever reason, are unable to be physically present in the Chamber but are not incapacitated by illness or away on an official visit. We are not referring to a natural process as an incapacity, but one where the needs of a child are paramount, and the parent needs flexibility. Added to that, our hours are not normal working hours. Business managers were able to support women when they needed to be away, and were able to agree some concessions, but now, in a 21st-century Parliament, hon. Members consider that this should become a right.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a strong case. I rise very conscious of time, as a dad with serious childcare issues to get back for. I have a nine-year-old daughter who expects me to pick her up and take her to her drama class this evening. I say that in the context of my needing to get away, sadly, but also in wanting to add the voice of a dad to this argument. Too often, it is left to women to make the case for this. It is as much dads like me who need, and believe in, the change that is going to come. I welcome the tone that the Leader of the House has taken. Once this has been put to a vote—I appreciated her assumptive tone—and we have decided that it is to become standard practice, do we really, as a human organisation, given that bodies make babies in nine months, need to take any longer than that to come up with this process by which we can reflect the rest of the country and, indeed, most of the world in doing our job even though we are parents?

Valerie Vaz: My hon. Friend has eloquently put his case for being called early to speak, so that he can get back to his family. I recall when he came down to vote with Bobby in his arms, who had just been born. It is great to see a hands-on dad. A lot of men nowadays are hands-on dads who want to be part of their children’s upbringing.

We are now in a 21st-century Parliament, and we need a 21st-century solution. I get the flavour that the principle is more or less agreed by most Members, which is why I want to touch on the process, because that will inform the debate as to whether this modern practice is workable.

I know that there has been a great deal of discussion behind the scenes to come up with a workable solution. The Leader of the House touched on the process known as “nodding through”, which means that in specific circumstances where a Member is ill or infirm but is on the estate, they are verified as being that person by representatives of the Whips, so that they do not have to pass through the Lobby. That arrangement is in place because a Member may be physically unable to walk through the estate, but it may not apply to what we are talking about today, which is Members who are not here and cannot be here because they are about to give birth or need to be with their children.

I have read the note of the Clerk of the House and thank him for setting out the important point that there should be transparency in the voting process, as suggested in the Procedure Committee’s report. Members who have given birth and are unable to vote have faced a torrent of abuse for poor voting records, so we need to do something. It may not be possible to agree slipping or pairing arrangements, as the smaller parties may not be able to do so.

Incorporating the principle with the need for a record of Members not being present and Members being able to cast their vote in a transparent way could be undertaken in the following way. A representative of all the parties could meet you, Mr Speaker, when necessary to agree in a memorandum of understanding the names of Members who want to exercise a proxy vote for a duration. It would then be up to the House to agree how long that would be for after the expected date of delivery, and the agreed list would be presented to the Clerks in the normal way in the voting Lobby. The Procedure Committee suggested that there could be a sign near the name of

[Valerie Vaz]

the Member, with the name of the proxy. After the normal vote is recorded, a list could be added for the Ayes and Noes with the words “and by proxy”. The names of the Members who had exercised this right would then be in the official record. Alternatively, Mr Speaker, you could read out a list, as you do when naming the Tellers, of the people voting by proxy. That would then be in the record, and it would be necessary to say whether people had voted Aye or Noe.

There are a number of ways of listening to a debate now. Parliament’s 24-hour channel enables Members who are with their babies to continue to be part of the House and do their duty on behalf of their constituents, as the debate can still inform their vote, while balancing that with family life. As we all know, babies wait for no one, and rightly, we must put them first. With proxy voting exercised in a transparent way, Members can still fulfil their duties to their constituents at times when they cannot be present in this specific way, but their voice and that of their constituents can still be heard in Parliament.

1.33 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, as it largely centres on a report produced by the Procedure Committee, which I have the great privilege of chairing. On our various journeys, I am accompanied by a fantastic crew of able seamen and women. We get the rigging up, get the sails billowing and travel across many oceans. I have here a copy of our report. It is a serious and thoughtful bit of work, but it is not perfection. As colleagues will know, perfection is a plain and ugly thing; it is like a landscape painting without a point of interest or relief. There is no perfection in this report, just some pretty good ideas.

I would like to say a few things before I move on. I have really enjoyed getting to know the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman)—what a really nice woman she is. When I was a young man, before I got into Parliament, I would watch the TV and see this Cabinet Minister sweeping in and out, and there was an aura around her. There still is an aura around her, but she is a very warm person, and I have enjoyed getting to know her. The Leader of the House is a very warm person as well. She has been absolutely straight in her dealings with the Procedure Committee on this and other matters. I have so much regard for her because she takes her role seriously and she is straight, and I say that with absolute sincerity.

I am a Conservative Member of Parliament and a massive small “c” conservative. I am such a large small “c” conservative that I could happily find a place in the Labour Whips Office. If Momentum does not like that, it is because it does not have a sense of humour. Neither am I evangelical. Evangelicals are too certain in their own certainties. I am a thoughtful, considered person, full of reflection and self-doubt. I do not have all the answers, and neither does the Procedure Committee, but we get pretty close with this report.

Funnily enough, Mr Speaker, you have a central role in overseeing this process, because you will certify who the proxy is and who the Member of Parliament is who

is seeking that proxy. It is very important that Members of Parliament retain the right to choose their proxy, because after all the vote belongs to the Member of Parliament. I have had suggestions from the Labour Whips Office, for example, that they should cast the vote on behalf of their Members. Funnily enough, the Conservative Whips Office thought, “What a cracking idea! We’ve got more in common than we ever thought possible.”

But I do not want the Whips to be involved in this. I would be more than happy to give my vote to, for example, the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas)—a man I trust implicitly. I go fishing with him, and we have spent happy days on riverbanks. I know that he is an honourable gentleman, and if I asked him to vote on my behalf, he would go through his Lobby and then go through my Lobby, and on occasions we might find ourselves in the same Lobby. It is very important for us to recognise that it should be the Member who decides whether to have a proxy, not to have a proxy, to go with pairing or to do nothing at all.

We have discussed that the period of eligibility for a proxy vote is six months from the point of birth, or it could be just before the point of birth. I know that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) has some way to travel to get here, and, strangely, airplanes do not like to take pregnant women on board a month before the point of birth. There are logistical issues such as that. We also make provision for you, Mr Speaker, in extremis to extend that by four weeks, to recognise that there could be emergencies.

Before I continue, it is important that I also say nice things about the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), because I do not want to leave her out of this—she is looking at me in a circumspect way. She has been enormously helpful and always willing to give evidence to the Committee, and I thank her immensely for all the time she has given us.

Clearly, as both the shadow Leader of the House and the Leader of the House pointed out, the House will have to decide on the procedures around proxy voting and whether it should be used on, for example, closure motions. Our Committee says that when the House is seeking to establish whether it is quorate, proxy voting should not be used, and nor should it be used when we seek an early Dissolution for a general election on the two-thirds threshold.

Recognising that we play an important part in national and political life, we have to be mindful of our responsibilities to our constituents. Should a proxy vote be cast when we are committing our constituents’ children to a field of conflict? We need to be very careful in areas like that. I am feeling optimistic that, although this report is not perfect, it is travelling in the right direction.

There are some colleagues who rightly say, “But what about when a Member is very ill or caring for someone who is very ill?” That is a wholly legitimate question, but I would say this in response. In most cases, having a baby or bringing a child into this world is a joyous occasion that is difficult to hide and something that most people want to share. That is entirely different from battling a severe illness. I am absolutely not going to cast aside pairing, because pairing is very important for retaining anonymity. If we had proxy voting for an illness, a Member would have to declare why they had a

proxy vote, and that would remove the cloak of anonymity. Before people ask whether this is the slippery slope, I would answer by saying, “Yes, it is the slippery slope if you choose it to be, but be careful before making that argument because it may lead you to some fairly difficult places.”

Do I have more to say? Yes, I do. I always have more to say, but I forget to say it.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for very kindly giving way, which gives him a moment to regain any thoughts he may want to add in conclusion. May I extend to him the thanks of Opposition Members and my thanks personally for the leadership he has shown in overseeing this report and the work his Committee has done? His report was done—concluded and published—in May, which was obviously a number of months ago. Does he share my view that there is an appetite on both sides of the House to see some quick progress on the outcome of his report?

Mr Walker: That was a stunning intervention for three reasons: first, it was very good; secondly, it was delivered very well; and thirdly, I have remembered exactly what I wanted to say. The answer is yes, yes, yes, and this is what I wanted to say.

It is the case, and research is available suggesting that women coming to this place have fewer children before they get here and, if they are of child-bearing years, they have fewer children once they are here. As I have said, I am a dyed-in-the-wool small “c” conservative and I hate change. There are going to be people suggesting electronic voting. I will of course look into electronic voting, and I know it is important to some colleagues on the Committee, but I do not like it, and I will be honest about that. In case you had not gathered, Mr Speaker, I am not particularly a great fan of proxy voting, but I have to say that I am a greater fan of allowing as many women as possible to choose to come to this place, get elected to this place and, once here, prosper in this place.

That is all I want to say. This has been—we are in the early stages of it, but I imagine it will be—a good-natured debate. Once again, I thank all those colleagues who have contributed to this report with their evidence, time and good humour.

Mr Speaker: May I just say to the hon. Gentleman that the word “good-natured” could have been invented to describe him?

1.43 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I am very glad that I can contribute to this debate, as it falls in the period when I am briefly back in the saddle before going off on a further period of leave in October. Colleagues will not be surprised that I, having introduced shared parental leave as a Minister, and Duncan have chosen to share caring for our new baby.

I want to put on the record my sincere thanks to you, Mr Speaker, and in particular to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), for enabling me to speak early in the debate. The slight changes to its timing, with the urgent question and the statement, have made the feeding and

expressing schedule slightly difficult. Gabriel will be arriving in the House in half an hour or so, so I really appreciate colleagues’ help in enabling me to make my speech at this point.

I do wish that I could say I welcomed this debate, which for some of us it is too little, too late. This House first resolved that Members with small babies should be able to vote by proxy seven months ago. Since then, Gabriel, Elijah and Solomon have been born, whom, instead of calling “honourable”, we might call the “adorable” babies for East Dunbartonshire, for Lancaster and Fleetwood and for North West Durham. Two more Commons babies are on the way, and I am sure colleagues will join me in sending good wishes to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), whose baby is due next week, and the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who says she wishes she could be here. Unfortunately, she is experiencing heavy morning sickness, but she has been a strong campaigner for proxy voting. I very much welcome the contribution from the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) and members of his Committee, who, to their credit, have produced an excellent report. They carried out the inquiry swiftly, and it is almost four months ago that they published their report recommending motions to be put to the House to make proxy voting on baby leave a reality, yet here we are having another general debate.

I can absolutely see the merit of looking at proxy voting more widely than in cases of baby leave, not least after the atrocious treatment of the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) back in June. She travelled hundreds of miles in an ambulance from hospital, and was wheeled through the Lobby with a sick bucket on her lap. This does need to be looked at, but that is no reason to delay cracking on with the vote on introducing proxy voting for baby leave along the lines suggested in the report. It is better to take a step forward now than wait for perfection that may never arise.

I want to share the message one of my new fellow parly mums has sent me. She said:

“I am sick of being asked to vote on this and that by constituents and having to reply about pairing. People either don’t know what it is or they do because of how you were done over by the Tories—not a great advert!”

I have to say she puts it very compellingly. A cynic might conclude that, because all five pregnant or new mum MPs sit on the Opposition Benches, the Government are trying to kick this issue into the long grass. After what happened to me in July, I think I might be forgiven for being cynical about the Government’s motivations. I am sure the House can imagine my fury when I found out that the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) had voted in those two knife-edge Brexit Divisions, despite being paired with me, as I nursed my two-week-old baby.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady find it mysterious, as I did at the time, that the right hon. Gentleman actually remembered the pairing system on the other votes, which were not so close?

Jo Swinson: That really gave the lie to the line that this was some kind of honest mistake. It was, quite simply, a shameful act for the Government Chief Whip to ask a Member to break a pairing arrangement and for him to agree. It clearly was not an honest mistake, especially when it emerged that other MPs had also

[Jo Swinson]

been asked to break their pair in those Divisions. I would say that, whether for reasons of maternity or illness or anything else, there is nothing honourable about deliberately breaking a pairing. It is cheating, plain and simple. What a sign of desperation!

However, on a more positive note, I want to put on the record my thanks to MPs from right across the House, and I include the Leader of the House in this, for the support they gave me when that happened. In particular, I say to those Conservative MPs who told their Chief Whip to take a running jump when he asked them to break their pair—unnamed, but they know who they are, whoever they are—that that is the behaviour of an honourable Member.

Despite the support of lots of people in the House, not quite everybody was supportive. On Twitter, I was told that

“duty comes before your health, happiness or family, if you’re not up to that, resign”,

and

“she should decide whether she wants to be a mother or an MP”.

A journalist wrote about

“whingeing women MPs who are not serious about parliamentary work”.

I have to say that one Member of this House questioned why on earth I could not spend five hours voting in Parliament in the evening with a two-week-old baby, because I had managed to spend 45 minutes in the afternoon at an anti-Trump demonstration a few days earlier. Well, I wonder why.

Maternity leave is a hard-won right, and no new mum should have to justify her activities when she leaves the house with her baby. Any parent of a newborn knows that just leaving the house is an achievement in itself. I do want to use my voice to help people who do not know what it is like and to understand the challenges so that they might be a little slower to cast judgment on new parents in future, and I want to talk frankly about breastfeeding.

When our first son was born, we tried everything to get him to latch on properly. We searched endlessly online for advice. We went to breastfeeding support groups, and we attempted every possible position to get a good latch. All the while, we were desperately trying to syringe enough expressed milk into his mouth, every couple of hours, so that he would not get ill. That was for only eight days, but it felt like an eternity. I am glad we persevered, because once you get the hang of it, breastfeeding is lovely, and frankly much less hassle than formula. Sleep deprivation can make people forget things, but if they are breastfeeding, that is one less thing to have to remember when they leave the house. Of course, not everyone can breastfeed, and the whole breast and bottle debate is just one more stick that is used to beat new mothers with. Parents need much more support and much less judgment.

This time round it was much easier to establish breastfeeding, but it still takes some time before mother and baby are confident and practised enough to get a good latch quickly at every feed. People are often less comfortable feeding in public in those early days—after a while, they can get up and answer the door while still feeding the baby and not break the latch, but at the

beginning, they might find themselves staying perfectly still during a feed so that they do not disrupt the latch. A four-month-old can easily finish feeding in 10 minutes, but a four-week-old might take 45 minutes or more. Small babies can get confused switching between nipples and bottle teats, which is why the advice is not to use the bottle as well as the boob for the first four to six weeks. I doubt that such details have been discussed much in Parliament previously, but when we are considering how MPs can combine being a new parent with their responsibilities as an elected representative, it is important context.

Luciana Berger: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting the challenges of feeding a baby, whether by bottle or breastmilk. I had to bring my baby in for a vote when she was around three months old. My baby was unable to latch on properly, even at that point, and I sat in the tea-room with a cover over me, trying to feed my baby and vote. I ended up feeding her in the Lobbies behind us, because I was determined and she wanted to eat. I do not think that is an appropriate setting for a baby of that age, and I welcome the hon. Lady’s comments. These are the realities for mothers across the House.

Jo Swinson: Absolutely, and that is part of the challenge. What should someone do if they are in the middle of a feed and the Division bell rings? Do they stand up and try not to disrupt their baby, or do they feed in the Lobby, as the hon. Lady did? When babies are a lot older it is easier to manage those things, but there is a reason why proxy voting would be so helpful for parents of very young babies.

Above all, newborn babies are unpredictable. Duncan put it well to me the other day when he described being on parental leave by saying, “It’s like you need a bottomless well of contingency.” I just thought, absolutely. Someone can try to plan their day according to when their baby might respond best, when to go out, and when the baby is likely to sleep and be happy and not to fuss—in Gabriel’s case, that is early afternoon. Someone could be ready to head out, but then all of a sudden there is an up-the-back poo explosion, which means not just a change of nappy, but a change of vest and babygro. By the time they have cleaned all that up, the baby is hungry again, and by the time they have fed and winded them and are ready to go, they are more than an hour late for whatever it was they were doing.

That is not a massive problem if it means that someone has missed baby rhyme time, or if they have had to text an apology to a friend, who is also a parent and will totally understand that they will be late or miss the coffee they were going to have. Indeed, if someone does not manage to make it to an anti-Trump protest after all, nothing bad will happen. However, if it means that someone has missed a key vote in Parliament, that is an entirely different calculation, which is why it is so important to have a proper system for proxy voting.

Expressed milk is a lifeline for breastfeeding mums who go back to work, but it is not necessarily easy. As Gabriel is still just 10 weeks old, my diary has to accommodate slots for expressing or feeding several times a day, and I sit doing paperwork as the pump whirrs away noisily in the background. I am lucky; I have advantages that many mums do not enjoy. I have both a private office to express milk in, and the ability largely to control my diary. One member of parliamentary

staff has been in touch with me to tell me of her frustrated attempts to find somewhere private to express milk when on the parliamentary estate. Although this debate is about voting, we must do better for breastfeeding mums who work in Parliament, whatever their role, and I hope that the House of Commons Commission will respond positively to that challenge.

We legislate here for the employment rights of new parents, but far too often those are flouted. In our country, 54,000 women a year lose their jobs because of pregnancy and maternity discrimination, and that is a huge disincentive for men who want to be more involved as fathers when they see the consequences and what happens to mothers. We must do better at enforcing those rights, and we must set the tone for this issue. To put it simply, we must put our own house in order and make this simple change to enable new parents to fulfil their responsibilities to their child and their constituents. We should get on with it.

1.55 pm

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the powerful speech made by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), who shared her direct experiences with us all. My children were born a long time ago, but what I and my wife went through, when we both worked at that time, came back to me, even though back then we were in different worlds and different jobs. I congratulate the hon. Lady not only on her speech, but on how she has coped so magnificently with the difficult circumstances in which she found herself.

It is a privilege to make a short contribution to this debate, and I begin by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House on her thoughtful and constructive speech. As a member of the Procedure Committee, I have had the privilege of serving under our Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), whose brilliant speech highlighted the issues and his passionate commitment to ensuring that this matter is dealt with as soon as possible.

I have experience of being in the Government Whips Office. Indeed, as a former pairing Whip, I feel that I am in a unique position from which to comment on how we worked closely with the Opposition Whips Office to do the best we could in a pairing situation, with a Member matched with another Member so that they could be absent for a period of time. I put on record that while I was in the Whips Office—from 2012 until earlier this year—we worked well and tried, under existing arrangements, to accommodate requests for both maternity and paternity leave from right hon. and hon. Members. Such requests were always looked on favourably, and we also worked with people who had to be absent due to family circumstances such as illness or other important reasons. I think that we did that quite well. I also had the privilege to take over from the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), while she was away on six months' maternity leave.

Having listened to the powerful and moving arguments made in our evidence sessions, I believe we have to make changes that are appropriate to this country and this Chamber in 2018. I particularly acknowledge the rational and logical arguments that were passionately put forward

by the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who cannot be with us today. Both made brilliant contributions to our deliberations in Committee, and we tried to ensure that this change can be made quickly. This issue should not be parked; it needs to be dealt with as soon as possible. We also heard from a number of witnesses that the current situation is unsuitable for new parents. Powerful points have been raised in interventions, as well as in the speech made by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire.

People outside this House do not understand how pairing works or what it is. It is an informal situation, and the absence is not publicly recorded. It has been pointed out, including by some of my constituents, that people are unaware of why Members are not present when they are actually doing valuable work with their newborn children. I strongly believe that bonding in the early years, which my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House mentioned, is important to forge the relationship between a new parent and their child, which provides the basis for a relationship that will, hopefully, continue throughout life.

I am well aware of the importance of not bringing Members back from maternity or paternity leave for votes in this place. As a former Whip, I know that votes here are very important—I think we all believe that—but there are other more important considerations, which the report highlights and takes into account, that need to be dealt with.

There is much still to debate—I am confident that this will happen—regarding how proxy voting can be implemented. I have to say that, like my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne, I am not in favour of change for change's sake. Change has to take place because of a real need and because society has changed. I do not think that we should end the pairing system in other circumstances. This proposal is a one-off, and it is really important that it is implemented as soon as possible. This is different, and a powerful case for changing from the old way we have done things has been made.

Forgive me, but I would like to quote the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham, who said:

“We set rules for people outside this House to taken maternity, paternity and shared parental leave, and yet we ourselves have no system.”

That is quite a damning indictment, is it not, when we are making rules for other people? I know that, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said, we are different, but that does not mean that the basics should not be looked at, because human relationships are the same whatever our job or situation happens to be. Our job is unique, but these proposals are sensible.

I could not accept proxy voting for all absences. As I said, I do not believe that that is practical or desirable, but to me the arguments in favour of proxy voting for baby leave, or whatever we want to call it, are compelling. I believe this House would do a disservice to parents and children if we did not consider this very seriously and implement it as quickly as possible. On other fronts, the Whips Offices work closely together to help. I am not going to go down the route of whether pairs had been broken and so on because I do not think that that is helpful to this debate.

[Sir David Evennett]

I apologise, Mr Speaker, but I have a constituency engagement that was already planned, so I will not be here for the end of the debate. I hope that you will forgive me, but I, too, did not anticipate the timing of the debate. I was privileged to be here when we debated this issue previously and I listened to the powerful arguments, none of which could be refuted. I therefore very much hope that proxy voting will be implemented for new mothers and fathers. We should take a different approach—and soon.

2.2 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): First, I would like to thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) to speak before me, because it is important that she gets back to her baby. There is an irony that we are discussing such matters today. I encouraged her, because I am a fan of such things, to bring her son into the Chamber. I did that in Glasgow City Council—I got away with it because everyone was too scared to tell me no. In yesterday's Prime Minister's questions, Members were far, far worse behaved, and far, far noisier, than any baby I have ever seen, so I think that babies could get along in here fairly well on most occasions.

This debate calls for a discussion on proxy voting for Members with new babies, including in relation to adoption, and not just for women Members of Parliament. That is absolutely the right way to look at this. Opportunities to take care of, and to bond with, the child should be given to mothers, fathers and adopted parents equally. I would like to briefly focus particularly on women, who statistically will benefit from this procedural change the most.

If we want a society that tackles inequality, we need a reasonable cross-section of society to be making policy from the grassroots up. Women are sadly still under-represented in politics, and that can lead to policies that do not take women's experiences into account. At the weekend, I spoke to Radiant and Brighter, a group in my constituency, at their "Bright Futures" talk. I said to the women in that room to look at Parliament, but not to think that they cannot be part of it. I said that they should look to be coming behind me and for my job, because their experiences are entirely different from mine. They deserve to be in here as much as anybody else—perhaps more so, given the contributions from some people—and they deserve a place in politics. Their voices deserve to be heard. At the moment, however, they are not being heard.

Women are not a problem to be retrofitted to this place or to the economy. When women's voices are not heard, that leads to policies such as the two-child limit on tax credits which means that women have to prove to the Department for Work and Pensions that a third child was conceived as a result of rape. That applies to women who have no recourse to public funds getting their period on the bus when they cannot afford sanitary protection. It leads to situations such as split payments on universal credit being taken up by only 20 women in the whole of UK in June, because it is too dangerous for women to do so. Those policies have been made in the absence of women's voices and the policies are poorer

as a result. We therefore need to get more women in here and we need to look at the structures we have in place to achieve that.

I want to encourage every girl to stand up and make her voice heard, whether in her school, in her community, in council chambers across the land, in the Scottish Parliament, in Assemblies or in this place. Women do not put themselves forward for election to the same extent as men. We can pretend that this is a matter of preference, and that women are not as interested in politics as men, but we know that that is just not true. The reality is that this situation is a constructed one. It is a consequence, at least in part, of some of the policies in this House.

Mary Beard, in her book "Women & Power", writes:

"You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is coded as male, you have to change the structure."

The structure in this House is inadequate for women and for families. I am sure that nobody would want their daughter to work in an environment where they were subject to online abuse, judged by newspapers on their appearance or behaviour, and not entitled to maternity leave. The hon. Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and for East Dunbartonshire spoke passionately about the abuse they received because people were judging them on a structure that was coded as male and had no place for them.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that it is precisely because we do not have proxy voting that we give the perception that this place does not work for women? I think back to the time when I stood in North East Derbyshire, when Natascha Engel was the MP. I was confronted by a lady who said that Natascha Engel was not doing her job properly because she had three children. In fact, people can do their job properly while having three children. I hasten to add that I threw that constituent's vote away because I found her views so appalling. Surely this is about perception. We can and we must do more, otherwise we will never show that this place is right for all.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree. When I was a standing as a candidate, somebody said to me, "I hear you have two children. How are you going to manage this?" I asked him whether he had put that question to the incumbent in the seat, because he also had two children, which put him in his place slightly, but he felt that that was a legitimate question for me. I am pretty sure that nobody would have asked the male incumbent in the seat that question.

Emma Reynolds: I gave birth on Good Friday last year, four days before the general election was called. Somebody locally said to me, "I didn't think you'd stand again because you've just had a baby." When I said, "Would you say that to my husband?" he did not really say anything in return.

Alison Thewliss: Absolutely. That will be the experience of many women in politics who have stood for election to this place, and of many women who did not stand because they thought they would be judged on that basis. I have good colleagues who are councillors in Scotland who feed their babies in council chambers and get on with their job as best they can. Councillors, of course, are not afforded maternity leave either. That is a

big issue, because if people are not even going to take that step on the first rung of politics—some councils are very male, too—we need to look at this issue right across the board. A good place to start by example would be this place right here.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office said in response to an urgent question on this subject that rushed procedural changes often leave the House repenting at leisure. I would make the case that this would not be any kind of rushed change—quite the opposite. Dr Sarah Childs' "Good Parliament" report was published in 2016, and the report from the Procedure Committee came out in May this year. We have had lots of time to consider this. We have had female MPs in this place for 100 years, with Constance Markievicz elected in 1918 and Nancy Astor taking her seat in 1919. Women are not a new phenomenon. We have been having babies for quite some time. There are 209 women who are currently entitled to sit in this place. We have dithered quite long enough on this matter. Babies have been conceived and born while we have been considering this matter, and that will continue to happen until we get a resolution. It is just not fair to put Members in the position of being judged in the media for their actions when this place could ameliorate some of those issues.

Some Members have suggested that pairing is the answer to maternity leave. The SNP does not take part in pairing for many reasons, not least because of the question of trust, to which the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire alluded. In addition, Members of other parties and independents do not have the option of pairing, so the system is inadequate. We saw during proceedings on the Trade Bill the consequences of somebody breaking a pair. The trust in the integrity of the system, such as it is, breaks down; the system is too fragile to base our procedures on. The hon. Lady found herself in quite an unfair situation, because she was then subject to further scrutiny of and questions about her ability to be an MP.

The breaking of pairs has been commonplace. In other debates about the issue, hon. Members have mentioned how many pairs were broken, when and under what circumstances. Because the system is so opaque, we do not know for absolute certain whether that is true. I share Opposition Members' cynicism about the fact that if there were more Government Members, this might not be such an issue.

In addition to the fact that we have to place trust in Members of other parties, there is no formal mechanism for recognising when pairing has taken place. The Member in question is simply registered as not having voted, with no explanation or mitigation. That characterisation of a paired vote is quite unfair on those who are on baby leave, because there is no other option. Effectively, the system disfranchises two Members, and the Member who is paired with the person who is off on baby leave has to explain to their constituents why they did not vote. Their constituents can quite legitimately say, "You're not pregnant. You don't have a baby. Why shouldn't your vote be counted?" It is difficult to explain this opaque system to constituents. We need to look at it, because it is unfair to disfranchise two Members for the sake of making a poor system work.

I agree very much that, as has been said, a Member should have the choice to exercise a proxy vote as and when they wish to do so. I think that we can trust each

other—this is the basis of all that we do in this House—to use that proxy vote wisely. Members have mentioned such things as voting to send troops into war. It will be the decision of a person who has a proxy whether it is appropriate to use it. I am pretty sure that nobody would want to use a proxy in such circumstances; I think they would move heaven and earth to be here on behalf of their constituents. They would be judged, quite rightly, in the light of the circumstances. I think that we can trust each other to take responsibility for that and to use proxy votes as and when they are required, as the Procedure Committee report sets out.

There has been discussion of health issues and other perfectly legitimate reasons for absence. The clear instruction from the House to the Procedure Committee was to look specifically at baby leave, and we did so thoroughly and diligently. I, for one, would be happy to explore those other issues further, because we are not adequately looking after those who face bereavement, health problems and disabilities any more than we are looking after new parents. We should not duck proxy voting on that basis. We should see how it works for a small but important group of Members, and we can quite legitimately review the process after a year to see how it has been used in practice. We should take up the suggestions in the Procedure Committee's detailed report, which lays out how such a scheme would operate—and, indeed, how it operates in Australia and New Zealand—and work out how to fit it to our circumstances.

The question of geography was raised briefly in an intervention. Geography gives rise to specific difficulties for Members who largely have to fly to get to this place. For someone who comes from Scotland, Northern Ireland or some other parts of the country, flights are necessary to get here in any kind of reasonable time. It would be no more reasonable to suggest that someone should come from Aberdeen on the train, which would be extremely stressful during the late stages of pregnancy. Some airlines will not allow pregnant women to fly after 32, 34 or 36 weeks, and women will not be able to fly after a C-section on medical advice. Recognition of the situation of women who are in those circumstances must be built into the scheme. Simply to impose a tight six-month cut-off would not necessarily take into account circumstances prior to giving birth.

It is an enormous privilege to be elected to this place, but it comes with trade-offs. It is very difficult to have work-life balance as an MP. Economic research has shown that women often value time flexibility over salary when they make career choices, and we have some way to go to make this House an attractive option for women. The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) talked about the decisions that women make when they come into this place. Are they going to have any more children, or will they opt not to do so? The antisocial and inflexible hours make it extremely difficult to plan ahead for childcare or family commitments, as other Members have said. I, too, want to get back to Glasgow this evening. Proxy voting would be a welcome step forward in making a career in politics that bit more accessible and that bit easier for parents. If decisions are made only by the MPs who can come here because it is easy, we will miss the voices of those who cannot come here because it is hard.

We in the SNP look for further changes. Debates can take all night, because they involve going through the Lobbies to record votes. It can take hours to vote on

[Alison Thewliss]

several amendments to a Bill. According to the Institute for Government, in the past year we have spent nearly 48 hours voting—just voting—in this place. The House of Commons could look to the Scottish Parliament for an example of a more efficient system. Votes are cast electronically in the Chamber, and Members can vote yes or no or abstain in a matter of seconds, rather than 48 hours. That means that more parliamentary business can be achieved within fewer working hours, so there is more chance that a Member's child will be able to pick them out of a line-up at the end of the parliamentary Session.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I agree with everything that my hon. Friend is saying. In the Scottish Parliament, votes happen at a fixed decision time every day. The fact that Members know when the votes will come, as well as the fact that the votes happen over a very short period of time, makes it much easier for people with all kinds of caring responsibilities to plan their day.

Alison Thewliss: I agree that that helps with planning. There have been so many occasions recently when we have had to change our plans at late notice because of votes, business or other things. Getting a wee bit more certainty into the parliamentary diary would be to the advantage of us all, and it would help with our work-life balance and associated stresses.

Huw Merriman: The hon. Lady is being generous with her time. This view may not be shared by many other Conservative Members, or indeed Members from other parties, but I completely agree with her when it comes to taking two hours to complete eight votes. In my days in business, we would all have been fired if we had executed eight trades in two hours. Does she agree that if we were to introduce electronic voting, it would make sense also to require Members to spend time in the Chamber during the debate before voting? It is slightly nonsensical that at the moment people can vote at 9 o'clock on a Monday night, having spent no time in the Chamber whatsoever. With electronic voting and that tag-on, we could end up seeing more Members in this Chamber, which is what the public want, I believe.

Alison Thewliss: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, up to a point. I think it is a myth that an MP must at all times be in the Chamber before they vote; we know that that is not true. How many people are here today? If the motion were put to a vote at the end of the debate, a lot of people who voted would not have been here. Sometimes we are in Committees, servicing Westminster Hall or doing other things in this building that mean that we legitimately cannot be in the Chamber for an entire debate before we vote. We need to be realistic about the fact that there are many things going on outwith the Chamber at various points during the day, but it is important to know what we are voting for and to take responsibility for it.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con) *rose*—

Alison Thewliss: I will give way, but I am coming to the end of my speech and I know that other people want to speak.

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I used electronic voting for many years in the European Parliament. It was my experience that when electronic

votes came along—sometimes, there were many hundreds of them—Members did not know what they were voting for, and they frequently voted without checking the detail. I have found that having to put one foot in front of the other and go through the Lobbies focuses the mind, and I believe that that is what our constituents expect of us.

Alison Thewliss: I think the experience in the European Parliament, where there are many votes—many more than we would have here—is slightly different. I question whether all Members of this House know at all times exactly and specifically what they are going through the Lobby to vote on. I am pretty sure that if we did a quiz on the votes that have taken place this week, most people would not be able to say what we have voted for. That is a weakness of our democracy, but it is the reality.

We must take the important step today of endorsing proxy voting to level the playing field for parents in this place, and to ensure that equality of representation is reached before any further time passes. It is important that women's voices are heard. We have had lots of chat about unintended consequences, but at the moment there are very real consequences for people's participation in this place, as well as for those who look to us for guidance.

The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) mentioned perfection. We are dealing with people here. We will never achieve absolute perfection, and we should not wait for it. We should seek it, but we should not wait for it. We should get on with the job, and let proxy voting go ahead as soon as possible.

2.19 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), although I do not agree with her about electronic voting. However, I do agree with her on one point. I have lost track of the number of occasions when people have asked me, "How do you cope being a Member of Parliament with three children?" In fact, that was once said to me when I was standing next to a male Member of Parliament who had twice as many children as me, in the same age bracket. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) has guessed which Member I am referring to. I did not seek his permission, so I will not mention him formally. That Member could not recall being asked even once how he was coping as a Member of Parliament with six young children. It is one of the frustrating questions that female Members of Parliament are still asked too often, but in my view we more than cope, and do so extremely well.

I well remember, about 10 years ago—before I was a Member of Parliament—sending a text to my manager. It read, "Sorry I can't make the meeting tomorrow. I am in labour." As I sent that text, I knew that the manager would be fine without me at the meeting the next day, but I also had peace of mind as I sent it, because I knew that for the following six months I would not have to think about my day job at all, and I certainly would not have to go into my place of work to see people unless I wanted to. How I spent those six months would be utterly up to me, and if, for instance, I spent quite a lot of time knocking on doors, because I was standing for Parliament at the time, that was entirely my choice.

That was, however, a much more normal job. What we do here is not a normal job. We have to represent our constituents, whether we are in sickness or in health. There is still governing—and opposing—to be done, and campaigning to be done, whatever our physical condition. Unlike my former job, in which I could be given that kind of maternity leave, this job is, in many respects, a bit more like running one's own business. It cannot be switched on and off. I will say, though, that it is far more flexible than the jobs that many of our constituents do, which is an advantage for parents here—as well as, I believe, far more rewarding, which probably motivates all of us.

I personally think that, in many respects, being a Member of Parliament is a good job for a parent. I say that because I am so often asked by young women, and young men, who are thinking about whether to stand for Parliament, “How can you do it, and have a family?” So much of what people hear and perceive about Parliament is that it is a difficult, or even impossible, to be a Member and a good parent. It is important for me to put on record that I really do think that that is possible. It can be made to work. It is not easy, but in many other jobs it is not easy to combine work and being a parent. One has to work hard at it, but it is possible to be both a good and active parent and a Member of Parliament.

Here we are in the Chamber on a Thursday afternoon. We can often choose whether to be here or not on Thursday afternoons. On some Thursday afternoons I am here, and on others I am in my constituency, doing constituency work; but on some Thursday afternoons, I collect my children from school. I was not able to do that very often in my former job, before I was a Member of Parliament. On the other hand, I frequently work in the evenings. There are swings and roundabouts, but overall I believe that this can be a good job for a parent.

As other Members have pointed out, too many men and women are put off by the idea that it is not possible to combine being a Member of Parliament with being a good parent, and I truly believe that our democracy is the poorer for that. We want a diverse membership of this House of Commons. We want people who are older, and people who are younger. We want those whose children have flown the nest, those who are planning to have children, and those who are in the middle stages of life with young children—and, of course, those who have not had children and do not intend to have them. We need the full mix.

We also need a Parliament that consists of an equal number of men and women. Looking around the Chamber, I see that this afternoon the number is fairly even, but, as we all know, that is unusual. The women are usually very much outnumbered, and that is something that we need to change.

There are many reasons why women do not tend to put themselves forward. They have concerns about, for instance, being in the public eye, and very real concerns about abuse directed at themselves and their families. I know that that has been experienced by some Members who are present today. There is also the problem of a lack of confidence among many women, and a reluctance to follow such an uncertain career path. Another reason, however, is doubt about whether this is a good place in which to work, and we have to change that perception. Part of that involves ensuring that both men and women

know that if a woman is going to have a baby, she, or her partner, will not have to rush in to vote when that baby has been newly born.

Both the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson)—who is no longer in the Chamber; I think that she is with her baby now—and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) brought to life the experience of being a new mum, juggling whatever else one is doing with feeding the baby, whether that involves breastfeeding or expressing, or trying to combine those things. Goodness, I remember the chore of expressing. I would do anything to avoid it. We should not make that something that women know that they will have to do, and work out how to do, if they are going to have a baby while being a Member of Parliament. It is something that we must fix, and we must get on with fixing it sooner rather than later.

We do, of course, have the pairing system. Some MPs with children have told me that for them the system worked very well, but for others—including some who have spoken today—it has not worked at all. I have heard from new dads that it has not worked for them. One of our colleagues who became a father relatively recently was not paired for the birth of his child, and did not know whether he would be able to be present when the child was born. As it happened—just because of the way things worked out—he was able to be there, but in the weeks and days running up to the birth, he did not know that it would be possible. Similarly, in the days after the child was born, he did not know that he would be able to be with that child, and neither did his wife.

Mr Charles Walker: Does my hon. Friend not agree that some things in life are more important than a Whip's instruction? [*Laughter.*]

Helen Whately: I think that each Member should probably make his or her own judgment on whether to do as the Whip says, but I think it would be better to have a system whereby Members can be confident that they can be where they need to be for the birth of a child, without worrying about whether they will have the Whip's support for whatever else they might want to do when they come back after spending time with that child.

As I was saying, the pairing system has worked for some, but it certainly has flaws, and, as we know, there are examples of pairs being broken on both sides of the House. There is the question of whether the system should be made more formal. I know many Members will disagree with that, but, whatever the reason for a pair, would it not be better to be confident that it will definitely happen? I think we should consider that seriously, because it is such an important part of how Parliament works.

That brings me to the proxy voting proposal, to which the Procedure Committee has clearly given significant consideration. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) spoke convincingly about that and about how, though the Committee recognised it might not have achieved perfection, it had given the proposal an admirable amount of thought, which clearly it has, and I support much of it. It has the big advantage over pairing of enabling MPs to continue to use their votes. As I said, this is not a normal job. Our constituents still need representing, even if we cannot make it into

[Helen Whately]

Parliament, and it is not right for them to go unrepresented just because their MP is a new parent. Proxy voting would enable Members to make sure that their constituents' views were still heard.

I have heard some say that a new parent would not want to spend their time scrutinising legislation and deciding how to vote, but it is just a fact of this job that they would have to get going pretty quickly after having their baby and make sure they knew what was going on. I cannot see a way of avoiding that; we have all taken on the responsibility of exercising our vote. That said, a new parent cannot be worrying about actually getting here to do it.

The proposal falls short, however, in its provision for dads-to-be. If I understand the proposal correctly, it would give new fathers a two-week period in which they could exercise their right to a proxy vote. I am concerned about the period running up to their partner's due date—for instance, the two weeks before the due date—as well as when the baby has arrived. Certainly for my second and third children, I pretty much banned my husband from travelling. When he announced he was taking a flight a week or so before the due date, I said, “No, sorry. You're going to be here”. As many of us know from experience, babies can take a long time to come, but sometimes they can come really quickly.

I particularly feel for fathers-to-be who have constituencies further away from Westminster—hon. Members from Scotland, for instance. A dad-to-be with a wife expecting any day cannot be coming down here to vote; they might make the vote, but there is every chance they will miss the birth of their child, which is not good for them, their partner or the child. We should, therefore, consider a longer period for new dads, as well as for new mothers. Overall, however, we should be considering this proposal very seriously and moving forward promptly.

One of my children has a birthday in August because I thought I should make sure she was born in recess. I realise now that it is a bit hard on her, because it means she is the youngest in her year—not something I thought about at the time because I did not have school-age children—but, genuinely, she was born in August because I wanted her to be born in the recess. As it turned out, I was planning for an election that I did not win, so the exact timing did not matter, but the point is that I, as a parliamentary candidate, was thinking, “I need my baby to be born in recess because of the lack of maternity provision in Parliament.” That needs to change.

I feel very strongly that we need more women in Parliament. We need more dads in Parliament, but we particularly need more women in Parliament—women who want to make a difference and be good mums—so that they can get their voices heard. In my experience, Parliament has come a long way in becoming more family friendly, but it has a lot further to go. Making progress on proxy voting would be an important step forwards.

2.33 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), because she is an example of exactly why this change is needed.

Proxy voting was not an issue back when the House of Commons was overwhelmingly male. When I came in, it was 97% men, 3% women, and most of the women were older and either had had their children or were childless. In the decades since, however, there has been the most enormous change in society, and that has been reflected in the House. The hon. Lady is a part of that change, in that she expects to work, and to do her best at work; she expects to be a mum, and to do her best as a mother; and she expects the father to play his part.

That transformation has happened outside this House of Commons, and we must reflect it, and it has changed the people and the demography in the Commons. It is not just about encouraging women to enter Parliament, because women are already here. In the Labour party, 43% of Members are women. There are women MPs on both sides of the House and in all parties, and many of them are young, which again is reflective of the world of work outside. It is right that the House of Commons be representative of men and women's lives outside.

We need to recognise that things have changed and that we must change our procedures to keep up to date. The most fundamental thing is that we are elected to vote on behalf of our constituents. Women MPs who have had babies are saying, “We want a proxy vote. We do not want to lose our right to vote on behalf of our constituents just because we are having a baby.” We should see this as a way of making our democracy work in the light of the changed demography of people in Parliament.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) and the Procedure Committee. Who knew how exciting the Procedure Committee was? It has done an excellent job. It has taken evidence and deliberated and produced an excellent and timely report on a big issue. He says that, being a Conservative, he is against change for change's sake, and it is right that we guard against unintended consequences and comb through proposals—that is what the Committee is for—and not just make change for change's sake, or grab a headline with some gimmick. We must think about whether it is actually needed and, if it is, how it should work, and the Committee has done an excellent job on that.

Several hon. Members are concerned that the proposal might change the character of the House—that it might mean that nobody attends debates or talks to each other because they are voting remotely—and have wondered whether it might be the thin end of the wedge and lead to proxy voting for sickness, bereavement or caring responsibilities. In response to that concern, we have listened to some useful comments from the right hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett), who has the advantage of having been in the Whips Office, and the hon. Member for Broxbourne. Having a baby is different from being ill. For a start, there is usually much more certainty about having a baby. Someone has either had a baby or not had a baby. If the processes require it, a birth certificate could be provided, but it is very straightforward. Likewise, someone has either adopted a baby or not adopted a baby.

With illness, some discretion must of necessity be exercised in respect of how long it lasts and what sort of illness it is. This process engages the Whips with that individual Member to try to work out what the situation is; somebody might be better and then come back for a bit, but then have to be off again. The system of proxy

voting we are proposing suits situations in which people are having children, but situations involving illness and bereavement have by and large been well served by the pairing system. The Whips Offices have changed their attitudes over the years and do try to help Members struck down by illness or bereavement.

The hon. Member for Broxbourne mentioned that another difference between sickness and having a baby is that Members might want privacy in the former case. It is quite straightforward for Members to allow constituents to know that they have just had a baby or are pregnant, or for a new father to explain that he has just had a baby, but there are many reasons with physical or mental health why Members might not want to go into the issue with their constituents as to why they are not there; that might be the straw that breaks the camel's back in their trying to deal with the situation. For that reason as well, the transparency of proxy voting works well with maternity and paternity, and the discretion and personal approach allowed for under pairing works better for bereavement and sickness.

For many Members the matter we are discussing will not be an issue personally. For me it is about 30 years too late; it was an issue, and I can remember all the things the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) talked about in her brilliant speech. So for many of us, mainly either men or older women, this is not an issue, and we should be respectful of, and listen carefully to, those for whom it is an issue, because I do not want to hear younger men saying that they now want to do some proxy voting when their baby is young, or younger women having babies saying they want a proxy vote, and then say, "But I don't think you should do that." What is important is that they have been elected to come and serve in this House and we must listen to what they tell us about how they feel they can best do their job. Those of us who do not have a direct stake in this issue should tread a bit carefully and make sure not to cut across the strong and more or less uniform will of the young women who are having babies who say they want their vote recorded.

I will trespass on some difficult territory by dealing with the question of the big votes such as on putting our troops in harm's way and committing them to conflict, and say that we could look at this argument the other way around. If a constituency has elected a Member of Parliament, perhaps that is the vote the constituents would least like to lose and when it is most important that the MPs cast their vote. We could say the same about the enormous decisions on Brexit and propose that perhaps those votes should not be cast by proxy, but constituents might again feel it is one of the most important votes so their Member of Parliament should be allowed to have their vote.

We had a good debate on 1 February at which point it was unanimous that the House proceed and invite the Procedure Committee to look at this. The Procedure Committee has looked at it and produced an excellent report, and I thank all the Committee members as well as its Chair. We now have the Procedure Committee report, with its draft resolution. It has considered all the changes that would be necessary to the Standing Orders and all the circumstances, so we are ready to roll with this.

Perhaps I am going to need to have some discussions with the Leader of the House, who I know is very much on this; she knows what she is talking about and she is

thinking about it and is trying to get it all worked out sensibly. However, there is the possibility that we could have a Backbench Business motion, which would be a votable motion that would simply put to the House the motions drafted by the Procedure Committee making the necessary changes to Standing Orders. If the Leader of the House is going to bring forward substantive change along the lines of the Procedure Committee report, we will not need to go ahead with our Backbench Business Committee motion, but it appears that there might be a lot more deliberation. I was a bit worried that perhaps she was asking too many questions that are either not relevant to what we are looking at or that have already been answered by the Procedure Committee. The Leader of the House and I need to work out whether we just cut through the process and have a Backbench Business Committee motion and enable ourselves to crack on with this.

We have had a very good debate, and many women outside the House will have listened to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire and understood the process. The House is more representative now than it ever has been, and I think we should crack on with this reform.

2.44 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is an honour to follow the Mother of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who has led this debate from the beginning. I pay tribute to her for her work not only on this issue but on other transformational issues that she has raised in order to reform the House of Commons. I did not participate in the debate on 1 February, but I listened to all the contributions from Members across the House, and I have served as a member of the Procedure Committee under the excellent chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), sat through all the evidence sessions and participated in the discussions leading up to the excellent report that we have produced.

It is fair to say that the contribution from the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) has drawn the attention of the House to the difference between a new mother and a new father, and to the reason why a new mother will need to be absent from the House for far longer than a new father. The Procedure Committee looked at several issues, including parental leave not only for mothers and fathers but for newly adoptive parents. I think it was the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) who drew our attention to the need for newly adoptive parents to be able to bond with their children, particularly as they are not the natural birth parents. It is important that those actions can be taken during those early stages.

The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham talked about the duty of individuals to come and vote in this House. That is quite clearly why we are elected. Up to now, the principle has always been that an individual MP had to be present in the Chamber, or on the estate if they were incapacitated, where their vote could be counted. We are now considering whether we should change that fundamental principle. Having sat through all the evidence, I completely understand the case for changing it, but we should remember that the Procedure Committee did only what the House asked us to do, which was to look at the issue of baby leave for new parents. That is why we need to be slightly

[*Bob Blackman*]

cautious here. This is a debate on the principle of proxy voting in general, as well as on the specific issue of baby leave, and we need to look at how things have changed.

The fundamental issue involved is a Member's right to vote in this House on his or her views. I would probably go to the ends of the earth to oppose the principle that the Whips should take over a Member's right to vote. I almost always vote with my party, but not always, and I defend my right as a Member to stand up for my constituents, as opposed to just my party. I would therefore absolutely oppose any proposal that the Chief Whip or any other Whip could go through the Lobby and cast a vote on my behalf. If we are going to introduce these changes, the fundamental principle has to be that it is not the Whips who determine which way a vote should be cast.

Mention has been made about whether a Member casting a proxy vote should be present in the Chamber to observe all or part of the debate before voting, and whether they will know what they are voting for. It is for individual Members to ensure that they are informed as to what they are voting on and how they vote. That is their job. From that perspective, it is not necessary for someone to be in the Chamber listening to every single word that is uttered in a debate before they come to a conclusion and cast their vote accordingly. It is therefore equally possible for a Member to watch the parliamentary channel remotely and then instruct someone to vote on their behalf in a particular way. That is perfectly reasonable with new technology. However, we need to consider some precautions. If we are going to make a change, it should enable new parents, new mothers in particular, to exercise their vote, but there should be no unintended consequences.

I completely agree with the Procedure Committee's report, which says that proxy votes should not be used at all in matters such as counting towards the quorum, a closure motion or other technical votes. We need to consider the circumstances in which proxy votes should apply. When the measure is introduced—I look to the Leader of the House to propose how it should operate—it should be done in such a way that we can review the process after, say, 12 months to ensure that we have not introduced unintended consequences or other problems.

Emma Reynolds: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman's speech, and I know that he has given the matter a lot of thought. Several hon. Members have mentioned unintended consequences, so will he spell out what he is talking about there?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, and I will come on to the unintended consequences.

When individuals seek to exercise their right to vote, we have to decide whether proxy votes should be allowed on all votes or just certain votes. For example, what if an individual is absent because they are on maternity or paternity leave and an important private Member's Bill comes up on a Friday? We know that few Members attend such debates on Fridays, even though everyone has the right to do so, so should proxy votes apply on those days? Equally, what happens if the appointed proxy says, "I'm not going to be in the House that day." There could therefore be unintended consequences for private Members' Bills.

Similarly, Thursdays tend to be Backbench Business days. Debates are not always well attended, and the motions rarely lead to votes, so should proxy votes apply to Backbench Business debates, which can be quite different, perhaps relating to matters of conscience, for example? We also have debates that are definitely matters of conscience when party Whips do not apply at all, such as House business debates. Should we allow proxy votes in those debates? My view is that we can allow that provided that there are clear, explicit instructions from the individual who is on leave to their proxy, but that could lead to issues of transparency. A proxy could vote for a new mother at home in the way that they expected her to vote, but it could turn out that she did not want her vote cast in that particular way. That would be embarrassing for the individual Member and for the proxy.

We should therefore proceed with a degree of caution. If we introduce proxy voting, it should apply to all Government business, particularly to Second Reading debates and those that are programmed and quite clear. I have a concern about, for example, Report stages or Committees of the whole House. Will a mother with a new baby be considering how to vote? The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire laid out the problems that a new mother can face. Will they be following the debate and instructing their proxy to vote? We could be voting half a dozen times in an afternoon, and we need to make sure that proxies vote in the right way. We should be cautious about these particular circumstances.

Emma Reynolds: I will be brief because I will touch on this in my speech. I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying about unintended consequences. Let not the perfect be the enemy of the good. I would not have minded if any of those little things had happened when I was on maternity leave, because at least I would have had most of my votes cast. In the current circumstances, none of my votes was cast. I kindly say that I can live with those unintended consequences.

Bob Blackman: I understand the hon. Lady's view that she can live with it. All I am doing is pointing out the consequences that could apply if such a system were introduced.

We should also have a clear position that proxy votes are the Member's choice—they should not be compulsory in any shape or form—because individuals who want to preserve their privacy may not wish to disclose that they have had a child. However, we should look a bit further than just the principles of maternity and paternity leave. We have to consider the terrible fact that not all pregnancies go to term and, very sadly, mothers lose their babies. We should consider proxy votes for their bereavement and recovery. There is a mixture of problems in those circumstances.

I have also considered the time I had an emergency hospital admission in 2013. I had a life-threatening problem and was admitted to an NHS hospital as a result. I was off from the Queen's Speech—10 May, to my recollection—until 5 July. My constituents, therefore, did not have my vote cast in this place on 43 occasions.

That was an emergency. I had an emergency operation and a period of convalescence thereafter. I could not walk for much of that time. Walking down the stairs or across the road, or going to a constituency function, was about as far as I could possibly go. I could not come down here to cast my vote.

I was paired with an Opposition Member on all of those occasions, but I have examined some of the lists, and on several occasions I would not have voted with Her Majesty's Government. My personal vote therefore was not properly recorded on those occasions.

My point is about individual Members who are suffering from a long-term, well-documented illness, where surgeons and doctors expect them to be absent from the House for a period of time. Over the past few years a number of Members have been absent with well-documented, long-term illnesses that were backed up with medical certificates. If we are to introduce proxy voting for any reason at all, we have to take into account individuals with long-term illnesses that are clearly documented—I am not talking about people with a cold, flu or whatever—and who are therefore going to be absent from the House for an extended period of time.

At the moment, as others have said, there is no record of why an individual has not voted, just that they have not voted in a particular Division. Externally, people might be saying, "Is it because you are too lazy? Is it because you can't be bothered? What is the reason?" We have to look very carefully at the proxy voting arrangements not only for new parents but for Members who are off for extended periods of illness.

I completely oppose the principle of Ministers or other individuals who are on Government business saying, "I'm going to be away on Government business so I need a proxy vote for an extended period." I oppose that 101%. The slippery slope that the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham talked about is a concern. The way forward is to make sure that we conclude any changes to the way we work in a considered fashion, but we should look not just at certain limited aspects but slightly wider, to make sure that all votes in this House are considered in an appropriate fashion, as Members would wish them to be, but for allowable reasons only.

I come back to the Procedure Committee report and the Standing Orders that we have proposed, which are very limited because they are restricted to the issue of parental leave, as opposed to other issues, one of which I have mentioned and think should be considered and included. It may be that we start by dealing with long-term parental leave and then look at other aspects at a future time, but it is important to consider all the reasons why people are absent from the House through absolutely no fault of their own, so that their votes can be cast or the reasons why they are not cast recorded. Those reasons should be recorded only if they so choose, though, because people who are on long-term absence for other reasons may not wish for that to be disclosed, for all sorts of reasons.

I urge a degree of caution, but also some cautious speed, because having debated this subject on 1 February, we should now get on with the job and get a system into operation so that we can review it after a period of time and make sure that it works for all Members and encourages people to participate in this place.

3.1 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I must express regret that it is only a general debate on the principle of proxy voting, rather than a debate on a motion that would provide any means to implement it. The debate about

implementation has been going on since 1 February. In the interim, we have had multiple debates, an excellent Procedure Committee report, a cancelled debate in July, and a breach of the pairing system followed by an urgent question on that matter, yet we still do not seem to be much closer to allowing Members the ability to decide on whether we make changes to our parliamentary system.

If Parliament is to remain vibrant and keep pace with our ever-changing modern world, we need to make it as open and accessible a workplace as it can possibly be. We must ensure that there are no barriers to people standing for Parliament. I welcome the recently published Fabian Society pamphlet "New Brooms", which was co-ordinated by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith). It was authored by Labour MPs from the 2017 intake, including myself, and brings together ideas for parliamentary reforms. At the pamphlet's launch yesterday in Speaker's House, I spoke of the hard work that has already been done to modernise Parliament, but also about what more can and must be done.

To those watching our proceedings in the months leading up to the summer recess, Parliament looked like its old, archaic, inaccessible self. They would have seen the indignity of unwell MPs being wheeled through voting Lobbies; heavily pregnant Members, who would otherwise be at home, having to vote; and the scandal of the Tory Whips breaking their pairs in a bid to avoid a defeat on the Trade Bill. Such events are not the example that we should be setting, nor are they an advertisement for a modern, forward-thinking democratic institution.

As a former employment rights lawyer who specialised in maternity discrimination, and from my experiences raising my own family, I know how important the early months are for a child and their parents. Being a Member of Parliament is a rewarding and fulfilling job. In the short time I have been here, I have been able to do so much and have found the experience wholly enjoyable and rewarding. Representing our constituents in a place like this is a job like no other. But for the next generation of MPs and those who are already here, we must adapt to modern times and create a Parliament where there is nothing that would put somebody off becoming an MP.

Parliament is a lot more family friendly now than it has ever been. We can shore that up by taking the next logical step in this endeavour and bring in proxy voting for parental absence. As someone who, along with some of my fellow MPs in the 2017 intake, has discussed the idea of parliamentary reform with Mr Speaker, I am grateful to a whole host of Members who have strived to make this place as family friendly as possible over the past 20 years or so.

My son had just turned two when the snap election was called. As someone whose husband is also a serving MP, I can say that, without the House of Commons nursery, I would not have been confident in putting myself forward for Parliament. The service that the nursery provides has been invaluable to me throughout my first year as an MP. I want to place on record my thanks to those who have made the nursery possible, including Mr Speaker and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), and also to those who work there and run it today.

[Ellie Reeves]

The ability to take my son through the Division Lobby at the end of the day has also been immensely helpful. Often, when I pick him up from nursery, he asks me whether we are going to vote. If there are not any votes, he gets very upset. When the Division bell sounds, he jumps up excitedly and runs towards the Chamber, often insisting on giving his name to the Clerks as we go through the Lobby. We did have a bit of an incident just before the summer recess when he wanted to go and vote with one of his friends from nursery school. Unfortunately, his friend from nursery is the son of two Conservative MPs and he had a little bit of a meltdown when I explained that he could not go through the Lobby with them.

Joking aside, voting with a young child in tow is not without its problems. With a small baby, the practicalities would very often render it impossible. Some 20 children have been born to serving female MPs since 2010, two of whom are my niece and nephew, the children of my sister, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). I know that she has previously spoken in this Chamber about the difficulties she has experienced in juggling family and work life after her children were born.

Parliament and its systems can feel archaic and old fashioned at times and I am pleased at the direction that we are moving in to make our democratic institutions more open and accessible to those who work here. I also want to put it on record that I recognise the challenges that working parents face across the world of work. I have raised many times in this Chamber the issues of inflexible work, maternity discrimination and lack of work-life balance that many working families face.

One of my lasting memories from my own maternity leave was expressing milk in the toilets of the Royal Courts of Justice as I did not want to miss a big court case in which I had been involved. As Members of Parliament, we should lead by example and ensure that we can provide a decent working environment for parents.

I welcome the Procedure Committee's report into proxy voting and parental absence and note the written submissions, including those from the women's parliamentary Labour party and from my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) in his role as chair of the all-party group on fatherhood. The proposals, both in the evidence submitted and in the subsequent report, are reasoned, proportionate and thorough. Ultimately, however, transparency should be at the forefront of our minds when implementing any changes to the way our Parliament works. Part of the issue with the existing pairing system is the disparity between what the public sees and what the public knows; pairing is very much a behind-closed-doors process, and we saw that before the summer recess.

As Members noted in the previous debate on this subject, as a result of our existing schemes, some MPs have been the subject of unfair and disproportionate criticism following their taking time off after having their children. MPs work hard on behalf of their constituents and having a child while in office does not change how seriously we all take our roles. It is imperative that any system that adopts proxy voting has openness at its core and is transparent with Mr Speaker, the House and our constituents.

We should also take into account the experience of other legislatures who have introduced similar measures. I do not advocate that we adopt wholesale systems that are used in Australia and New Zealand, but we should understand that they have enjoyed a successful implementation and have no doubt modernised their Parliaments. However, Members should remain in charge of their proxy arrangements, rather than handing it over to their respective party whips.

I welcome the recommendation in the Procedure Committee's report that proxy voting should be available to all Members, whether they be new mothers, new fathers or adoptive parents. It is key that no Member of this House should feel excluded or question whether they should be entitled to a proxy vote when they become parents. Furthermore, this debate is not solely about women. As we continue to strive for full equality, we must continually recognise the role that fathers, and paternity leave, has in our society. As I said at Women and Equalities questions this morning, I have long been an advocate of shared parental leave and a greater emphasis on paternity leave as key ways of reducing inequality in the workplace. If we, as a Parliament, can put in place measures that promote that, it will be a worthwhile exercise for Members and wider society.

Proxy voting is the next logical step in our endeavours to modernise and we must now have a vote on a substantive motion so that we can take that forward. I hope that all hon. Members will embrace the opportunity to enact positive change.

3.10 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It has been a great pleasure to listen to many Members talking about their experiences; I would like to add some of mine. It is a great honour to chair the all-party group on women in Parliament and to have the opportunity to talk to some of my women colleagues about their experiences.

I am lucky to be the mother of three wonderful children—they are now much older than children. I remember that every pregnancy was different, that every baby when they arrived was different, and that every childbirth experience was different. I particularly remember my experience with my second child, who was not due for three weeks when I felt something rather strange and I picked up my bag from under my desk at work and said, "I'm going home." Two hours later, I was standing in a large pool of water. How glad I was that that had not happened on the trading floor.

Every mother and father needs flexibility in the system so that they can have the time that they need pre-birth, at the birth and after the birth, in those important early days, weeks and months. It was moving to hear about the much more recent experiences of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) and the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves).

I have long been a champion of having more women in Parliament. I admit that that is a bit selfish, because when I was first elected to the European Parliament as the only female MEP for the East of England it was very lonely. Once, outside the M25 and east of the M11, there was not a single other Conservative woman Member of Parliament. Now there are 10 of us and there is a lot more comradeship.

It is important that we support each other. Women continue to be a minority in Parliament, but the support has made our jobs easier. I sometimes find that people outside Parliament ask, “How do you cope with working in a place where women are not respected, not treated as equals and harassed all the time?” I say that that is not what I feel when I do my job here, but we can do more to support each other and we must continue to support the next generation. That means ensuring that we have a modern Parliament and modern maternity leave.

When I talk about modernising Parliament, I do not mean a move towards electronic voting. We should take care before making such a sweeping change. As I said earlier, my experience of voting in the European Parliament was that we sometimes had many hundreds of votes. It is easy to vote electronically, so people can decide to vote on every minor change. There are then hundreds of votes and people often stop focusing on what the votes mean.

I learnt early in my time here that when we have to put one foot in front of the other and walk through the voting Lobby, that makes us focus on the decision we are about to make. It was quite public at the time, but at the start of a particular debate, I did not know which way I would vote. It was only after listening to the debate and the reassurances that Ministers gave at the Dispatch Box that I could decide, on the basis of the evidence and the arguments, how I wanted to vote. Those are really important parts of this parliamentary democracy that we must hold on to.

I have had the experience of seeing how pairing works here. In the European Parliament, which is considered so modern, there was no pairing. Sometimes I saw women having to fly literally all across Europe with tiny babies because they wanted to be present for a crucial vote. Our pairing system does give flexibility, but it is not perfect, and it can be made more robust. For example, we should be able to register that we are paired. Then, when we went through the Lobbies, the tellers, who have their iPads in front of them, would be able to say, “Hold on a second—you were registered for a pair: had you forgotten that?” Sometimes things can be a bit confusing if a vote arrives earlier or later than expected and one might not have realised.

I have spoken to mothers who are MPs and have been paired during maternity leave. One Opposition Member told me of a really terrible experience. She was paired throughout her maternity leave, but then deeply harassed by the press and accused of being lazy—“The laziest Member of Parliament”. That was because her voting record had shown that she did not vote, but it did not show that she did not vote because she was paired or explain that she was on maternity leave. It should be possible for Members, if they wish, to have their pair made public.

It is also important, however, as other Members have said, that people should be able to keep their pair private. One evening I was paired with an Opposition Member who was very sick and did not wish that to be made public. I was very honoured to be able to respect his wish that his vote was counted, and I stood back in order to make sure that he did not feel that he needed to be called back here.

I also spoke to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), who said that she was prepared to have it mentioned in the House that she was

on parental leave for six months between 2016 and 2017 and that she supports proxy voting. I think that one of the reasons why mothers, especially, say that they support proxy voting is that although pairing does give a great deal of flexibility, they feel that they want a moment of saying, “I want my vote to be positively registered for this,” as opposed to pairing, which just means that we step back and neither person votes. They would often like to see their positive support for a policy on record.

However, there are a number of questions, many of which have been raised today. Who does one appoint as one's proxy? It would need to be somebody who one trusts deeply, and perhaps understands one's own local issues. For example, some Members who were involved in the Heathrow vote had very strong issues in their area that meant that they might have voted differently from their Whip. It is important that if we take the proxy route, people should have the right to choose their proxy. If somebody has decided that they want to have a proxy for their voting, should they also say that they will stand away from constituency issues—that they would not go campaigning, for example, during that period because they had decided to have a proxy? That is a fair question.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) asked what care there would be for the mother of a baby who had died, which is a terrible circumstance. My understanding is that in any other career, the mother of a baby who had died would receive normal maternity time off and maternity rights, and we should have the same sort of process.

Bob Blackman: We should remind the House that we are office holders, not employees, so the circumstances for employees do not apply to us. The particular issue that I raised was about allowing a proxy vote to be used during that time of bereavement and proper recovery for the mother.

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for making that clear. We are office holders, not employees. The responsibility is different but, on this issue, it would be right to give a parent who has lost their child—that has never happened to me, and I cannot even begin to imagine how challenging it must be—the same right to choose a proxy, should they wish to. Others may not wish to. It is all about choice.

One other group of parents that is very challenged—not just in this place but in this country—is the mothers and fathers of very premature babies. They often spend many months in the neonatal unit and then find that by the time they get their baby home, they have run out of parental leave. The charity Bliss does amazing work to help those with very premature babies, and that small number of families should get extra support from society.

The question has been raised of who else should be able to have a proxy vote and whether this is about more than just parental leave—which, by the way, I agree means fathers, mothers and adoptive parents as well. For example, should proxy voting cover the circumstances that I remember with my third child? I went back to work very early, having just started my own business, and found myself suddenly with a very sick three-month-old child. I had stopped my parental leave and needed to go back into hospital. Should a parent be able to restart their leave?

[Vicky Ford]

Those are challenging issues that one would need to look at as the system evolves, which is why I support the idea of introducing proxy voting with a trial. We can then see how it evolves. My suggestion is that it should just be for parental leave—fathers and mothers of babies, including adopted babies—and not widened out to other issues at this stage, even though people need time off. In parallel, we should also look at how we can make the pairing system more robust.

3.21 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I want to begin by thanking the Procedure Committee for producing its report. It occurred to me, as I was listening to the debate, that this is like all big changes, although I think we are making this out to be a bigger change than it is. Before we had the smoking ban in public places, people saw all sorts of unintended consequences, but once we did it, we thought, “Why did it take us so long?”

It is absolutely right that every workplace—this place included—should recognise that having a child is a life-changing event for new mothers and new fathers, and should try to be as family-friendly as possible. I share the concern of the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that we are not being ambitious enough. We should not be timid.

If we agree with the principle of proxy voting, which I think everybody here does, we should extend it to people in other challenging circumstances, such as Members who are suffering from illness, Members who have a spouse or close family member who is living with an illness, or Members who are dealing with the death of a child or partner. People have talked about the special bond between parents and their new baby and said that that is why this category should be different, but while it is very important for parents to spend time with their new baby, it is also important for Members of this House to be able to spend time with a loved one who is dying. If we accept the principle of proxy voting, we should be more generous in our application of it. When proxy voting is brought in, it will be in the form of a pilot, and I would like that pilot to be more inclusive.

The hon. Member for Harrow East said that some MPs may not wish their constituents to know if they are very ill. It would be odd for an MP to be less visible in their constituency, so their constituents might well be aware of the fact that they are not around as much and might therefore deduce that they are ill anyway. I do not think that that is as big a deal as it might seem at first glance.

Everybody agrees that all workplaces should do all that they can to recognise and accommodate the demands of being a new parent, particularly a nursing mother. In this place, however, my concern is that, by limiting proxy voting to just nursing mothers, we must make sure that we do not forget fathers and make sure that they are given the same consideration as new mothers. I would like us to consider all circumstances that create challenges for Members turning up to vote. If we are going to do this, we should show a bit more ambition.

Many people have talked about how being an MP is not like any other job—the role is unique. Before and since becoming an MP, I have heard people say that

MPs should set the standard that we would expect society to adopt, and that we should live up to those standards. Some Members may well have been here—I do not know, but the Mother of the House might have been—when the right to paid maternity leave was finally won for women. We know that paternity leave for fathers is still very much in its infancy, and many men do not feel able to take up the opportunity of paternity leave from their workplaces.

My word of caution in all this is that, as much as I support proxy voting, I do not want the House to do anything that might unwittingly set a precedent, even symbolically, for some unscrupulous employers in any way to interfere with or erode paid maternity leave. Women on maternity leave—that time is very important—should be on maternity leave, and they should not feel under pressure to vote, write emails to their boss or meet whatever the particular demands of their workplace are. We need to be careful not to send a signal to employers that women on maternity leave and men on paternity leave can still do some tasks, such as write the odd email.

I am talking not about MPs, but about the signal we may send to bosses. I know that fathers often, depending on the size of the company and the nature of the place in which they work, feel uncomfortable about taking paternity leave, and there is not as much acceptance of it and understanding as we would like. I just ask the House to be careful that if we bring in proxy voting—I think that we should—we in no way send a signal to any employer or workplace that maternity or paternity leave is not sacrosanct. It is sacrosanct, and it must be. It was too hard fought for to be compromised in any way.

Our job is to protect workers in the workplace. We know that pregnancy discrimination is still a big issue, and that is a stark reminder of how fragile the rights of new mothers can very often be. Let us not do anything to compromise or erode such rights. Research recently commissioned by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that some 54,000 working mothers per year are forced out of work in pregnancy through discriminatory practices. Let us tackle that, and let us protect nursing mothers and new fathers. Regardless of what we do in the House, when maternity leave is taken out there, it must still remain sacrosanct. It needs to be protected absolutely, not compromised, eroded or undermined in any way whatsoever.

3.28 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): A Member of Parliament recently described to me how the phone rang in the labour ward when his wife was in labour a number of years ago, and it was not another lady or her husband seeking to come on to the ward, but the Government Whips Office asking how long he thought he would be. In this story as he recounted it—the Member of Parliament confessed that his memory of the event was somewhat hazy—the Whips Office rang a number of times in the course of the night, and I do not think the calls were pastoral checks on his wife’s progress. As the evening went on, he eventually ended up with what he described as “two hours of paternity leave”, before being summoned back for a “very important Bill Committee.” It will surprise no one to know that, according to his recollection, there was subsequently no vote in that Committee. We have come a long way since then, even

in the Whips Office, although the sad fact is that if that story were repeated now, the Whips would nag Members on a mobile phone rather than the hospital phone—so perhaps we have not come that far.

Within the context of total support for everything that many Members have said about the necessity of introducing this specific change, I would like to raise some points. As has been said, although on the one hand we should introduce this measure as quickly as possible, we should also implement any changes in such a way that we do not need to revisit them. That is why I support a trial period, but we should not start to implement anything before we have a decent idea that it might work.

I am pleased that on the specific issue of parental leave we are talking about proxy voting rather than electronic voting or anything else. The process of an individual walking through the Lobby—or being nodded through in small number of cases—is something that we should fight to preserve at all costs. I came to this place expecting to think that we should abolish the voting Lobbies, have electronic voting and ditch the adversarial nature of the Chamber, but although we often produce far more heat than light, the nature of the physical process of walking through a Division Lobby with our peers is profoundly valuable. It also gives Members valuable time to lobby Ministers and try to get something done.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP) *rose*—

Matt Warman: I was about to say that that is a reason for SNP Members to join us in the Government Lobby. I appreciate that Opposition Members walk through a different Lobby so they do not have that advantage, but even then the physical process of being together in the same room is a valuable opportunity to nobble people, whether they are in government or not—I know that Opposition Members have taken that opportunity on a number of occasions. It is unreasonable to suggest that simply moving to digital voting would solve more problems than it would create.

Alison Thewliss: My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) has had to tend to some people who were taken ill in the voting Lobbies because they were crushed, cramped and hot, particularly in summer; they are certainly no place for babies or pregnant women. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is completely inadequate?

Matt Warman: We should not move too much into a debate about air conditioning. I agree that an awful lot about the process could be improved, although that would not lead me to go as far as to suggest that getting rid of the whole physical process would be progress. I appreciate that such systems work well in other Chambers, but I echo the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) who spoke about the European Parliament.

The emphasis on proxy voting as an individual process, rather than digital voting, is hugely important. I do not seek to make the best the enemy of the good, but we must be extremely careful about how we might manage if proxy voting goes wrong, for whatever reason, and ensure that we do not allow honest mistakes to crowd out the idea of doing something worth while.

My second, broader point is that once we introduce some form of proxy voting, we will have a series of conversations with our constituents about what is a legitimate reason for a formal proxy vote, as opposed to a pair or something else. We all know of situations where Members have been genuinely very ill and obviously unable to vote. Why would that not be a cause for a proxy vote? I know the Procedure Committee has covered this issue in great detail, and I know it is perpetually the job of this House to stand at the right point on a slippery slope on a whole host of issues, but we have to make sure that we are prepared, as we go through this process, to have the right set of answers and the right set of parameters. It will not simply be a question of illness or baby leave or whatever; constituents will reasonably say to us that MPs have other hugely important duties outside this House and ask why we should not be paired or proxied for those duties.

Mr Charles Walker: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He poses some very searching and important questions. I would say, in the purest terms, that my ambition to see the introduction of proxy voting for women who have had a child is to allow and encourage more women with children to come to this place and to have children when they are here. It is no higher ambition than that, but it is an important ambition.

Matt Warman: I absolutely agree. As I say, I do not want, for a moment, to present myself as standing in the way of that ambition. What I want to do is make sure that this process works as well as it possibly can from the outset. I think that that process should be what allows more people to come into Parliament in the long run, so I think we are all on the same side.

We need to have a sensible conversation about proxy voting. If we are going to live in a world where far more people, through the experiences of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), get in touch with us and have conversations with us about pairing, is there room then to say that we should be transparent about whom someone is paired with and what pairing looks like, so that people better understand the arcane procedures of this place, if we are to say that keeping those arcane procedures to some extent is the right thing to do? We have had situations where people have said, “I was paired with the hon. Member for x,” but the hon. Member for x did not know that they were paired with that person on the other side.

There are a huge number of consequential issues. We should not use that fact as an excuse not to do a version of what has been proposed, but we should absolutely be prepared to see where this takes us. We should understand that while, to use the fashionable phrase, the red lines might be around digital voting or proxy voting, we will have to have cogent answers on a whole load of issues that go way beyond the simple and narrow issue we have practically been discussing in this debate. The issue of proxy voting goes far, far wider than that. We should use this opportunity to get it right and to fix some of the wider stuff, and we should try to seize that opportunity as quickly as we possibly can, while also seeking to ensure that they are long-term solutions.

3.38 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak, yet again, on the issue of proxy voting for MPs who become new parents.

[*Emma Reynolds*]

I welcome the announcement the Leader of the House has made today that there will be a substantive motion and a vote on this issue. I would just say to her that there is some urgency to this debate. The biological clock is ticking: three hon. Ladies have recently given birth and two are expecting. When we had this debate in February, we were in a similar situation. It is a great thing that younger women are coming to this place and having babies while being Members of this House, but the procedures of the House have not yet caught up. I hope the Leader of the House will perhaps say a little more about the timing of the vote in autumn. I hope it will be soon after conference recess. I hope we are in the final trimester of the gestation of this new policy.

I have three key messages to the Leader of the House and the House. First, why would we not do this? Why would we stand in the way of new mums and new dads having a voice and a vote in this House while they are on a system of leave—albeit an informal one—and forging that bond with their babies?

Secondly, let us not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. I noted carefully what the Leader of the House said about all her questions regarding the set-up, and I understand that she wants to get it right. All I would say is that the current system—I will go on to talk about pairing in a minute—is so imperfect that the proxy voting system, even with the unintended consequences that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) set out a moment ago, would be so much better than what we have now. I have had some recent experience of the current arrangements.

My third key message—I have said this already, but I cannot stress it enough—is: let us get on with it. I gave birth last Easter, on Good Friday, and I thought I might have a quiet maternity leave. I did not think that there would be an election, despite the speculation, because the Prime Minister seemed so intent on not having one. Four days later, however, my husband and I were proven wrong. We were a little shocked, it has to be said. I recognise the picture painted by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), about the tensions, difficulties and stress of holding down the quite almighty job of an MP and being a parent, as well as the criticism that we receive because of that, and I will share some stories about that.

I had to run an election campaign with a newborn. Obviously, there is no way of legislating to avoid that; it was just bad timing. I am not suggesting that we can get around that one. I then took leave between July and December last year. I had to come in to Parliament to swear in, otherwise I would not have been paid. I was given a little bit of leeway with the cut-off point, because I was struggling to make sure that somebody could be at home caring for my baby so that I could get into London. I did not really fancy coming in with him at the time.

I am not, on this occasion, accusing the Whips of breaking a pair, but our Whips Office felt it was important that I came in three or four times, I think, during that period of leave, once on quite a late vote on a European matter. Although I was supposed to be on leave from the House, barely a day went by when I did not deal with a constituency matter. As the hon. Member for

Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) said, that comes with the territory, because we are our own bosses, in a way.

I had the stress and strain of thinking about when I might have to travel to London to be here to vote, and I received some criticism from some people—let us say that it was a minority. One constituent told me that I was not worth the money, because I was on maternity leave. They said that my salary was not justified, because I was not here to vote. A national newspaper said that I had the second-worst voting record, although its staff did not ask me about it before they published the article. One of my hon. Friends was called one of the laziest MPs in Britain. It is ironic that the journalist was lazy, because he did not care to check with her why she had not been here.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman)—I pay tribute to her for the tremendous work she has done on the matter—said that she did not have a vested interest. I do have a vested interest, because what if my husband and I decide that we want to have a baby? Or what if, as the Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), said earlier, the current arrangement dissuades us from doing so?

Mr Charles Walker: The news report that the hon. Lady mentions was also inaccurate because she was in her place of work. She has two places of work: her constituency and the House of Commons, and it is important that we inject that fact into this debate. We never stop being Members of Parliament. We go home to our constituencies, where we are Members of Parliament.

Emma Reynolds: I could not agree more. As I said, although I was on informal maternity leave, in every week of that maternity leave I checked emails, I phoned the office and my staff texted me—although they were careful about not bothering me all the time. That comes with the nature of the job, and I am not complaining about it. However, I am saying that it would have been much easier for me if I had not had, on top of that, the stress of wondering whether I should be here, and the criticism that I have described; and if I had had the right to have my constituents represented during that period of leave. I will give my reasons for thinking the pairing system is inadequate in a more formal way shortly, but I wanted to share that experience with other Members.

During our debate about this issue on 1 February, I explained to the House what had happened a week after I had given birth. I held an election meeting with members of my local party, and I think that if the situation arose again, I would not do so. My husband, who watched me make my speech, said, “I cannot believe I let you do that.” I think we underestimate the stress of giving birth. It is not just about forming a close bond with the baby, although that is obviously the priority. To have a healthy baby, one must be a healthy mum. Giving birth is physical, right? And it is hard. Whether a woman has a caesarean or a natural birth, it will take her some weeks to recover. The last thing that she will want to do is hop on a train, or to be driven to London, in order to vote. We must be able to find a way of dealing with this, even given all the complications and the questions raised by the Leader of the House.

Let me now quickly give my reasons for thinking that the pairing system falls down. First, in the case of close votes it is either suspended or broken. We heard from the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire, who had given birth three weeks before the vote in which her pair was broken. As she rightly said, that cannot be seen as anything other than cheating. Once the trust is gone, it is difficult to rebuild it.

Secondly, new mums have been attacked for missing votes. I have gone through that. I want to place on record my thanks to TheyWorkForYou, which, since our debate on 1 February, has put a banner on my page on its website saying that I was absent between July and December last year, so that the numerology takes that into account. People had been able to look at the website and see that I had not been here for many votes, so I am grateful to TheyWorkForYou for making that change. Perhaps, though, it should not be up to another organisation to be transparent about what is happening in Parliament. Perhaps the parliamentary website should do the work of TheyWorkForYou. The representatives of TheyWorkForYou tell me that they rely on generous donations, and I think that they do a good job, but perhaps we should do it for them.

My third point is the most important, and I mentioned it earlier. Only proxy voting, not pairing, will allow Members who are new parents to represent their constituents and vote in Parliament by nominating a colleague—not a Whip!—to vote on their behalf while they are with their newborn. That, I think, will be particularly crucial in the autumn. I do not want my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who is due to give birth next week, to be worrying, in October or November, about whether she will have a say on the Brexit deal that the Prime Minister will bring back. I do not want her to have that worry. I want her to be able to forge a close bond with her baby and enjoy her maternity leave, albeit, perhaps, with some constituency responsibilities.

Fourthly—this has already been mentioned today—pairing is not well understood. If we say “pairing” to our constituents, even if we put it in context, they may think, “That’s a bit odd; what is it?” It is not transparent, and I understand that it does not extend to all Opposition parties.

Fifthly, the later stages of a pregnancy are quite tiring. I remember being here with a massive bump, bobbing up all the time. I think I managed to make some sort of arrangement with the Speaker that I would put my hand up. This is a demanding job. There are, of course, other demanding jobs, but travelling up and down the country is not easy.

My main message today is “Do not let the perfect be the enemy of the good.” I listened carefully to what was said by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who is no longer in the Chamber, and I asked him what the “unintended consequences” were to which he was referring. If the worst of them is that my proxy would not be here on a Friday to vote on a private Member’s Bill on my behalf, or would not be here to vote on my behalf in a Backbench business debate, then so be it: I can live with that. A proxy voting system, even with those minor imperfections, would be so much better than what we have now.

This Parliament has more women than any before it, we are still outnumbered by two to one, so we are still nowhere near being gender equal—we do not represent

the country in terms of ethnicity either. We have made huge progress, but we still have a long way to go. These changes, which I hope we could make quickly, would send an important signal to new mums and dads—I hope that these proposals will be extended to fathers who take shared parental leave, because at the moment only 5% of dads take up that right in the workplace—and send the message to young men and women thinking about a career in this place but who also want to start a family that they can do both.

3.50 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Since I was elected just over three years ago, several debates and Committee inquiries have rightly condemned unacceptable employment practices, and I have always thought this place at its best when we come together and defend the rights of our constituents to be treated with dignity and fairness, but our right to hold others to account can be compromised if we allow arcane and meaningless tradition to lead to such disgraceful scenes as those we saw recently when desperately ill colleagues were forced to leave their hospital beds to go through the voting Lobbies. We rightly condemn the exploitation of workers, but, with such scenes, we risk the response, “Who are you to judge?”

This Parliament has a long history of things that make us proud, but rather than learning from that history, we seem at times to be bound by it. In what other workplace would a woman be asked to discharge herself from hospital for something that could be dealt with over the phone? Imagine how we would respond if another employer said that the reason they were insisting she do it was that it had always been done that way. I welcome the concept of proxy voting for Members who have had a baby or adopted a child as a first sensible step, and I would urge, as others have done today, that we get on with it as soon as possible.

We have heard differing views on this, but I believe we should be going much further. The Procedure Committee’s proposals do not cover the disgraceful scenes I just referred to, and although it should be the expectation that we be present in this place for debates and votes, there are many perfectly acceptable reasons why it might not always be possible. These could include personal or medical issues, as well as being away on official business as part of our role—to be clear, I am referring only to such absences as arise from a person’s role as an MP, not other jobs, such as being on the Front Bench, or other private interests.

The current situation creates several very serious issues. In matters of vital importance, it effectively forces people to put their health at risk if they want the voice of their constituency to be heard. Again, if that was any other workplace, we would not allow it. Not only is the current system potentially unsafe; it allows people to be conveniently absent if they want to dodge an issue, the recent vote on Heathrow being a particularly memorable example. I would advocate proxy voting not just for those who are absent on health grounds or who have taken maternity or paternity leave, but to remove a convenient excuse from those who do not have the guts to represent what their constituents want. I understand what the Chair of the Procedure Committee said about personal information being disclosed in creating the dispensations for medical-related absences, but I am sure we can do it while respecting confidentiality.

[Justin Madders]

It has been 18 months now since we last discussed the report “The Good Parliament”, which set out an extremely modest set of proposals to improve how this place works, yet it is very difficult to see what progress has been made in implementing any of them. So much needs to change here, including certain ridiculous practices, such as filibustering, the absence of maternity, paternity, adoption and caring leave, and complex webs of procedure and protocols that can be impossible to explain and justify to our constituents. For example, the Order Paper lists 60-odd private Members’ Bills due to be debated next month. If people expect these Bills to become law, we have to explain that they are not going to but are still on the Order Paper. Let us ensure that this debate is part of the wider debate about reforming the way this Parliament works.

In how many workplaces does the finish time vary and change at very short notice? That is in no way family-friendly. In which workplace is it acceptable for colleagues to stop speaking to another colleague because they disapprove of something they may or may not have said or done? In which job would it be considered normal to engage with colleagues on social media—and, yes, I do mean people from the same party—with sometimes those comments not being acceptable in any workplace and not passing any dignity at work policy? We should be setting an example in here about how we treat each other with respect and dignity. Of course there is rough and tumble in politics, but some of the behaviour we see in this Chamber would be unacceptable in any workplace, let alone any school.

Where is it considered acceptable to shout at someone who is addressing a room? Too often we see this Chamber descending into a bear pit. Of course those involved are trying to put off the Member speaking, but often, I have noticed, there is a sexist undertone to that, and it only usually puts off people watching outside; it does not work on those in here speaking.

There is so much we can do about the culture here, but we can also change the rules governing this place, and if we can change the rules, we can hopefully improve the culture as well. Having an uncodified constitution should be an advantage for us in doing that; we should be flexible and moving with the times, but we seem to be bound by decisions and protocols that are hundreds of years old, dating from before women were even able to vote.

On proxy voting, as we have heard, there are examples of it working in other parts of the world. In Australia proxy voting has been in place since 2008, and in evidence provided to the Procedure Committee the Clerk of the House of Australia said he was not aware of any negative feedback about its use. New Zealand has two different systems for proxy voting, and proxy voting could even be found in the past in this place: until 1868—a bit before my time—Lords who were not present could vote by proxy, while in the Commons proxies were allowed in the medieval Parliament. We are not just stuck in the past; we are almost going backwards on some of these issues.

I believe that we can move to a system of proxy voting, and, as touched on already, we ought to be looking at having a full electronic voting system, which is common in many Chambers. The US House of Representatives

has been doing that since the 1970s, and they may vote at any number of stations located throughout the Chamber. As we have heard, in the United Kingdom the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales both use electronic voting systems.

Mr Charles Walker: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about electronic voting, and he is citing the House of Representatives in America. I think he should look at the quality of debate in many of those Chambers before extolling the virtues of electronic voting too vociferously.

Justin Madders: I think there are many factors that influence the quality of debate in America, not least the party system and the way it is funded. To put that all down to electronic voting might be a slight oversimplification.

As we have heard, going through the voting Lobby gives us a chance to talk to Ministers about important constituency issues, but, as has also been said, only very rarely are Back-Bench Members, certainly on this side of the Chamber, in the same Lobby as Ministers, and I think chance meetings like that are not the best way to be doing important business on behalf of our constituents.

In conclusion, I think the proposals of the Procedure Committee are—pardon the pun—a baby-step towards a modern Parliament; they clearly fall some way short of the workplace protections our constituents have and a long way short of where I think we should be as a modern forward-thinking democracy. But at least we are discussing this, even if it is a century after the first woman was elected to this place.

However much I disagree with the process of English votes for English laws, that has shown that we can change our procedures quickly when there is a desire from the Government. So let us hope that we do not have to wait another century for further progress and we see the same commitment from the Government on this issue that we saw from them on introducing English votes for English laws, and that the recommendations in the “Good Parliament” report are used as part of a wider debate about how we conduct ourselves so we, and our constituents, have confidence that Parliament operates in a transparent, modern and effective manner.

3.59 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I want to start by paying tribute to the Mother of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), not only for the work that she has done on this but for the point that she made earlier about the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). One of the things I have been reflecting on this afternoon is the idea that because we are officeholders and Members of Parliament, we are different. Given what we saw yesterday, I think that members of the general public sometimes forget that although we are officeholders and Members of Parliament, we are also human beings. Far too often, that is lost from folks’ consciousness.

I rise to speak partly to back up some of what the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith) said, and I also want to speak as a father. I had no intention of being here today. I have mentioned before in the House that I am an expectant father. My wife and I are expecting our second child, and her official due date is 21 October. However, this has been a complex pregnancy,

as was the case with our now three-year-old son, and my wife has now been taken in for a C-section the day after tomorrow. So for me, proxy voting is incredibly personal. I know, now that we have been given the business of the House, that the Agriculture Bill will have its Second Reading in the first week back after the recess, but I will not be here to vote on that Bill.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend—and he is a friend—the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who is also my Chief Whip. I went to him at the beginning of this week and said to him, “Patrick, I won’t be able to be here in the first week back after the recess.” It will not be a simple case of my daughter being born and coming out of hospital. When my son was born, he ended up in intensive care for two weeks, followed by a week in the special care baby unit. Men normally get two weeks’ paternity leave, and on occasion such as those, they have to go straight back to work before their child has even come home, so I am grateful to my colleague for allowing me to be slipped that week.

I have sat through this afternoon’s debate feeling incredibly frustrated by the fact that this issue has been kicked into the long grass time after time. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) touched very nicely on the question of English votes for English laws. As a Scottish nationalist politician, I have views on that subject, but what we noticed when English votes for English laws were introduced was that the Government had no problem at all bringing forward the necessary changes to Standing Orders. We did not have to have countless debates on the general principles involved. When the Government decided that they wanted English votes for English laws, they came up with the changes to Standing Orders and put the measures in place. There were a hell of a lot of unintended consequences, but it was good enough for the Government to bring in those changes at that point, and I believe that it is good enough for them to bring forward proxy voting now.

Perhaps the reason that I am annoyed and a bit emotional today is that proxy voting will not help me on this occasion. There will be no proxy voting in place when I miss that first week back, and I will not be here to vote on the Agriculture Bill or on any other matters that come up that week. I say to the Leader of the House that there is consensus among Members of Parliament on this issue. There was consensus on 1 February this year. I sat in that debate knowing that we were expecting a baby later in the year, and I went home and told my wife that it looked as though we were going to get proxy voting. I knew fine well that my child would probably be in intensive care for two or three weeks. The reality is that if we had gone full term to 21 October, Parliament would have been back in session and I would have missed countless weeks here. At the time, I said to her, “It’s okay, we will have proxy voting.” It is sheer luck that we will be in recess for the vast majority of the time that I need to be away from here. My message to the Leader of the House today is crystal clear. There is a clear consensus in the House today: get on with it.

4.3 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): As we consider the scope of proxy voting, it is worth looking at how we do things in this House when it comes to voting. As a relatively new Member of Parliament, it took a while for me to get used to the ways and

procedures of this place, including the ways in which we vote. On the face of it, there is nothing wrong with having to vote in person and being required to be physically present in the voting Lobby within eight minutes of the bell sounding. However, there are exceptions to that rule, one of which involves nodding through.

It is a long-established custom and practice that if a Member of Parliament is on the parliamentary estate but, because of some physical inability, cannot get to the voting Lobby, they should be allowed, with the agreement of the Whips, to cast their vote by being nodded through. That custom was torn up and trampled on by the Government on 19 June, when the Government Whips refused to honour a request to allow a Member who was on the parliamentary estate, having been brought here by ambulance, to be nodded through. Instead, they insisted that my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) be wheeled through the Lobby in a wheelchair with a sick bucket in her lap. Surely Parliament should be about trying to ensure that Members have a fair opportunity to vote. The Government Whips’ approach on 19 June was deliberately anti-democratic as their actions resulted in making it harder for Members to vote, even when they wanted to but physically could not do so without help.

Another such exception is the pairing system. If a Member knows that they will be absent from a vote, they can, with the agreement of the Whips, be paired with an opposing Member, with their pair agreeing not to vote in a Division from which the other Member will be knowingly absent. However, as the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said, pairing does not apply among other parties, such as the Scottish National party. On Tuesday 17 July, the pairing arrangement was broken twice by a Member who voted in favour of the Government by opposing two amendments to the Trade Bill in close votes while the non-voting Member, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), was recovering after having given birth just a few weeks earlier.

Our antiquated system of voting needs reform, but considering how long it takes for change to happen and the systematic failure to honour customs and traditions in recent months, it is time for at least one change to happen—and soon. We need another exception to the rule: the introduction of proxy voting in the limited circumstances of Members being absent from the House by reason of maternity, paternity or adoption. Following my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) securing a debate on 1 February 2018 and a resolution about proxy voting—it was nicknamed “baby leave”—being passed without dissent, the matter was referred to the Procedure Committee to explore further.

As a member of the Procedure Committee, I and my colleagues had the pleasure of hearing from a number of hon. Members and knowledgeable people about the pros and cons of proxy voting, and their experiences of being a parent and a Member of Parliament carrying out their duties, one of which is to vote. We heard about how, in the glare of social media, Members of Parliament have been accused of being lazy because their voting record shows that they have not voted when they were absent due to pregnancy or having just given birth. We heard from one hon. Member who said that he felt compelled to vote in a Division only days after adopting

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

a child with his partner for fear of criticism about his voting record. On an entirely separate note, the Procedure Committee may want to look at how an active abstention might be recorded to help to differentiate from absenteeism, but I digress.

The Procedure Committee also heard from a Member who said that she was not allowed to fly after a certain number of weeks due to her pregnancy. The NHS recommends that pregnant women should not fly after 37 weeks, although that figure varies from airline to airline. As such, that is a barrier to access due to a physical condition, and the House needs to try remove all such barriers that discriminate against Members who are unable to carry out their duties. The Committee heard from Whips who said that there was nothing wrong with the present system of informal pairing, although they might not be so full in their praise of the system following recent events. We also heard from learned Clerks of this House and constitutional experts about how such a scheme could be implemented.

Following its thorough scrutiny of the issues, the Procedure Committee produced a report entitled “Proxy voting and parental absence” on how a non-compulsory proxy voting scheme limited to cases of maternity, paternity and adoption could operate. Although many Members have said that they would like any system to go further, that was the remit that the Committee followed, although I would like to see us go much further. The Committee looked at how and when a proxy would be appointed, in which Divisions a proxy could vote, how those votes should be recorded, and how the Standing Orders should be amended. Much of what we have heard in this debate was captured by the Committee when we were working on our report, which outlines how we could implement any proxy voting proposals. The system is ready to go, and we need a substantive vote soon.

The Procedure Committee, which includes many fine constitutional minds, also considered that if the report’s recommendations were to be implemented on a trial basis this year, which marks the 100th anniversary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, it would send a positive message to women of child-bearing age and men that this House is becoming more family-friendly by making a minor concession. This is the 21st century after all.

Sadly, we are still some way off having a 50:50 Parliament. Although 32% of MPs are women, much more needs to be done to attract more women to stand for and get elected to Parliament. We should get rid of any antiquated practices that discriminate against new mums or heavily pregnant MPs. If we do not, what message are we sending to young women and girls who might aspire to become politicians?

The House has previously taken some strides in that direction by changing the times that the House sits to make them more family-friendly, and by establishing a nursery in Parliament. By accepting the Procedure Committee’s proposals, we would be taking one step further in getting more women to stand for Parliament and in modernising the House to make it fit for the 21st century. There is still much more that needs to be done, but proxy voting would be a big step in the right direction.

4.10 pm

Valerie Vaz: With the leave of the House, Mr Speaker, I will wind up on behalf of the Opposition.

I know that you have been here since 9.30 am, Mr Speaker, so you must be slightly frustrated. I am pleased to see that you have had a break, although I know you have great stamina. I start by paying tribute to you, because you must be frustrated in another sense, as you commissioned the “Good Parliament” report. That report flagged proxy voting, not least because the Parliaments of Australia and New Zealand have this process—the two processes work in slightly different ways, but they do work.

The Prime Minister of New Zealand has just given birth. She is also facing the criticism that women have to face nowadays, but she has had the support of the people of New Zealand, who said, “Our Prime Minister looks like us. She does the things that we do. She has had a baby and is balancing her working life with her family life.”

Again, I thank the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) and members of the Procedure Committee, who I will name because they took the trouble to contribute to the debate: the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous)—he has just made a very thoughtful contribution—and for Ogmere (Chris Elmore), and the right hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett). I will be coming back to the contribution of the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) in a minute. Sadly, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has had to catch a flight, so she has apologised to all of us for not being here for the wind-ups.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), who has obviously also had to leave, has shown exactly why new mums, dads and, of course, adoptive parents need breathing space. In her important contribution, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central made an important contribution in which she said that we have to make a decision soon. The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) said that sometimes the pairing system can work, and it does. I remind everyone that proxy voting is a choice; it is not mandatory.

What can I say about my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), other than that she has driven this issue forward, and she did so way before 1 February? I am sure that she, too, will want to see quick progress. As she said, we are ready to roll.

The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) made an important contribution. He knows that, throughout the years, we have been covered by pairing and nodding through, and proxy voting is a much more up-to-date and much more formalised system.

I remember how my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) was vilified and how, as she was sitting here during the previous debate on this issue, TheyWorkForYou decided to change its mind on the policy—and rightly so. All credit to her for going through an election at a very difficult time. She is my constituency neighbour, and we all felt for her.

The hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), and my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), all made important contributions.

We are a modern Parliament, and we are up to date in certain aspects. That will continue but, as the Leader of the House and I have both said, we are not employees. We have different ways of working.

I wish the hon. Member for Glasgow East and his wife all the very best at this exciting time. We should all be with our newborn children—it really is a wonderful time. I am sure that his wife will be in very good hands, and mothers do need to take that extra time after having a C-section. You do need to be on hand; I am afraid that you will have to do all the heavy lifting—*[Laughter.]* Sorry, Mr Speaker; I mean the hon. Member for Glasgow East will have to do the heavy lifting, not you. I hope you are not going to be there. You have a job to do here, and we need you.

Proxy voting is a choice and it is tied up with the business of the House. It is right that the business managers should manage the business. We are in a hung Parliament. Members who use proxy voting should not have not to spend time finding a proxy. I hope that the process that I outlined earlier can be considered. The Leader of the House mentioned to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham that they should have a conversation about how to drive this issue forward, but it is important for the business managers to be involved, too, so I hope that the Leader of the House will ensure that the business managers of all parties are involved.

The Leader of the House said that she wants to take more evidence on unintended consequences and the various other issues that she outlined. Who will take that evidence? Is it a question of Members writing to her? Is she going to refer anything to the Procedure Committee for further inquiry? How long will the process take? What is the timeframe within which we can expect a substantive motion?

Finally, I wish to recognise that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire has returned to the Chamber with baby Gabriel, who is asleep—I hope that that is not because of my speech. Perhaps we should all be quiet.

I wish to work with the Leader of the House, as do, I am sure, all our business managers. We have to get this right—and soon.

4.16 pm

Andrea Leadsom: With the leave of the House, I will also make a short closing speech and welcome baby Gabriel. I shall try to be very boring and quiet and not make anyone laugh at all.

I really do sincerely welcome the thoughtful debate that we have had. Again, I thank the Procedure Committee for its helpful response to the debate earlier this year, and I thank all those who have made contributions today. I gently remind those who—courteously in some cases, less so in others—advocate urgency and have criticised the fact that a few months have elapsed that Leaders of the House and business managers over the years have never achieved progress in changes to voting procedures. I am grateful for today's debate because, as I have said time and again, this is a significant change

and I am determined that we get it right. I am also determined that it is this Government who make that change—in fact, that it is me as Leader of the House who makes that change. There is my ambition.

We have had some fantastic contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker)—as you rightly say, Mr Speaker, a good-natured fellow—is a strong advocate for modernising Parliament. He made a good case for limiting proxy voting to baby leave rather than extending it beyond that, for reasons of privacy, which I thought really resonated around the Chamber.

We heard an excellent speech from the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), who was quite understandably critical of the Whips. For the record, I wish to repeat the words of the Prime Minister on 18 July in response to a question from the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman). She said:

“First, may I say to the right hon. and learned Lady that the breaking of the pair was done in error? It was not good enough and it will not be repeated. My right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) and the Chief Whip have apologised directly to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire”.

She went on to reassure all right hon. and hon. Members who are having babies that we

“will continue to guarantee a pair for MPs who are currently pregnant or who have a newborn baby.”—*[Official Report, 18 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 410.]*

It is important that there is no sense of the Government not being committed to ensuring that new parents have time to spend with their newborn babies. But, as many Members have said, we can and will go further.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett), a member of the Procedure Committee, made a strong pitch in support of change to help new families. As a former Whip, he recognised that more needs to be done and was keen to support proxy voting.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) made a strong case for why we need more women in politics, and she is absolutely right. To attract more women into politics we need a new, more modern Parliament. May I just say that she apologised to me for having to get going for a flight, which is entirely understandable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) pointed out in a beautiful way the experience that she had with one of her children when she was not a Member of this place and how it can be very tricky in all circumstances, but, of course, it is so much more difficult if a person is a Member of Parliament and an office holder who is unable to be flexible with the demands of giving birth. She was quite right to make her points and she gave some helpful thoughts on the process of proxy voting.

The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham spoke very powerfully about why women should not lose the recognition of their vote. The key point here is that being paired is just not good enough; it is not right for the women or for their constituents that their vote should not be recorded. She also made a plea that those for whom this is not an issue have sympathy for those for whom it very much is a live issue.

[Andrea Leadsom]

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) talked about broadening the issue of proxy voting to include those who have serious illnesses. It was one of the issues that I was keen to have raised in the House today. He was right to raise it. He himself was forced to be absent for a considerable amount of time, and he said that he would have liked to have had his vote counted as well. It is important that we consider, in a pilot scheme or at the end of a pilot scheme, whether proxy voting should include other areas, although I do not get the impression from the debate today that there is a broad appetite for that.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) gave us the benefit of her knowledge as an employment rights lawyer specialising in maternity leave. It was also lovely to hear about her son's excitement about voting. Is it not wonderful to hear about somebody who wants to vote? A Whip once said to me that we spend most of our lives trying to get to this place, and, as soon as we are here, we spend the rest of our lives trying to escape from it. It is the ultimate irony.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) spoke warmly of her own children and the potential embarrassment of the sudden arrival of No. 2. She warned against electronic voting from her experience in the European Parliament as she considers that it can mean that Members are simply not well informed because they tend not to attend the debate. She is a strong advocate for pairing and says that she wishes that it had been offered in the European Parliament, and suggests that possibly better enforcement of pairing—perhaps more transparency—could be a way forward. She also mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) who is one of our colleagues who has recently experienced maternity leave and who is a strong advocate for proxy voting.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) made the case for a broader approach to the use of a proxy. She suggested the example of a parent of a Member dying or being extremely ill. She said that, perhaps, it should be considered in that broader context. She also gave strong words to support all maternity and paternity rights, which as I am sure she will agree is a priority that has been expressed right across the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) talked about the situation of a Member—presumably it was a Member from some time ago—where the Whips were actually calling the delivery suite and asking how long he was going to be. We can all laugh about that now, but, as we saw in that play “This House”, those sorts of things were not uncommon. We have come a long way, but there is a long way to go. He advocates a trial period for proxy voting and that we consider the scope. He is also a strong voice for the current way that we vote through the Lobby to enable Members to have time with Front-Bench Members of all parties.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) made a very strong speech and gave us an insight into her own maternity arrangements, in which she was dealing not with voting in this place, but with the even more challenging situation of a general

election. I can let her in on a story. When I was having my third child, I was dealing with the final round of a selection committee. My daughter was born at home at 2.30 in the morning and at 8 o'clock that evening I was appearing in front of the committee. The mad things that we do! Anyway, I congratulate her on having coming through it with such good humour. She also talked about the stresses and strains of that maternity period. It is incredibly difficult.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) advocates modernisation to give the same protections to this place as we have in the workplace. He is also a strong fan of electronic voting. He will find some support for that in this place, but, dare I say it, not a huge amount of support. Nevertheless, his views were interesting.

To the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), I express my sympathy, wish him good luck and send every good wish for the new arrival who is due the day after tomorrow. We will all be thinking of him and wishing him and his wife a safe delivery. He spoke movingly of the difficulties for dads when their partners really need their support. I am incredibly sympathetic to him, as I know all hon. Members will be.

Last but not least, the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) spoke strongly about the pairing system and his view that it does not work. Pairing is a complicated, quite manual, administrative process, and more than 50 pairs have been broken by the Opposition, some yesterday. I gently point out that it is administratively intensive to enable people to be paired. With the greatest good will and the intention to do all we can to make the system more robust, pairing is nevertheless complex and it is not right to say that breaking it is always deliberate. That is far from the truth. The hon. Gentleman also gave a helpful analysis of the benefits of proxy voting, to which we all listened with interest.

In my opinion, and as expressed by many during the debate, it is important that any new scheme should be time limited to give us the opportunity to evaluate it once a period of time has elapsed. I am grateful to the Procedure Committee for indicating that it will review any new scheme, and I think that it is important that the pilot should be implemented permanently only if the Committee can reassure the House that it has worked well.

Significant changes to procedures in the House need to be carefully considered and evaluated. For example, colleagues will know that the independent complaints and grievance policy, which has just been established, has reviews built into it at six and 18 months. I personally think it is right that any new procedure for voting should have similar checks and balances. [Interruption.] Is that baby Gabriel, alerted possibly to something he does not agree with?

I am minded to accept the majority of the recommendations of the Procedure Committee's report, which provides a good basis for a pilot scheme. However, I do not think that our ambitions for modernising Parliament should be limited to the question of proxy voting. There is much more we can consider when looking at what we can do to modernise this amazing place of work and make it a more family-friendly environment for both those who are here to vote and those who are not.

As I said when I opened the debate, there is no question in my mind but that we need to make progress. I will reflect carefully on today's debate, which has been incredibly helpful, and I intend to bring forward a substantive motion as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered proxy voting in the House of Commons.

Burma: Humanitarian Situation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Mike Freer.*)

4.27 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is delightful to be given this Adjournment debate and to follow such a stimulating debate about proxy voting and enabling women to take part in politics more fully.

I am very pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) will say a few words and I hope that others will join in. Although it is a short-ish debate, I hope that we can have cross-party contributions.

Mr Speaker, I acknowledge your long-standing support for the people of Burma and their journey towards democracy. I also declare an interest as one of the Patrons of Justice for Rohingya Minority. I pay tribute to their work on this matter, most recently at a policy roundtable chaired by the journalist and producer Peter Osborne, where we heard in more detail about the humanitarian situation in Burma, particularly the states of Kachin, Shan and Rakhine. It is beyond dire.

It is appropriate that Mr Osborne chaired that event because two journalists were imprisoned in Burma in the past couple of weeks for uncovering the terrible situation there. It is right in this debate to put on record all the work that journalists do in the difficult parts of the world. Obviously, we have quite a lot to do with the lobby here, and that has its ups and downs for each of us, but we sometimes forget the important role that journalists play in giving us the information we need in order to have these sorts of debates. I know that the Minister, who, with his brief, gets to go to the most interesting parts of the world, will be aware of the importance of high-quality journalism, correct information, accuracy and professionalism among journalists. I hope that we can all pay tribute to them for the work that they do.

Civil rights, freedom of the press and strengthening democratic processes are key areas of concern within Burma, and other Members may wish to bring those aspects into their contributions, but I will focus my comments specifically on the humanitarian crisis facing the Rohingya minority. We know that the community has faced historical persecution that has intensified over the past two years and has now reached a level such that the UN recognises the actions of the Burmese military as

“a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”.

On 27 August 2018, the United Nations fact-finding mission published its interim report, which concluded that genocide has been committed against the Rohingya, and that war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed in the states of Kachin and Shan. The UN Security Council's report of March 2018 estimates that over 25,000 people have been killed, with a further 700,000 displaced in Bangladesh. Those numbers are horrendous, given that it has happened over such a short period of time. I am sure you would agree, Mr Speaker, that we have not seen the outcry that we would have seen with regard to other parts of the world. I hope that through this debate we can continue to highlight what we can do in the international community to ensure that human rights are respected in that part of the world.

[Catherine West]

We have all heard the chilling accounts of the atrocities committed against the Rohingya people by the Burmese army: arbitrary killings, the raping of women, torture, the beating of children, villages burned to the ground, the forced displacement of people, and the targeting of civilians. Such crimes have characterised the nature of this regime in recent times. But perhaps the most harrowing account I have heard is the story of Rajuma Begum, who was attacked and gang-raped by army officers while her home burned to the ground. Following this utterly revolting sexual attack, her baby Sadiq was torn from her arms and thrown into the fire.

The 20th century has witnessed, time and again, assaults on the human race and communities, from the holocaust, to Rwanda, to Cambodia, to Srebrenica, to Halabja in Iraq—an attack against the Kurds. The next chapter of that woeful saga is unfolding in front of our very eyes, in a country that was globally looked on with such hope as Burma held its first openly contested election since 1990. It feels like only yesterday that I had my first moment as a shadow Minister, at that crucial time in 2015, talking about the right to vote for the Rohingya, when we pressed the government to give the right to vote, the right of citizenship, and the right to play a full role in society—yet it now feels as though we have gone backwards. I hope that through our contributions today, we can put a spotlight on the complete injustice and murder that is still taking place.

I have a couple of points for the Minister that I would like to get right to the heart of. Can we all agree that bringing an immediate end to the bloodshed and massacre must be the No. 1 priority—that is, safety for human beings? The UK Government are the penholder for Burma at the UN Security Council. If the international community is to act effectively, we need resolutions to be drafted that go beyond requesting Burma to take responsibility for the crisis and allow investigations into the atrocities to take place. Have the Government considered lobbying their Security Council partners to widen the jurisdiction of the crimes to Bangladesh, as Bangladesh has ratified the Rome statute, which facilitates referrals to the International Criminal Court, while Burma has not? On targeting suspected war criminals, perhaps the Government should consider introducing travel bans. We need to be exploring every political avenue open to us to help to secure our shared objectives in the region. I would also be grateful if the Minister updated the House on what progress has been made at UN level on securing a political solution to the crisis, and specifically whether the Government are considering a referral to the International Criminal Court.

Another question for the Government is on sanctions. I will be honest: I am not sure of the evidence base for the effectiveness of sanctions in this instance. Could the Minister enlighten us on the thinking in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as to whether that would be helpful at this moment?

Could the Minister provide an update on what discussions he has had with Aung San Suu Kyi and her team about this situation? Is there any way that she could use her standing internationally, which gives her a unique opportunity to begin to put right this terrible situation?

I realise that the issue of emergency aid and assistance straddles the Minister's joint brief with the Department for International Development, but it would be helpful to receive the most recent update on what resources are being allocated to health, housing and civil protection for the affected communities in Burma and those already displaced in Bangladesh.

I would like briefly to pay tribute to the truly heroic work of our aid workers and medical professionals, such as my constituent Michelle Tonge, an intensive care nurse at an NHS hospital in London who volunteers in refugee camps in Bangladesh, and my friend and colleague my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), who is currently preparing for another tour of duty as a doctor in Cox's Bazar. We are all tremendously pleased that she can be our messenger, as it were, as a Member of Parliament and also a doctor.

To conclude, history has shown that for most nations, the road to democracy is rarely a path free from obstacles, and it is more than fair to say that Burma has faced a great number of such obstacles. As the one-year anniversary passes of the Burmese military's most deadly attack on the Rohingya, let us resolve to redouble our efforts to secure sanctuary for those fleeing persecution and amplify our calls for international partners to secure an end to the bloodshed in Burma.

Mr Speaker: I wish the hon. Lady a happy birthday for tomorrow.

4.36 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing this very important and timely Adjournment debate on Burma.

Over the last year, Burma, Bangladesh and the Rohingya crisis has been a priority area of work for the International Development Committee. In fact, the Minister gave evidence to us yesterday on the Rohingya crisis. We also took evidence from Save the Children, one of the fine non-governmental organisations working on the ground in Bangladesh and Burma, and from Tun Khin of the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK, which is a voice for the Rohingya diaspora who live in this country. One thing that has struck me over the last year is the importance of hearing the Rohingya voice. There is a lot of discussion about the Rohingya by different parts of the United Nations and agreements being reached between Governments. All that is, of course, essential, but it is vital that the Rohingya themselves have a voice in discussions about their own future.

Our Committee has published three reports on this over the past year. My friend the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) is our Committee rapporteur on Burma, Bangladesh and the Rohingya. I pay tribute to the work he does for us. We went to Bangladesh earlier this year, as many colleagues on both sides of the House have done. We went to Cox's Bazar, and one of the things that is incredibly striking about it is the sheer scale of the place. I went with Oxfam to Zaatari refugee camp for Syrian refugees in Jordan, and the population there is around 80,000. Cox's Bazar is 10 times the size of Zaatari. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green, I pay tribute to the amazing volunteers,

the aid organisations, the UN and others for the work they are doing to try to provide services for people on the ground.

Of course, what we all want is to reach the point where the refugees can safely and confidently return to Burma. I do not think we are very near that at the moment, because of the challenges. The Minister rightly said in his evidence yesterday that the two challenges are safety on return and identity. At the heart of this crisis is the question of the Rohingya identity and the view in Burma—let's face it, it is not just the view of the military and the civilian Government, but of most people who live in Burma—that denies that basic identity and therefore denies their citizenship. That is the core policy issue that will have to be addressed if the Rohingya are going to return with any confidence.

A very specific issue about which I am keen to hear from the Minister—we addressed this with him yesterday—is the crucial importance of good education for the Rohingya children in the camp. We know that increasing numbers of children around the world are spending their entire childhood in refugee camps or as displaced people in other forms. Ensuring that they get the same kind of access to education that other children can expect is a huge challenge, but one I really think we have a duty to rise to as a country and as the world community.

Catherine West: On education, does my hon. Friend agree that part of the reason why it is so important is that, I think, three quarters of the refugees in the camp are children? It is doubly important, because it is about the future generally.

Stephen Twigg: Absolutely right. A similar statistic that we were given yesterday by Save the Children, and which the Minister and the Foreign Office officials confirmed, is that probably only about one in four of the children are getting any kind of education. In a sense, it is understandable that initially, as the refugees arrive, the priority is shelter, food and so forth. Now, however, a lot of them have been there for a year, and it is time for education and learning to be given a higher priority.

Let me finish by saying something about the crucial question of justice for the Rohingya. As is so often the case, we as a country can be very proud of our support for humanitarian relief for the refugees and of many of the development programmes that we fund in both Bangladesh and Burma, but there is the crucial question of justice. I know that the Foreign Secretary is visiting Burma soon. It would be very positive to hear from the Minister his thinking, so far as he can share it with us today, about that visit, but I certainly urge the Foreign Secretary and the Government to take this opportunity to make the case for justice.

My own view, which I know is shared by many colleagues, is that the military leaders responsible for this campaign should be before the International Criminal Court. I know that there are huge challenges in getting there. My hon. Friend mentioned the interesting option of going via the Bangladesh route, because Bangladesh is a signatory, which might circumvent the danger of a Chinese or a Russian veto at the Security Council. I realise there are complications with that, but, in principle, we should be saying as a country that there should be a referral to the International Criminal Court.

Ultimately, I think we all want a Burma that can be a genuinely democratic, multi-ethnic country, with support for people of all faiths and of none. Sadly, we are a very long way away from that vision, but I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving us the opportunity to address this important issue today.

4.42 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): It is a pleasure to be able to reply to the debate, as well as to two eminent colleagues who know their business very well, and in front of you, Mr Speaker, who also knows the issue very well through long engagement with it.

I thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West)—I spent many happy years some time ago in her constituency with the Young Conservatives—for securing the debate. I also thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who grilled me for an hour yesterday on this very subject—fortunately, because a lot of the stuff is still in my mind. As the hon. Lady said, this would normally be the province of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Asia and the Pacific. He is busy attending to other duties, so forgive me for taking his place. Of course, my DFID responsibilities absolutely lead into the Rohingya crisis, and I can also speak to that.

I want to talk a bit about Burma and what is happening there now, then about the Rohingya in Bangladesh and the issues affecting that, and I will then come on to the questions the hon. Lady raised at the end. I will start by picking up on her thanks to two groups of people. The first is journalists—and absolutely. Every now and again, we get a little message saying that another journalist has been killed or wounded, and every year there is a commemoration of those who give their lives to bring information and news to all of us. We are well aware of the risks that they run. Yes, we have our issues with journalists here, but we must never forget the job they are required to do. Sometimes they are the only people able to bring us first-hand accounts of really dreadful places, and the hon. Lady is right to remember those who run risks for us in every circumstance.

On behalf of the Government I am happy to pay tribute to and thank those journalists for what they do. Such people not only show bravery in difficult places, but in my experience—I have had the good fortune to be in my role for quite a while—really good commentators know what they are talking about. They have got into a state; they have understood it and spoken to all sides, and they maintain a constant interest over many years. Therefore they are a memory bank and a fund of knowledge about a place, and the very best commentators play an important role in informing me, other Ministers and our officials about what is going on—such people are even more vital than we sometimes realise.

I join the hon. Lady in thanking aid workers for what they do under difficult circumstances. We are proud of those who work for DFID and the partner agencies that it supports. I wish particularly to recall those involved in medicine. Last Christmas we sent an emergency team to Cox's Bazar to combat a diphtheria outbreak, which they successfully dealt with. That team was drawn from NHS workers all over the country, and other specialists, and they did a remarkable job. By and large, those teams are composed of people such as the hon. Member

[Alistair Burt]

for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) who use their skills in such circumstances. It was entirely appropriate for the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green to mention her hon. Friend, and we wish her well in continuing her work. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) also does remarkable work, particularly in Gaza, and we are lucky to have colleagues who do such remarkable things.

As we know, Burma is struggling to emerge from 50 years of military rule. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green mentioned the appalling nature of some of the atrocities committed in Rakhine State, which amount at the very least to ethnic cleansing. That and the ongoing conflicts in Kachin, northern Shan and other ethnic areas highlight the enormous scale of continued suffering among Burma's marginalised and most vulnerable communities.

We have looked closely at the UK's support to Burma to ensure that the needs of those communities are at the centre of what we do. We are working to ensure that UK programmes build resilience and can rapidly respond to meet urgent humanitarian needs. We are increasing support for access to education and livelihoods to meet the longer-term needs of vulnerable populations and displaced people. The UK will continue to press for and support a more hopeful and peaceful future for all people in Burma, including leading work at the UN's Security and Human Rights Council to shine a light on Burma's atrocities and accountability. Only through peace, inclusive democracy, and a fairer economy will the longer-term safety, dignity and prosperity of all Burma's people be secured. We are under no illusions. As the hon. Lady said, the pathway to democracy is rarely linear. This is a long and difficult road.

UK-funded humanitarian and development assistance supports vulnerable and displaced people in Rakhine, Kachin and northern Shan. In some of those areas—for example in parts of Kachin that are not controlled by the Government—we are the largest provider of assistance, reaching parts of Burma that neither the Government nor the UN can access. We increasingly focus our humanitarian and development assistance in those areas to support better prospects for displaced people through better health, education, skills and livelihood opportunities.

We will do more. We have changed the way we operate in Burma following the atrocities in Rakhine, and continued instability and violence in other areas. DFID's entire portfolio has been adapted so that all programmes focus on inclusion, social cohesion and equity. We are also placing a greater focus on supporting internally displaced people and refugees. Burma's internal conflicts have persisted since the 1940s—the recent focus on the Rohingya must not obscure the other conflicts and issues that are going on—and together, they constitute the world's longest running civil war. Of 21 active ethnic armed organisations, only 10 have signed the Government's nationwide ceasefire agreement to date. We will continue to support Burma's peace process, but it is an enormous and difficult undertaking. Progress will be slow and fitful, but we and our partners remain committed to supporting peace.

The hon. Lady focused a great deal on the Rohingya in both Bangladesh and Burma. Let me first respond in relation to what we are doing to support the Rohingya

in Rakhine itself. We are working in northern Rakhine, through the United Nations and development partners, to meet immediate humanitarian needs. Since 2017, we have funded over £3.5 million to the few organisations that have been able to get access. The International Committee of the Red Cross has distributed over 350,000 litres of water to affected communities; over 8,000 people have received sanitation services; and 119,000 have received food distributions. The World Food Programme has provided emergency food assistance for some 118,000 people, including 24,000 children under the age of five. Lobbying by the UK and others led to the Burmese Government allowing the World Food Programme to operate again in northern Rakhine. We continue to push for safe access for all aid actors across Burma.

The UK remains one of the largest donors in Rakhine. Humanitarian and development assistance is provided to all communities. We continue to operate in central Rakhine. DFID has provided more than 100,000 people with emergency food, safe water and sanitation services. Our support has provided antenatal care visits for pregnant women, birth deliveries by skilled birth attendants, and the refurbished Sittwent General Hospital.

Of the pressing needs for the Rohingya community remaining in Rakhine—it is important to note that not everyone has been forcibly evicted; some still live in Rakhine—the violence has subsided to a degree but there is still, obviously, a climate of fear and great trepidation. We estimate that some 600,000 Rohingya remain in Rakhine: up to 250,000 in northern Rakhine and the remainder in central Rakhine. Some 128,000 have been living in camps since the intercommunal violence in 2012. Restrictions to movement prevent them from accessing health services, their livelihoods, markets and other basic services. Poverty and food insecurity are among the highest in Burma.

The rule of law and protection against intimidation and violence for remaining civilian populations is a priority. Reconstruction of homes and villages, support for livelihoods, access to basic services, psychological trauma support, guarantees on security and basic rights, and work on reconciliation and intercommunity relations are needed. In the longer term, the Rakhine advisory commission's recommendations provide a pathway to progress. They have been accepted by the Government, but are yet to be meaningfully managed. We will remain very engaged with that process in Rakhine, as well as in Bangladesh.

Let me turn now to Bangladesh. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby knows, I was there recently in order to be able to report more accurately to the House. The overall impression I gave to the Select Committee yesterday was that the immediate needs of the 750,000 who fled last August are, extraordinarily, being met in the camp. We must always pay tribute the Government of Bangladesh and the local community for their work. I think we know what the reaction would be in the United Kingdom if 750,000 people suddenly appeared here. It is remarkable to host that group of people and to help the agencies to provide for them. The UNHCR now operates very effectively in the camps and works with the agencies. The work cannot be done by any one single group. DFID has supplied and supported the agencies working there.

The evidence we see on the ground is of health clinics and primary care services being provided. Reproductive health services are incredibly important and are being

very well used. The child-friendly spaces are terribly important. Many children came with appalling memories and visions of what they had experienced. It takes time to work that through. As the International Development Committee knows from its time there a few months' ago, they were still seeing children working through experiences of trauma. Some few months later, I saw children who were, with their extraordinary resilience, clearly adapting. The pictures that they were drawing were of much happier scenes. They were benefiting from DFID's support for these child-friendly spaces, of which there were some 30 around the camp. When I say spaces, I mean halls where children could meet, be taught and spend some time with people. That is progressing.

The issue now for the Rohingya in the camps is what happens next. As the protests on the anniversary demonstrated, they have had 365 days of tears, and now they are angry and want to know what will happen to them next. Their immediate needs having been provided for, the focus is now on dealing with the things that they fear in the camps. Domestic violence is, sadly, perhaps the No. 1 concern of the agencies, and the second is trafficking—people are being taken out of the camps for all sorts of purposes. The third is idleness—what are people to do now? There is only a certain amount of work available. Because the community are now living together in a way that they were not allowed to in Rakhine state, when their movements and everything else were controlled, there will be a build-up of expectation and activity.

The fourth concern is education, which the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby mentioned. It is one thing to help children to recover from trauma, and to give them the counselling and encouragement that they need, but they are going to need education. People are not going to leave quickly, so those children's education needs must be met. The process is not easy. People will come in from outside and some teachers will need to be recruited locally, but that creates local issues because the agencies may well pay more for teachers than they might be paid in the local community.

Now that we have dealt with the immediate emergency, other issues need to be considered. That is where we are now. I pay a huge tribute to all who have worked in Kutupalong camp and the area of Cox's Bazar. They have done a remarkable job over the past year. I am very proud of the DFID team and its work. Jane Edmondson, who has just left the post of director there, and Jim McIntyre, who has also been involved, have done a great job. We can be proud of that and proud of the British people, who have contributed £129 million of taxpayer support for that emergency. We play a leading part as donors.

Let me deal with some of the questions that the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green asked. First, I turn to the issues surrounding the UN. I spoke to the permanent representative yesterday before I spoke to the Committee. The view is taken that passing a resolution is not a simple process. We want to do something that ensures accountability, and we are looking at options for what happens next. We have been very active. We led the recent visit to Burma and Bangladesh by permanent representatives from the UN, and we played a leading part in EU sanctions in relation to other individuals. There may still be more to do, but the fact that there has not been a resolution does not mean that other work is not going on.

The recent fact-finding mission confirmed the appalling human rights violations that many have suffered. UK Ministers have long stated that the Burmese military is primarily to blame for the atrocities, which include the widespread rape and murder of Rohingya. We believe that the gravity of the report warrants the attention of the UN Human Rights Council and Security Council. We are discussing options with other Security Council members, and we intend to do so in a couple of weeks at the UN General Assembly, at which I and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Asia and the Pacific will be present. Of course, we have to consider bringing the full report to the Security Council once the fact-finding mission has made its final presentation to the Human Rights Council on 18 September.

I now need to wrap up—*[Interruption.]* Oh, can I carry on? I have only got a small amount to say.

Mr Speaker: Order. The 5 o'clock motion will have to be moved at 5 o'clock, but it is not incumbent on the right hon. Gentleman to finish his speech by then.

Alistair Burt: I am relatively new here, Mr Speaker—*[Laughter.]* I do not have all the procedure fully to hand, but I am grateful for the guidance from both you and the Whip. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) reminds me that I was actually a Member of Parliament before he was born, but there is something that one can learn every moment, and in a second Mr Whip will do his job to allow us the extra few minutes that I need in order to deal properly with the questions asked by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mike Freer.)*

Alistair Burt: Let me return to the UN issues. To date, we have judged that pushing for a UN Security Council resolution that includes a referral to the International Criminal Court would not be productive as part of our efforts to ensure accountability and persuade the Burmese authorities to make progress on conditions for safe returns, and nor would it have received sufficient support among Security Council members. When the Security Council considers the final UK fact-finding mission report, which is yet to be seen, we will have an opportunity to discuss all options to ensure accountability, including ICC referral, while also pushing for accelerated progress on conditions for refugee returns.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby mentioned the ruling on 6 September by the Pre-Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Court. The Court has jurisdiction over the alleged deportation of the Rohingya from Burma to Bangladesh, and we acknowledge that as a very important decision. We will support the Court's efforts to bring perpetrators to justice.

Catherine West: The Minister is being very generous in his fulsome reply. I simply want to put this on record. Does he agree that other Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and, indeed, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), would be making the same points if they were here? Indeed, over the summer, as the reports have been coming out and as we have seen the seriousness of the situation, they too have been making representations.

Alistair Burt: Absolutely. There is no doubt that we all want to see justice applied in this case. If the world cannot respond to this, what can it respond to? Names are being named, and we expect to see more in the final report. That will, of course, lead to an increased interest in sanctions and the like.

I take the hon. Lady's point about the efficacy of sanctions. They are an easy tool to go for, but they do not always do the job. In this case, we need the sort of accountability that can ultimately be achieved only through a judicial process, as the world has recently seen at The Hague in a number of different instances. We must ensure that we have the right process to get the right answer. The current process involves taking a bit of time to talk to partners about what is in the best interests of justice, and I hope that the House will not mind that. Sanctions have already been applied, and the United Kingdom has worked with partners in the EU to ensure that they are effective.

The House is aware that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will pay a visit to Burma shortly, because he wants to observe for himself the different issues affecting it. We spoke about the process of democracy, and the role of Aung San Suu Kyi is, of course, of fundamental importance in relation to that. There is disappointment and concern that a position that she might have taken has not been clearly heard but, equally, the differences between the civilian and military parts of the Government need to be known and understood, because they are not straightforward. The Foreign Secretary will have an opportunity to explore that himself, and he will do so. He will return to let the House know of his deliberations, and that will feed into other conversations that he will have during the week of the United Nations General Assembly.

I thank the hon. Lady again. I think I have dealt with the questions raised, although this is a matter that we will all be returning to. One cannot go and see this extraordinary camp and the exodus that produced it without being incredibly touched but also angry at what is happening and the realisation that the world has again been presented with another "never again" situation. We have to find a way through this crisis that can add to a sense of a global order in which the perpetrators of such violence and atrocities realise they can no longer be tolerated. Bearing in mind what we face in other parts of the world, however, particularly in the region I am fortunate enough to cover, I fear that we will rather too often have to deal with the consequences of actions that should have been stopped long ago and to work through them to find the next phase.

On this matter, the commitment of the House, through the Select Committee and individual Members, and through questions to both DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, is remarkable. We will continue to give this matter our every attention. The Foreign Secretary, who will raise the issue of the Reuters journalists with the Burmese authorities when he is there, is committed to doing all that he can to reflect the attention and concern that this House has consistently shown for Burma and the Rohingya, and their issues, over a good period of time.

Question put and agreed to.

5.5 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 September 2018

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Deaf Children's Services

1.30 pm

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I draw Members' attention to the fact that our proceedings are being made available for people who are deaf or hearing-impaired. The interpreters are using British Sign Language, and Parliament TV will show a live, simultaneous interpretation of the debate. We are also trialling live subtitling for the first time on channel 15 on parliamentlive.tv. I call Jim Fitzpatrick to move the motion.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered deaf children's services.

It is a pleasure to see you presiding over today's debate, Mr Stringer. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting us time to raise this matter with the Minister. I look forward to his response and to those of the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), and the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley). I am also grateful to colleagues from the all-party parliamentary group on deafness, who supported the bid for the debate—it is good to see a number of them here. Finally, I am grateful to the House authorities for ensuring that, as you mentioned, Mr Stringer, the debate is transmitted live with signed simultaneous translation. Surely that is the future.

The title of the debate is "Deaf Children's Services". I intend to concentrate on educational support for deaf children, and I am grateful to the National Deaf Children's Society for the briefing that will form the bulk of my comments.

Deaf children are 42% less likely to achieve the top grades than their hearing peers, but there is no reason a deaf child should do any worse than a hearing child if given the appropriate teaching. That is the historical perspective. The worry for the deaf community, and many colleagues here, is not only that the situation is deteriorating, but that it looks unlikely to improve.

In addition to their educational disadvantages, deaf children can be more susceptible to mental health issues. NHS England has said that around 40% of deaf children suffer from mental health problems, in contrast to 25% of hearing children. Continuing into adulthood, people with hearing loss are twice as likely to suffer from depression and anxiety-related issues. Investment in early life would likely lead to healthier adults, without the need for employment support or NHS attention.

The NDCS briefing predicts that more than a third of local authorities in England plan to cut £4 million from their budgets for education support for deaf children

this year. At the same time, the number of teachers of the deaf, who provide vital support for deaf children, has fallen by 14% over the last seven years. Those figures are drawn from freedom of information requests, as detailed in the House of Commons Library briefing.

The NDCS "Stolen Futures" campaign is calling on the Government to step in and tackle that growing crisis. Cuts are putting the education of thousands of deaf children at risk, leaving their futures hanging in the balance. Vital services for deaf children must be adequately funded, both now and in the next spending review. That review has led to today's debate.

There are more than 50,000 deaf children and young people in the United Kingdom. More than 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents who have no prior experience of deafness. Those parents rely on advice from specialist teachers of the deaf to support their child's language and communication skills. Around 80% of deaf children attend mainstream schools, where they may be the only deaf child. Teachers of the deaf play a key role in helping all teachers to understand how to differentiate the curriculum and provide effective support.

Despite the fact that deafness itself is not a learning disability, deaf children underachieve throughout their education. That is demonstrated in the early years foundation stage, where only 34% of pre-school deaf children were reported as having achieved a good level of development, compared with 76% of other children. At key stage 2, less than half of deaf children achieved the expected standard for reading, compared with 80% of other children. At key stage 4, deaf children achieve, on average, a whole grade less in each GCSE subject than other children, and in recent years that attainment gap has widened. Finally, 41% of deaf young people achieved two A-levels or equivalent by the age of 19, compared with 65% of other young people.

Most deaf children do not have an education, health and care plan. The NDCS estimates that less than a fifth—19%—of deaf children have their support confirmed through a statutory EHC plan. The NDCS has been researching what is happening on the ground, and believes that services are clearly under threat. The NDCS has tracked local authority spending on specialist education services for deaf children since 2011. This year alone, more than a third of local authorities—37%—have told the NDCS that they plan to cut funding for those vital services. Deaf children in those areas will lose £4 million of support this year, with local authorities cutting 10% on average from deaf children's services.

My own borough of Tower Hamlets, which is regarded as a model of excellence, has among the highest figures in England for hearing impairment and special educational needs and disability. It comments that it is difficult to make fair and equitable decisions for all children with special educational issues. The NDCS says that cuts are likely to affect my local services too, and believes that those cuts are being driven by wider pressure around SEND funding. I know that the Department for Education has protected high-needs funding to support children with SEND in cash terms, but I also know that the budget has not been adjusted to reflect several key aspects.

First, the number of children and young people requiring additional support is rising. Government figures show that more than 30,000 more children had statements or EHC plans in 2017 than in the previous year. Secondly,

[Jim Fitzpatrick]

local authorities have greater responsibilities to support young people with SEND aged between 16 and 25, following the SEND reforms introduced through the Children and Families Act 2014. Since 2014, they have seen significant increases in the number of 16 to 25-year-olds with a statement of special educational needs or an EHC plan. Finally, there is a trend towards many more children being placed in special schools. The number of children in special schools rose by 12.5% between 2014 and 2017.

The NDCS has published more background material to back up its concerns, and the Local Government Association has also recognised the funding pressures, saying:

“we are calling for an urgent review of funding to meet the unprecedented rise in demand for support from children with special educational needs and disabilities.”

As we head towards the next spending review, the needs of some of the most vulnerable children in society must not be forgotten. A failure to invest in deaf children's futures will likely result in a generation of lost potential.

The NDCS raised a number of issues with me that I know its representatives have already communicated to the Minister and his team. The Department responded that £6 billion is the highest budget on record. Nobody disputes that, but the demand outstrips the supply, and that is the fundamental question for the Minister to respond to. There is more money in the budget—it is the highest it has ever been—but the demand is even higher. I would be grateful if he would address those figures.

The NDCS has raised other issues and put forward some suggestions. For example, it wants to explore with the Department whether the ring fence on the schools block can be relaxed or removed. The national funding formula means that 99.5% of the schools block is now ring-fenced. The remaining 0.5% can be transferred to the high-needs block, which funds SEND support services, only with the agreement of the local schools forum.

That ring-fencing makes it harder for local authorities to move funding in response to growing SEND pressures, as evidenced by the large number of local authorities that have applied to the Department for permission to overrule the schools forum locally and/or go beyond the 0.5%. The NDCS understands that 27 local authorities made a formal request for disapplication of the ring fence, 15 of which were allowed to proceed. I would be grateful if the Minister could comment on those figures and on that principle. I would also welcome his views on whether there is more we can do to ensure that the local school forums include more representation around special educational needs and disabilities.

The NDCS wants the gaps in the specialised SEN workforce addressed. As I have described, teachers of the deaf play a key role in supporting deaf children, their families and other teachers. Where services are working well, they ensure that deaf children start primary school with age-appropriate language and communication skills and that they are effectively supported and included within mainstream schools. In 2017, there were 913 qualified teachers of the deaf working in a peripatetic role or in resource provision. That total has fallen by 14% in the past seven years. In addition, more than half of teachers of the deaf are over the age of 50 and hence are due to

retire in the next 10 to 15 years. Many services are telling the NDCS that they cannot recruit. In 2017, 45% of services reported difficulties in recruiting new teachers of the deaf or arranging supply cover over the previous 12 months.

The NDCS believes a national systemic approach is needed to address this growing crisis. There is little incentive for local authorities to be proactive in ensuring there are sufficient numbers of teachers of the deaf being trained to meet future needs. Many will not be able to meet the financial cost of training new staff while also employing someone who has yet to retire. In 2016, the Department for Education commissioned a report from the National Sensory Impairment Partnership on the supply of specialist teachers, which recommended a central bursary scheme. However, the NDCS is not aware of any action taken in response, and I would be grateful if the Minister could indicate if there is any progress in that regard.

The NDCS asks whether there is a way to incentivise or even require local authorities to work together to commission more cost-effective services for deaf children. Given that deafness is a low-incidence need, it is important that local authorities, and particularly smaller authorities, work together to commission specialist services and provision. There are too many services employing just one or two teachers of the deaf, who are trying to meet the diverse needs of deaf children in their area. There are just nine consortiums delivering education support services for deaf children in England—the largest is in Berkshire. There has been no noticeable increase in recent years in the extent to which services and provision for deaf children are regionally commissioned. I would be grateful if the Minister might comment on that suggestion.

The NDCS welcomes the fact that the Department has asked Ofsted how schools can be better held to account for how they support children with SEND, but it has concerns about whether more could be done to strengthen the accountability framework around specialist services for deaf children.

Finally, the NDCS raises the question of a review of post-16 funding. SEND funding for mainstream post-16 providers is given where a young person has been commissioned a place, using high-needs funding. In practice, that means that, in many areas, colleges will receive funding for young people only if they have an EHC plan.

Government figures suggest that more than 85% of deaf young people do not have an EHC plan. If SEND funding is, in practice, restricted to those with an EHC plan, a large number of deaf young people are less likely to get the support they need to access the curriculum, such as a radio aid to help with additional amplification, or notetakers. In further education, deaf young people are twice as likely to drop out as their peers, and one quarter do not gain any qualification. Teachers of the deaf are unable to provide advice to mainstream college staff or support young people there, as they are not funded. Again, I would welcome comments from the Minister, and I hope he would be prepared to look at that point.

A number of individuals have been in touch with me directly. I apologise for not being able to mention their cases, but there is just not enough time—there are so many colleagues who want to contribute to this important

debate. The House Facebook post for the debate was seen by nearly 64,000 accounts, had over 6,000 post clicks and 1,700-plus engagements covering funding, accessing support, good experiences, geographical differences and lack of understanding. There are some very poignant accounts, especially from parents. I hope the Minister has a chance to view them, if he has not done so already.

There are some very able deaf young people out there who can be huge assets to UK plc. If we do not allow them to develop—if we do not encourage and support them as they mature—we are not just denying them their birthright, but robbing our country of a significant contribution from some highly skilled and intelligent individuals. We owe them more than that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. Eight people wish to speak in the debate, and we have 45 minutes. I am not going to impose a time limit straightaway. I hope people will do the arithmetic and follow that. If not, I will have to impose a time limit. I call Peter Aldous.

1.45 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing the debate and on the unstinting work he does on behalf of the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. I also welcome the Minister to his place.

I start by raising some of the challenges faced by deaf children in Suffolk, where there is dissatisfaction with services in the north of the county. The National Deaf Children's Society points out that the county has lost four teachers of the deaf since 2011. Suffolk County Council has also discontinued running an integrated specialist service for deaf children, which brought education and care together. The service was praised and singled out by Ofsted in a thematic review carried out in 2012 as being a good example of good practice, and no assessment appears to have been carried out of the impact on deaf children of removing the service. More widely, its removal goes against the emphasis on joint working and commissioning in the special educational needs and disability reforms.

There is a concern that local authorities across England are being put under pressure to reduce services as a result of short-term budgeting constraints at the cost of the long-term future of deaf children. I have raised those concerns with Suffolk County Council, which is aware of the problem. It highlights that all services for children with disabilities and special educational needs are significantly under-resourced nationally across both the education and health sectors and point to a projected 18% to 20% increase in SEN demand. The lack of funding impacts on resources for deaf children, alongside all others with SEN.

With the new national funding formula for SEND, Suffolk receives less funding than similar areas. Although the county has been awarded some additional funding, it has been capped at a rate that means that it receives only half of the extra that it should be receiving each year—a shortfall of £1.5 million per annum.

In terms of NHS speech and language services, which support deaf and hearing impaired children, there has been a 21% rise in demand in the last three years, but no

significant change in the level of offer for community health services. That will only get worse, as a further 10% increase in demand is projected by 2020. That has a negative knock-on impact on the county council; where the NHS is unable to provide the necessary resources, the county council, as the local education authority, becomes the funder of last resort, thereby putting further pressure on its already under-resourced education budget.

Suffolk is looking to put resource bases into mainstream schools to address the needs of deaf children, which would enable a child with a specialist need to access a mainstream offer. Generally, I believe that is the right approach.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for securing the debate. In my constituency, Knotty Ash Primary School provides such a deaf resource base for 14 profoundly deaf children. It is a huge boon for those children, but also for the hearing children in the mainstream school, all of whom learn British Sign Language.

Peter Aldous: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The resource bases in Suffolk, both in primary and secondary schools, are very popular and go down very well—the feedback from pupils who are not deaf is that they welcome the provision. They are incredibly proud of the young people in those units. The problem in Suffolk is that there are three resource bases at primary level—in Ipswich, Bury and Lowestoft—but at secondary level there is a resource base only in Bury St Edmunds. They need to be put out across the whole county, particularly in the north.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse is a champion for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing community, but it is important to highlight the sterling work of another such champion, Ann Jillings from Lowestoft, who has been working tirelessly with passion and determination to secure the best possible education for her son Daniel. In doing so, she is campaigning for other parents of deaf children in north Suffolk. Ann chairs the Waveney Deaf Children's Society and, along with Daniel, has been campaigning for the introduction of a GCSE in British Sign Language as soon as possible. They made their case firmly and passionately but politely to the Minister for School Standards, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), at a meeting in March. I hope that the Department for Education will continue to do as much as it can to support the development of the new GCSE, and I would welcome the Minister's reassurance on that point.

Daniel was born deaf. Following a diagnosis through the newborn hearing screening programme, Ann receives support from a person she describes as a “fantastic” teacher of the deaf, who acted as an advocate for the family as Daniel grew up. Daniel has been able to make excellent progress throughout his education. Ann is very clear that that is because of the support he received from specialist teachers of the deaf and communication support workers. That confirms that, provided that deaf children receive the right support from the start, there is no reason why they cannot thrive and break through any glass ceilings that get in their way.

[Peter Aldous]

Getting support for Daniel has been a challenge. Ann comments that she has fought tooth and nail for it, which has put the whole family under incredible stress. She highlights that it took 50 weeks to complete the transfer from a statement to an education, health and care plan—more than twice the statutory deadline. She points out that initially the local education authority did not agree with the advice that Daniel would need to continue to have support from a teacher of the deaf in his school. Only when she stated that she would take up her right of appeal was it accepted that a full-time teacher of the deaf was needed. She says:

“Getting the support for your deaf child is a battle which parents should not have to fight, and I do wonder what happens to the children whose parents cannot persevere in the same way as we have.”

I have got a lot to say, Mr Stringer, but I sense I am preventing others from speaking.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): To help the hon. Gentleman, there were roughly five and a half minutes for everybody if they self-allocated. He has now been speaking for six and a half minutes.

Peter Aldous: Thank you for guiding me, Mr Stringer. I will cut to the chase and conclude with what I said at the end of the debate on deafness and hearing loss in this Chamber last November. Many barriers have been placed in Ann Jillings's way in her pursuit of better education for Daniel. It is our duty and the duty of Government and local authorities to remove those barriers as soon as possible. Thank you for bearing with me, Mr Stringer.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): It is probably easier if I impose a five-minute time limit on speeches.

1.53 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. It is also a pleasure to serve with the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), whom I have known for a long time, in the all-party parliamentary group on deafness. I congratulate him on securing this important debate.

I have got five minutes, so I will try not to repeat anything that has already been said, other than to thank the National Deaf Children's Society for its “Stolen Futures” campaign, which is a key reason why most of us are here. I also thank Willingdon Community School in my constituency, which is a fantastic institution with a unit for deaf and hard-of-hearing children. I have been there many times and have always been a big fan of it.

Deafness is a funny disability. I say that as someone who has been hard of hearing since I was about six. I have been involved with this issue for many years in various areas, including as a trustee of the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, patron of the British Society of Audiology and loads of other things in between. At the ripe old age of 61, I have concluded that it is still an interesting disability. I do not mean that facetiously. At my age, and given my involvement over the years in many areas of deafness, I would have thought that there would have been a quantum leap—an improvement—

in the opportunities for deaf people. In some ways that has happened, and in other ways there has been almost no advance at all. When I say “deaf”, I mean either profoundly deaf or severely hearing impaired. The situation is very different for people like me—I am hard of hearing but have a hearing aid, so relatively speaking it is almost no barrier at all—and for people who are profoundly deaf or have severe hearing loss. Our world is one of communication, and if you cannot hear what people are saying to you, or they are not able to communicate with you, it is an enormous barrier.

Teachers of the deaf play an important role. Over the years, I have seen children who have had good teachers of the deaf or adequate provision go on to lead fulfilling, successful lives and have good careers. Others who did not have that opportunity have, through no fault of their own, mostly spent their lives on benefits or in low-paid work. That is not a reflection on their intellect or ability; it is because of the barriers of deafness and because they were not helped at the right time.

The fact that, for various reasons, the number of teachers of the deaf is dropping, and that a substantial percentage of them are over 50, which means they will be approaching retirement in the next few years, worries me greatly. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how the Government propose to deal with that. I can say with conviction, based on years of experience, that if profoundly or severely deaf children are not supported at the right time in early years, they almost have no chance at all. We must bear it in mind that 90% of the time profoundly deaf children are born to hearing parents, and if the parents have no experience of deafness it is an absolutely shattering blow. I am not exaggerating; I have seen that so many times. A good trained teacher of the deaf not only helps the child to acquire communication skills so that they can maximise their ability to communicate, but plays a crucial role in supporting the parents, because when that happens to hearing parents it is like hitting a wall.

I am keen to support this terribly important campaign. In the limited time I have left, I want to focus on one particular ask: the review of post-16 funding. In theory, there will be enough funds to support deaf children from 16 to 18 if they go into further education. I urge the Minister to look at the report, because there is a clear anomaly—a gap between what is supposed to happen and what is happening. If a profoundly deaf young person goes into FE at 16 and there is no support, they immediately go backwards—I have seen it many times—and that is a terrible waste. I urge the Minister to consider the review of post-16 funding.

1.58 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. As others will do throughout the afternoon, I congratulate my former colleague—now my colleague in this House—the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). We agree on so many things, and we agree yet again on this issue. He based his brilliant speech on the summary that the National Deaf Children's Society, which I congratulate, sent out. Its timing is perfect, as we are now looking at the funding formulas and the allocations that will be given out.

At this stage I must declare that I have for many years been the patron of the Hertfordshire Hearing Advisory Service. It is not something I am new to, because I was

asked just after I became an MP. I had mentioned in passing one afternoon that I had a hearing impairment from my military service, which I must admit I did not tell the fire service about when I joined it—fortunately I am now out of the fire service.

I will not go over the many issues that have been raised, but I agree with nearly everything that has been said. SEN provision is a real difficulty in all our constituencies—how people are assessed, how long it takes for them to be assessed—and getting an EHC plan in place is massively difficult. Such provision carries on now, because the Government have rightly extended it to 25. The report clearly shows the anomalies and issues there.

In the short time I have, I will talk about a couple of things. For this country, British Sign Language is a language, the same as any other language we are lucky enough to use—for some people, it is their only language—but no one can get a formal qualification in it. That is fundamentally wrong, and discriminatory against people whose language it is, through no fault of their own. Yes, we have 80%—that is a fantastic figure—of those with deafness, profound deafness or hearing disabilities in mainstream schools, but teachers get nothing in the way of training.

I declare an interest again: I have a daughter who is a primary school teacher. She took her PGCE, her postgraduate certificate in education, four years ago, but in a whole year of training she had only half an hour on physical education to teach her how to take PE lessons, and absolutely nothing on deafness in young people even though, with that 80% in mainstream schools, she is obviously likely to be teaching them. I have not asked permission to speak on her behalf today, but I speak on behalf of lots of other teachers.

It would cost the Government absolutely nothing if British Sign Language was included as part of a degree in education, the post-qualification PGCE or any of the new ways of becoming a teacher that have come through, not because teachers necessarily have pupils in their school, but because they will do so later—almost certainly. At the moment, if a school does not have someone who can provide that sort of help, a teacher might be sent away, or people train in their own time, at their own cost, offering their own provision. That is fantastic, but surely in the 21st century, when we train a diversity of teachers and want more and more people to be in mainstream schools, we must understand what the needs for provision are.

The figures are shocking, and not to give basic support to a young person in school is fundamentally wrong. That basic support is not as a replacement for a deaf adviser, but just so people can communicate, “Good morning”, “How are you?”, or “Did you watch the football?”, the sort of normality that we all take for granted. That would not cost the Department for Education a single farthing, because it could be added into the curriculum, perhaps taking something else out.

Ninety per cent. of the education training for teachers—especially in the PGCE—is done in schools, but that provision does not ensure that the teachers go into a special needs school as part of the one-year course. Why not, Minister? It seems logical to me that they should do that. Why do we have to retrain them further should they need it when so many children have those special education needs under an EHC plan?

For me it is fundamental. If this House and this Government—which I am very proud of—want to treat people in a civil way, looking at them equally, with equalities in mind, then young people who need help should at least have the basics to be able to take a qualification. It is fundamentally wrong that in this day and age they end up less qualified than their peers sitting next to them simply because the provision was not excellent. That is wrong.

2.3 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, my Select Committee colleague.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate and for so comprehensively and effectively setting out the issues facing deaf children. I know how passionate he is about the issue, and he is a great advocate for the deaf community in this place.

It is important that the focus of today's debate is services for deaf children. Children's voices are not heard often enough in this place, and it is right for us to talk about them. I am also absolutely delighted that Parliament is making the debate accessible for all those who might want to follow it live. I hope that will be rolled out more widely.

There are 282 deaf children in the city of Nottingham. The majority attend their local mainstream school, supported by the sensory team at Nottingham City Council. Firbeck Academy in Nottingham, a mainstream primary school in the north of the city, has specialist provision for 12 deaf children—the school is actually in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris)—but all the children in the school are surrounded by British Sign Language in classrooms and assemblies, and many of the hearing children grow up signing and can communicate with their deaf classmates using BSL.

In addition to ensuring that deaf children get an excellent education at school, many parents require support from outside agencies, whether that is the BSL teacher, speech and language therapists, doctors, social care or audiology services, to name but a few. Managing those relationships adds to the increasing extra workload of the two full-time teachers of the deaf at Firbeck Academy. They increasingly spend more time out of the classroom, juggling budgets and timetables, because the school's overall budget has been reduced. Those at the school told me that

“it is the same old story, if the Government want an outstanding education system, there needs to be more funding for schools.”

They are concerned that many SEN children's needs are not being met due to lack of funding. Firbeck has been set up with specialist deaf provision and it is struggling. I am concerned for those schools that do not have the same set-up but provide education for a deaf child. How can the Minister be confident that such children and their families are getting the support that they need to thrive?

Looking to the future of deaf children's education, as my hon. Friend said, 57% of peripatetic teachers of the deaf are over the age of 50, and insufficient new trainees are being brought through. The training itself to become a teacher of the deaf has been reduced from one year full-time or two years part-time, which is less than in

[Lilian Greenwood]

many other countries. As a result, some topics cannot be covered in detail and others not at all. There is no requirement for continuing professional development and very little budget to support it. I hope that the Minister tells us in his response what is being done to recruit more teachers of the deaf and to ensure the quality of their training. Also, will he reassure us about the mainstream training of all teachers; that it properly alerts them to the needs of deaf children and how to meet those needs?

Some children cope well in mainstream education, but others struggle in that setting. Nottinghamshire Deaf Society tells me that, in its experience, too many children do not get the specialist support that they need, find communication difficult and, of course, then leave school with lower attainment. The society told me that those children can lack a sense of identity, so missing out on the support and richness of deaf culture. That is worth addressing.

Deaf children do not need access just to deaf services; they rely on health services too. The NICE—National Institute for Health and Care Excellence—guidelines on acceptable criteria for cochlear implants are now out of date and out of step with those in most other developed countries, such as the USA and Australia. Lots of parents are understandably frustrated by that. The children might not be reaching their potential with a hearing aid, but they do not meet the UK criteria for implants. Over the past year the Ear Foundation, a charity in my constituency, has lobbied NICE to review the guidance so that clinical discretion may be applied in the best interests of the children. I hope that the Minister will liaise with his colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care about what benefits access to that technology could bring for deaf children.

I am conscious of the time, but I hope that the Minister will also tell us a little about what is happening to ensure that deaf children and young people get access to proper careers information, advice and guidance, to help them as they enter the world of work. As we know, poorer educational opportunities mean poorer opportunities for life, and that impacts on things such as mental health and isolation, as my hon. Friend said. I look forward to the Minister's response.

2.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I too congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing the debate. Some things we disagree about, but there is a whole lot more that we agree about, and this subject is one of them. I look forward to supporting him in this debate, as I often do in many of the debates that he secures—likewise, to be fair, he often supports me.

Nothing is more frustrating than not being understood. At times, most especially at the beginning of my Westminster journey, I spoke to people in this place only for them to look at me searchingly, trying to get past my accent. Perhaps that is still an issue—I am not sure—but I hope everyone present can understand me. As the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) says, Jim Shannon gets more words to the minute than any other MP. I am not sure what she means, but I suppose I know what she is saying, so over the past few years I have tried to slow it down.

My point is that it is frustrating in the extreme not to be understood. I cannot imagine the frustration of deaf people who find it difficult to understand and to be understood, and there is also the frustration of those who love them, knowing how little help and support is offered through the education system or, as the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said, the health system.

I know that Northern Ireland is not the Minister's responsibility, but I want to give a flavour of what is happening there. There are 3,500 British Sign Language speakers and 1,500 Irish Sign Language speakers in Northern Ireland, but just 30 registered interpreters. That tells us immediately that deaf people have a problem being heard in Northern Ireland. There are 1,400 children—46 deaf children per teacher—who have moderate to profound hearing loss. The numbers do not add up, so it is impossible to deliver a system.

I read an interesting article in the *Belfast Telegraph* six months ago on this very topic. It reported that the prognosis was not good. It stated that,

“despite a 25% increase in the number of deaf children in the last seven years, the number of specialist teachers of the deaf has reduced by 16%.”

Of those teachers, 61% are due to retire in the next 10 to 15 years, which is an issue that the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and others raised. The Scotland and Northern Ireland director of the National Deaf Children's Society said:

“In Northern Ireland we've got around 1,400 deaf children...out of those children, 71% of them are currently educated in mainstream school. In those schools, the staff require support from teachers who have the specialism to be able to deal with those deaf children.”

The article added:

“Additional support would allow trained staff to educate teachers on the awareness and communication needed for deaf children.”

The director continued:

“It would also allow for one-to-one tuition, if required, and organise specialised technology for the pupils. Those teachers help the children to integrate and they help the teachers to help the children to integrate, so it's a dual support.”

We must remember that it is not just about being heard but about being part of the group of pupils. She further said:

“There's a great opportunity here because of the five education and library boards recently consolidated into one Education Authority so we can take a Northern Ireland-wide approach in addressing this situation. We would like to see a plan to train new teachers of the deaf so we have new teachers coming through to replace those who retire in the near future, and we would like a recruitment drive to get more of them into the classroom. At the moment, because of the increase of children who are deaf along with the reduction in teachers...we will soon have in the workforce, we would like to see education for deaf children recognised.”

I could not agree more.

The numbers are increasing and we do not have capacity to handle them. We do not have a Minister in office either to bring about policy change, but we look forward to the possibility that that might happen. When we return on 15 October, some things will come before the House. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is beginning the process of bringing new legislation to this place to allow senior civil servants to make policy decisions. That cannot come soon enough.

A recent study found that deaf children are falling behind their hearing classmates due to funding cuts. Unfortunately, only 40% of deaf students achieve two A-levels, compared with 65% of hearing students. The National Deaf Children's Society attributes this attainment gap to "year on year cuts". Only 9% of deaf students attend a Russell Group university, which indicates where the fall-down is. We are failing to understand their needs, and that must change. Thomas Edison, thanks to whom this Chamber is lit with electric light bulbs, had scarlet fever in his youth and therefore was severely hearing impaired, but look what he did and what we have today thanks to him.

The Minister has had a hard week; he has been in this place three times to respond to debates. We need an impetus from his Department, here and back in Northern Ireland. The hearing impaired can excel if effort is put into the process. I want to be heard and understood; deaf children need to be, too. Everybody has that right. We must do better.

2.13 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

On 5 March I had the great privilege of presenting a debate in response to the e-petition on making British Sign Language a part of the curriculum. Much of that debate was about giving deaf children the best possible chance of communicating with other people and the best educational outcomes. Sadly, attainment evidence shows that is not happening at present.

I want to talk about services for deaf children at a much earlier stage in the education system. I am sorry to have to do that; the latest figures show that services for deaf children are reducing across England. That means that their futures are being "stolen", as the National Deaf Children's Society puts it, because without the support, intervention and specialist skills that they need, they will not be able to make the best educational and social progress compared with other children who are not deaf or hearing impaired. That cannot be right.

There are more than 50,000 deaf children and young people in the UK. As we have heard, more than 90% of them are born to hearing parents who have no prior experience of deafness. Some 80% of those children attend mainstream schools, where they may be the only deaf child in their school. Figures from the National Deaf Children's Society show a stark difference in educational achievement as it is. In the early years foundation stage, 34% of pre-school deaf children were reported as having a good level of development compared with 76% of other children. At key stage 2, less than half of deaf children achieved the expected standard for reading, compared with 80% of other children. At key stage 4, deaf children achieve, on average, a whole grade less in each GCSE subject than other children. In recent years this attainment gap has widened. As we have heard, 41% of deaf young people achieve two A-levels or equivalent by the age of 19, compared with 65% of other young people. This is not a gap of intelligence but of the support and the tools to communicate and understand as other children do.

Where do deaf children sit in the special needs system? Most of them do not have an education, health and care plan. The NDCS estimates that less than a fifth of these children have a plan that sets out their supported needs.

Most schools do not have the knowledge or skills to support deaf children themselves. Access to specialist support is essential for their learning and development. Because deafness is a low incidence need, that support is best provided by teams of experts, especially teachers of the deaf, centrally organised in education services, who can go out and provide support and advice to teachers, families and the children themselves. Research from the Department for Education just last year showed that specialist education services for deaf children play a crucial role in advising mainstream teachers and ensuring that the needs of deaf children are met. Those services are funded through the high-needs block of the dedicated school grant. It is essential that that service is provided centrally to help deaf children achieve in school.

As the National Deaf Children's Society says, it is essential that services are funded in a way that allows early intervention not just at school but at pre-school, so that families and children can be given the best advice. It is worrying, as we have heard, that local authority spending on specialist education services for deaf children has been reducing since 2011. That includes my authority of Gateshead, where the budget for this year has reduced by 17%. Like many councils, Gateshead has done its best to protect funding for specialist services.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) about the pressures on funding and the asks of the National Deaf Children's Society. I endorse those asks, but as we approach the comprehensive spending review we also need additional funding for local authorities, to provide these essential education services. I have met some incredible people in the course of the last year, from Erin, who I met last year, who is pushing for a GCSE, to Ella, who messaged me this week. It is important to give them the time they need.

2.18 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this important debate.

I pay homage to the work of the National Deaf Children's Society in its "Stolen Futures" campaign. Earlier this year I had the honour of being invited to visit the Sunnyside Academy in Middlesbrough, where some of my constituents are employed and where deaf or hard of hearing children from Hartlepool receive an excellent education. Sunnyside is a mixed-sex primary school that services more than 350 children aged between three and 11. To say that my eyes were opened when I visited the place is an understatement. It truly was a magnificent experience to interact with the children, to visit their classrooms and to talk to teachers and support staff. I particularly enjoyed the magical experience of a signed storytelling and book reading session provided by one of my constituents. I was blown away by the experience and impressed by the enthusiasm of both staff and pupils.

The learning environment at Sunnyside is without question happy, comfortable and inclusive, but it made me think of two things: first, what experiences will the children have when they move to secondary school; and secondly, are there sufficient resources for sign language users and teachers of the deaf in our school

[Mike Hill]

system to support pupils? Sadly, according to the “Stolen Futures” campaign, the answer to the latter question is no.

Around 615 deaf children in Hartlepool receive support from the specialist education service for deaf students. The borough is part of a group of local authorities that jointly provide and commission services, but more than a third of local authorities in England plan to cut £4 million from their education support budgets for deaf children this year. That is likely to have a significant detrimental impact. The service is being reviewed this year, and it is vital that the feelings of parents and young people are taken into account. To help my constituents get the best education, that review must lead to improvements and factor in the growing demand for support from children with special educational needs.

What I saw at Sunnyside enthused me. I can only hope that the work of the teachers there is not in vain. It is important that we get the right resources and support in place to help students throughout their school career. That is why I fully support the National Deaf Children's Society's campaign.

2.21 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for securing the debate, not least because it gives me an opportunity to present the cases of the many constituents who have been in touch about this issue. They and I are grateful for that opportunity.

I am privileged to have Elmfield School for Deaf Children in my constituency. It provides specialist services to early years and primary pupils in a specialist setting, but it has plans to integrate those into a mainstream setting. It also provides a secondary service, which is already integrated into Fairfield High School, a mainstream school in my constituency. Elmfield provides a full range of services, with signed bilingual educational approaches and an individual language profile for each pupil. I will say in a second why that is so important. However, like other schools, Elmfield struggles to meet demand. In the south-west, where there are more than 3,000 deaf pupils, there has been a 16% drop in the number of fully qualified teachers of the deaf and a 12% drop in the number of teachers training for that role. That is why, in Bristol and other places with vacancies, there are no guarantees that those specialist positions will be filled.

I picked two sets of constituents—Mr and Mrs Ward, and Mr and Mrs Bolton—at random from a number of families who got in touch with me. I thank them for doing so, and I will spend the rest of my speech telling their stories. Ella is the daughter of Mr and Mrs Bolton. She is in year 1 and is six years old. She has moderate hearing loss, which was diagnosed at birth, and wears hearing aids in both ears. I have met Ella, and her mum rightly describes her as a

“confident, creative, brave girl, who loves learning.”

She is bright and is expected to do well. However, because of the level of her hearing loss and the fact she appears to cope well in school, her disability is often overlooked when she is in a mainstream setting.

The perception that it is not a serious condition or that she is coping or performing well means that the provision she requires to fulfil her potential is often missed. Ella has to put extra effort into hearing in the classroom, which gives her concentration fatigue. Because she has to focus so much on her teachers to be able to engage, on most days she is exhausted when she comes home. Her mum says it takes Ella until Sunday evening to fully recover before she starts again on the Monday morning.

Mrs Bolton says that deafness is not naturally understood by teachers, even with the best will in the world. Ella is an example of why specialist provision is required so much. However, as has already been said, this issue is not just about young people; it is about their families, too. Mrs Bolton told me how teachers of the deaf had helped the family come to terms with having a child who was deaf and with how best to support Ella at home and school. She wrote that teachers of the deaf played

“a pivotal role in providing and coordinating support and promoting deaf awareness”

among other staff and providers to Ella, and to the family.

Oli, the Ward family's son, is much older and further down the track. They wrote that he had “a very mixed journey”, and that it felt like his choices narrowed and became more limited as he got older and progressed through the system. Mrs Ward says that specialist teachers of the deaf made a huge difference to Oli everywhere he went, not just in terms of education provision but in the way he navigated life socially in a mainstream setting. She says that teachers of the deaf were his lifeline on many occasions.

Oli moved around between specialist and mainstream provision while he was in secondary school, which caused him difficulties. Mrs Ward said she was told by a teacher that her son had outstanding GCSE results “for a deaf child.” She rightly makes the point that that should not be a distinction—just because someone is deaf does not mean a C is an outstanding grade for them if they have the potential to achieve an A. Mrs Ward wrote:

“Teachers of the deaf navigate schools and classrooms...in no end of subtle and clever ways”

to get the best out of her child, Oli, and so many other children, whom we want to flourish and do well.

I look forward to the Minister's answers. There is cross-party support for getting this right. He has heard the stories of my constituents and those of local authorities on the frontline, which are really struggling to do the best, not just for children who are deaf but, as we have heard, for children with special educational needs. Many of my constituents face a struggle to get EHC plans in place, and schools cannot really afford to top up the money they get. This is a real slog. Parents, teachers and local authority staff are passionate about getting the best provision for deaf children and children with special needs to allow them to flourish, and I look forward to hearing how the Minister will help them do that.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): The restraint on interventions and speeches means that we have gained a couple of minutes, so the Front-Bench spokespeople will have a generous 10 minutes each. I call Angela Crawley.

2.26 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing the debate, and on his sustained and dedicated campaigning on this matter. I welcome the fact that the House has made suitable accommodations so that the debate is accessible for everyone, and I welcome everyone watching, both here and at home. That should be standard practice, and I hope we can look at doing it for all debates.

The debate is important because we are looking at a section of society with particular needs that require specialist support. Where support for children and young people is available, they can achieve just as much as their hearing counterparts. However, as we heard, there is evidence that, where support is not provided, children can lag behind. That simply is not good enough.

Let me acknowledge some of the notable contributions to the debate. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse outlined the statistics, and the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) highlighted his own experience, which was welcome. The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) rightly highlighted the issue of equalities. This is an issue of equalities of outcome, which we should always strive to do more about. As ever, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) represented Northern Ireland and spoke about his constituents—indeed, everyone who contributed did their constituents a service.

We have clear evidence of the effect of young people not being provided with support. Studies of educational attainment prove conclusively that we must pay more attention to this area. The debate has focused primarily on provision for deaf children in England, but as my counterpart the hon. Member for Strangford outlined, education powers have been devolved to Scotland and other areas.

In Scotland, there are 57,000 people with severe or profound deafness, and 701,000 with mild or moderate deafness. Many of them are people over 60 whose hearing has deteriorated with age, and the figures also include the estimated 2,000 deafblind people in Scotland.

Some 75 babies are born deaf in Scotland every year, of whom around five are born with severe to profound hearing loss. There are an estimated 3,000 children and young people under 25 with severe to profound deafness in Scotland, and approximately 34,800 in the whole UK. Nine out of 10 deaf children have hearing parents, many of whom have no experience of deafness, which shows just how important the existence of specialist services is to those children.

As in England, there is a fear that educational attainment in Scotland will fall due to the declining numbers of specialist teachers. We have already heard about the constraints on local authorities and funding services. There is a clear attainment gap for children from the deaf community across the UK, and while deaf pupils can achieve as much as their hearing peers with the right support, evidence shows that pupils with any degree of deafness score below the average academic scores, particularly in language subjects.

Early years education is crucial for children's development, and it is important that deaf children are supported through the additional barriers that can

delay development. One such challenge is the development of age-appropriate language for children as they experience communication barriers, because deaf children may struggle with social interaction in everyday communication. While most children pick up such skills during their early years through exposure to the language around them, deaf children can be three to five years behind other children. That can make it difficult for them to understand and recognise simple things such as sarcasm and humour when their hearing peers begin to develop such language and understanding.

As the National Deaf Children's Society has outlined, there has been good progress in Scotland, particularly with the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 and the implementation of "Getting it right for every child". However, I recognise that there is always more to do, and we must do more across the UK to tackle this issue.

Many of the deaf children in my constituency are lucky enough to be able to attend the Hamilton School for the Deaf, situated in the neighbouring constituency of Rutherglen and Hamilton West. The school is run by the South Lanarkshire local authority, which has a commitment to deaf children in our community. Pupils work in classes of no more than six, allowing intensive training specifically tailored to each child's needs. Each class is led by a qualified teacher of the deaf and supported by classroom assistants with excellent signing skills. The school campus is shared with the neighbouring Glenlee Primary School, allowing some of the curriculum to be shared with hearing peers. This means that the children are not secluded from other children their age.

It is deeply important that children with additional needs are given the requisite support to allow them all the opportunities of their hearing peers. I join hon. Members and colleagues across the House in supporting calls for funding for deaf children's services, as outlined by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse.

2.32 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the House for making BSL interpreters available to help people to follow today's debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) not only for securing this important debate on deaf children's services, but for his sterling work chairing the all-party parliamentary group on deafness. I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken.

Many of us, I hope, will have fond memories of school, but we probably take for granted the fact that being able to hear facilitated our learning and socialisation during that time. We are living in an era when advances in technology and teaching mean that deaf children need not be isolated. Nor should they be missing out on this vital part of learning and interaction, but the tragedy of this debate is that they are.

That failure can be laid at the Government's door. A toxic combination of Government-imposed local authority cuts, education cuts, the shambolic roll-out of SEND reforms and unfettered off-rolling have led to what the National Deaf Children's Society rightly refers to as "stolen futures". Local authority spending on services for children and young people has fallen in real terms by almost £1 billion since 2012, with a £3 billion shortfall predicted by 2025. Just last year, the APPG for children

[Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck]

found that 89% of directors of children's services were struggling to fulfil their statutory duties towards children in need of support.

In that environment, it is no surprise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse noted in his opening remarks, that over one third of local authorities in England plan to cut £4 million from their budgets for education support for deaf children this year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) rightly said, all that will do is exacerbate current issues.

The recent steps to ring-fence SEND funding represent an inflexible policy, where strict rules mean that only 0.5% of a school's overall budget can be transferred to the high-needs block. The policy is also not working, as evidenced by the 27 authorities that have appealed, asking that it be relaxed to meet their local need. Interestingly, the majority of successful appeals have all been in Conservative-led authorities—I sincerely hope the Minister is not playing politics with deaf children's services and education.

The £50 million announced earlier this year to help local authorities create new places or improved facilities for SEND pupils is also nowhere near good enough. Not only is it not new money, but it is a one-off cash injection, not the sustainable funding that people are crying out for.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Up in the north-east, my hon. Friend and I are in neighbouring constituencies, so I am sure she will be aware of the situation in Sunderland. We have 236 deaf children in Sunderland, yet the local authority has had its budget to provide the services for those children cut by 10%. Does she agree that, at a time when we see an increase in the number of deaf children and when deaf children are to be supported up to age 25 through the reforms to SEND, which is good, we should be seeing more money put in to support these children, rather than cuts?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The SEND reforms are a topic I will refer to later in my speech, but my hon. Friend leads me aptly to my next point. When funding and support are denied in cases such as the ones we are talking about today, education is also denied.

In his response, the Minister will likely refer to the funding given to the National Sensory Impairment Partnership and other bodies, but that money does not address the falling number of teachers of the deaf. Having British Sign Language-trained teachers is vital to deaf children, a point that was well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), but some areas have only one specialist teacher per 100 students. I was sorry to hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that that scarcity of teachers is the same in Northern Ireland, although I should say to him that I always follow every single word he says, and I love listening to his speeches.

None of that should come as any shock, since our schools are facing the first real-terms funding cuts in 20 years, with £2.8 billion cut from their budgets since 2015. As always in these austere times, specialist provision is the first to go. Bamburgh School is a specialist school in my constituency, which is now in the unenviable

position of having to pay out of an existing budget for its existing teachers to learn BSL level 1 on a 30-week course, which will take the school into a deficit. On top of that, these dedicated teachers are completing the course in what little free time they have. However, their equally dedicated headteacher, Peter Nord, told me that he has a duty to the children he teaches, who, without BSL, would not get the full learning experience they deserve.

Not every deaf child or school will have a head and teachers as dedicated as we have at Bamburgh or the Elmfield School for Deaf Children in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). I wonder what will happen to those children. I appreciate that a review of the SEND workforce in schools is under way, but a report commissioned by the Department and published over two and a half years ago has already identified a drastic shortage of deaf teachers. Instead of yet another review to give the appearance of doing something, can the Minister please advise us when there might be a response to the review that was done nearly three years ago, and what the timescales are for the current ongoing review?

The decrease in support is taking place against the backdrop of an increasing number of children requiring it. In just the last year, the number of deaf children increased by 11%. Earlier this year, it was shown that the attainment gap between deaf children and hearing children has widened—the figures were ably shared with us by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist).

Sadly, Government neglect of deaf children continues throughout their education, with post-16 funding bearing no resemblance at all to the number of deaf pupils without an EHC plan. Just last year, it was revealed that some county councils in England charge 16 to 19-year-old SEND students £1,500 a year for their transport. Since 2015, students have been required to pay a £200 contribution towards the cost of certain essential equipment that used to be covered by the disabled students' allowance.

Parents have told me that support often only comes with an EHC plan, yet we have heard that most deaf children do not have such plans. Those who do, as outlined by the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), have to fight, and suffer the exhaustion of taking on, the might of their local authorities. A recent damning report by the local government and social care ombudsman found that children and young people were missing out on provision, with health often a missing factor.

As we heard, 80% of deaf children and young people are not on EHC plans and rely on SEND support from their local authorities, which authorities struggle to provide following savage cuts that have resulted in up to 40,000 deaf children in England having no support at all. Deaf children and young people also remain stubbornly over-represented in alternative provision and exclusion figures. Schools, headteachers, support staff and parents work tirelessly every day under ever-challenging circumstances to give our deaf children the very best education, which they deserve. The Minister should be doing the same, and I look forward to his letting us know his plans.

I will end with a quick quote from Thomas Bailey, a 16-year-old pupil from Bamburgh School in South Shields. He sums up far better than I or anybody here could the damaging impact of the Government's policies:

"Being deaf makes me feel depressed and very frustrated. Having no support in school is very mean. When I don't have support, I don't have that person to repeat and break down that information for me and to sign important key words, so I am not able to learn the same as other children in class. I feel left out. Improving equipment would make the sound easier and clearer for me to hear, but having no equipment makes everything very quiet and unclear. This means I'm not getting any important information, leaving me feeling annoyed and again left out. My life and learning becomes a blank."

The Minister should know that, unless he takes urgent action, the despair and emptiness so well articulated by Thomas will continue to be felt by more and more deaf children across our country.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I remind him that it would be helpful if he left a couple of minutes for the debate's sponsor to wind up.

2.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and congratulate him on securing this important debate. Much of his speech rightly advocated for the National Deaf Children's Society. I let him know at the outset that I will meet the NDCS on 29 October.

I thank the many colleagues who participated in this important debate, including the shadow Minister; they really brought home the voices of the different stakeholders. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) talked about his daughter, who is a teacher; the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) spoke of the Bolton and Ward families; and the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) spoke of his personal experience.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and the hon. Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley). The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) reminded us that Thomas Edison achieved so much with such a disadvantage. I also thank my good friend, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for her intervention.

The debate is timely, following my recent meetings with members of the all-party parliamentary group on deafness. I am grateful for the opportunity to set out the Government's position on supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, including those who are deaf and hearing-impaired. It was great to see the percentage of pupils with a hearing impairment getting good GCSEs in English and maths increase last year, from 38% in 2011-12 to 46% in 2016-17. I congratulate those young people who received their results in August.

As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse pointed out, there is more to do, and I am determined that all children and young people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment receive the support that they need to achieve the success that they deserve. I think hon. Members will agree that the 2014 SEND reforms were probably the biggest change to the system in a generation. They are about improving the support available to all children and young people with special educational needs and disability. I am clear that this vision applies equally to deaf and hearing-impaired children and young people.

I think we all recognise that we are only part way to achieving our vision of the reformed SEND system. We know that there has been a steady movement of children with special educational needs out of mainstream schools and into specialist provision. We also recognise that the significant consequence of this trend of moving away from mainstream schools into specialist provisions is extra pressure on councils' high needs budgets, as we have heard from many colleagues.

The Secretary of State recently spoke at the Association of Directors of Children's Services conference, where he set out his core mission, which I absolutely share, to provide every child with world-class education, training and care, whatever their background or needs. Our plan to build on the 2014 reforms includes equipping and incentivising mainstream schools to work with all pupils—I will say more about that in a few moments—and supporting and challenging local authorities and clinical commissioning groups to become more effective planners and commissioners of provision.

In the current financial environment, both central and local government continue to face difficult choices. Local authorities are best placed to judge local priorities and to make local funding decisions, in consultation with local people and having regard to the range of statutory responsibilities placed on them. However, I fully appreciate that that is not easy in times of financial constraint. To support local authorities, the core school funding that the Government provide will rise to a record £43.5 billion by 2020—a 50% real-terms, per-pupil increase since 2000. Within that total, the high needs budget for young people with more complex special educational needs in schools and colleges is £6 billion this year, as the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman, we will keep this level of funding under careful review and will of course discuss it with ministerial colleagues in the Treasury as part of the next spending review. I and my officials in the Department engage with local authorities and schools so that we understand what drives the increasing costs of provision and how we can support them in managing their high needs and wider special needs budgets.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the ring fence on the schools block and whether we can allow more flexibility for local authorities to fund schools more. I am sure he will agree that there is a balance to be struck in protecting spending on mainstream schools and making sure that local authorities have enough for high needs. We are keeping that under revision, as I mentioned. We are particularly interested to ensure that the financial incentives in the current system do not lead local authorities and schools to make decisions that are not in the best interests of their children and young people with special educational needs.

As the hon. Gentleman recognised, local authorities play a crucial strategic leadership role, both in managing the special educational needs provision in their area and in overseeing high needs budgets. Those responsibilities are discharged most effectively when there is a strong partnership between the local authority and education providers, good engagement with parents and young people, and a shared understanding of where different types of need are best met.

The Department has committed £23 million of additional funding to support local authorities to conduct strategic reviews of their SEND provision, and we are investing

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

£265 million of additional capital funding specifically aimed at helping local authorities to develop provision for children and young people with education, health and care plans.

To respond to the hon. Gentleman's specific point on funding for FE colleges, they also receive disadvantage funding, which provides funds to support students with additional needs, including moderate learning difficulties and disabilities. Disadvantage funding is not ring-fenced, which means that institutions are free to use that element of the funding to choose the best way to attract, retain and support those with additional needs.

Stephen Lloyd: I appreciate the reassurance that has just been given, but as the money is not ring-fenced, if the NDCS or anyone else can find any evidence that it is not being used properly for profoundly deaf students between the ages of 16 and 18, will the Minister be prepared to review the matter?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. I will take up that point with the NDCS in our meeting on 29 October to understand the evidence in relation to that. In addition to high needs funding, colleges receive disadvantage funding, which provides funds to support students from areas of economic deprivation, based on the index of multiple deprivation—the IMD—and with additional needs, including moderate learning difficulties and disabilities. As I said, that funding is not ring-fenced and can be moved.

I am very supportive of local authorities working together and I know that many will be considering how best to support the sensory impaired children and young people in their area, including by working closely with neighbouring authorities to provide joint services. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney asked about joint working. To support that, we have established a national network for designated clinical officers, funded a local authority-led regional network and developed resources to support joint self-assessment and peer review. We have also funded a SEND leadership programme and legal training for all local authorities and their health partners to ensure that they are clear on their statutory responsibilities.

I understand that many local authorities have provided information to the National Deaf Children's Society, setting out their plans for sensory support services in the future. My hon. Friend raised particular concerns about provision in Suffolk. We have provided an additional £140 million in high needs funding this year and will provide an additional £120 million next year. In Suffolk, the local authority will receive £59.9 million in high needs funding this year. I understand that Suffolk has not indicated cuts to funding for deaf services this year.

Also this year, we have contracted with the Whole School SEND Consortium to deliver a two-year programme to help to embed SEND in school improvement and help schools to identify and meet their training needs in relation to SEND. That will of course include ensuring that schools, including mainstream schools, know where to access the expertise that they need to support pupils with a hearing impairment.

In addition, a team from University College London will be working with the SEND sector to understand better the supply, demand and drivers for SEND training

and continuing professional development. That will enable us to target resources at addressing those areas, too. The National Sensory Impairment Partnership will feed the views of the sensory impairment sector into that work, and we will review the NDCS report on local authority funding as part of that work. We have also asked Ofsted to consider how our accountability system can sufficiently reward schools for their work with pupils who need extra support, and encourage schools to focus on all pupils, not just the highest achievers.

As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse stated, the vast majority of deaf children are born to hearing parents who have no prior experience of deafness. That is why the Government have separately invested in a number of programmes to support children and young people with hearing impairments, and their families. We have funded the development of an early support guide for parents of deaf children, available through the Council for Disabled Children website. In addition, we have funded the NDCS's I-Sign project and the development of a family-orientated sign language programme, which is available free on the family sign language website.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether more can be done to ensure that school forums include more representation in respect of SEND. Local authorities are required to include at least one representative from a maintained special school, and a special academy, in their area. Many extend the representation of specialist providers by creating SEND subgroups to look specifically at issues relating to children and young people with SEND across the whole age range to 25. In some areas, there is strong partnership with parent groups so that they are engaged as well. We need to learn from those areas and spread that good practice.

I want to touch on a few issues that colleagues mentioned. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead and the hon. Member for Nottingham South talked about the lack of teachers for deaf and hearing impaired children. To be awarded qualified teacher status, trainees must satisfy the teachers' standards, which include a requirement that they have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including those with SEN, and are able to use and evaluate distinctive teaching approaches to engage and support them. Also, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) pointed out, we provided £900,000 of funding to the National Sensory Impairment Partnership between 2016 and 2018 to equip the school workforce. The new SEND schools workforce contract with the Whole School SEND Consortium, led by nasen—the National Association for Special Educational Needs—aims to equip schools to identify and meet their training needs.

There was a question on the specialist workforce and the report by the Consortium for Research into Deaf Education that there has been a 14% reduction in the number of teachers for deaf children over the past seven years. That is based on annual surveys of local authority specialist educational services, and we will look at it very carefully, especially in my discussion with the NDCS. As I understand it, the figures do not include teachers of the deaf in special schools, but I will take that up with the NDCS.

The hon. Member for Blaydon and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead spoke about British sign language and the curriculum. My right hon.

Friend the Minister of State for School Standards has written to the NDCS. We are open to considering a proposal for a new GCSE at this stage—for possible introduction during this Parliament. The development of a new qualification is of course a lengthy process, but we are certainly open to that.

I shall conclude now to allow my very good friend the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse to wind up the debate.

2.57 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am very grateful for and appreciate the responses from the Front Benchers. I hope that when the Minister has the opportunity to meet the NDCS in October, he will have good news for it. I have been somewhat encouraged by some of his responses to the questions that I have asked today, but he has heard appeals from everybody who has spoken. He knows the pressures that have been described, and the hope is that he can champion the deaf community in Government.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for our opportunity to have this debate; the signers for their sterling work; the House authorities for providing them with this opportunity; and all colleagues who have contributed to the debate. Many of them made kind comments about me, and I am grateful for them, but they apply to everybody who has participated in the debate and all the members of the all-party parliamentary group on deafness, who work with and for deaf people and with great organisations such as the National Deaf Children's Society, Action on Hearing Loss, Auditory Verbal, The Ear Foundation and so many others.

Deaf people do not want charity. We know that. They want fairness. This debate demonstrates that we here collectively get that, and the hope is that the Government get it, too.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered deaf children's services.

2.59 pm

Sitting suspended.

Road Safety (Schools)

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

3.2 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered road safety around schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank the Chairman of Ways and Means for granting time for this debate. I am pleased that we have the opportunity to discuss an issue of national and international significance, which has had a profound effect in my constituency.

Bobby Collieran was a bright, fun and loving boy. He was good at football. He loved playing cowboys and Indians, and he loved his Xbox. As his mum put it, he was, "Cheeky but charming." He was,

"his own person and didn't care what anyone thought."

He loved his family and friends, and would not allow anyone to be upset or alone when he was around.

Bobby loved his nan and his grandad Richie—"Grandy," he called him. He loved his mum, Joanne, and his dad, David. He was the "Most loving little boy." Bobby was the middle child and he loved it that way. He had his big brother, Harry, and his younger "twinnies", Frankie and Georgie. When his younger brothers started school, Bobby would stand by the nursery railing every day at playtime, to check that they were okay and to talk to them. He had a big, caring heart.

On 24 October 2014, while Bobby was returning home from Blackmoor Park Infant School with his mum, he was knocked down and he died. He was six years old. The incident, when it happened, sent shockwaves around my constituency of West Derby, and around Liverpool as a whole. The coroner said:

"When a six year old dies in these circumstances, it affects the whole city."

As the local community mourned, questions were asked about how this could have happened outside a school. In the aftermath of Bobby's death, the Bobby Collieran Trust was created. The trust works hard to encourage and promote better road safety awareness for children and parents, and throughout the education system, to help prevent future tragedies. We are here because we need to ensure that roads around schools are safe for children and parents, because we want to see changes in the law that will make the areas around schools less dangerous, and because we owe it to Bobby and his family to make it clear that an incident of this nature should never happen again.

The Bobby Collieran Trust is leading the way in encouraging local authorities and the Government to make our roads safer. I am pleased to say that it has had a lot of success in the city of Liverpool. People across Liverpool applaud and endorse its efforts to make roads near schools safer. One way it is doing that is by encouraging schools to introduce Bobby zones. If you drive around Liverpool, Mr Evans, you will see huge banners outside schools with the straightforward slogan, "Slow Down for Bobby", next to a picture of his face. In fact, every primary school in Liverpool now has a Bobby zone banner, which is a testament to the Collieran family's ceaseless work for Bobby's legacy.

[Stephen Twigg]

I also want to put on the record my thanks to Radio City in Liverpool, which has supported the Colleran family and the Bobby Colleran Trust since its creation. I am pleased that Adam from Radio City is here today, along with the Colleran family. They have used the medium of radio to raise awareness of Bobby zones and the “Wear Blue for Bobby” campaign.

Bobby zones are designed to slow down the traffic around schools and prevent the unnecessary build-up of vehicles. The maximum speed limit in a Bobby zone is 20 miles per hour. No dropping-off or picking-up is allowed in the Bobby zone, even when the traffic appears to be at a standstill. Drivers should not park on the pavement in any manner within these zones, as that can force pedestrians into the road, which can act as a further distraction to other road users. Drivers should not park in locations that could block the walkway for children and parents. Drivers should be extra vigilant in these zones, and aware that the surrounding area is full of children and their families.

I know that there is an appetite for such measures right across the country. In the past 24 hours, just on social media, I have had responses from parents, campaigners and others from right across our country. In July, for example, there was a furious row at a meeting of Manchester City Council, where discussions were held about which schools in Manchester should get new safety crossings. Earlier this year, two children were knocked down outside Crossacres Primary School in Wythenshawe, Manchester. According to the council’s road safety sub-committee, there were 48 serious incidents outside Manchester schools from 2014 to 2016. A legally enforced Bobby zone outside those schools might have prevented some of those incidents from happening in the first place.

Bobby zones have probably already saved lives in Liverpool. In a cruel twist of fate, earlier this year, on what would have been Bobby’s 10th birthday, another pupil from Bobby’s school, Blackmoor Park, was knocked over in nearly exactly the same spot as Bobby. Paramedic Gary Earps, who had just picked up his daughters from the school, saw the incident and rushed over to help. Fortunately, the pupil suffered only a broken leg, but it could have been a great deal worse. In an interview with Radio City, Gary said that he believed that the Bobby zone had saved that child’s life. He said:

“If what happened...is a prime example, then a life’s been saved because of this. You’re not going to eradicate incidents, but what you can do is put measures in place to minimise injury or death ultimately... I think every school in the country should have these zones where the speed limit is low.”

Bobby zones are now in effect outside every primary school in Liverpool, but that alone is not enough. Like Gary, I would like to see a Bobby zone outside every school across our country. The small changes that drivers and other road users can make will have a lasting impact on the safety and security of roads around schools. Does the Minister agree that every school should have a Bobby zone? If so, what action will the Government take to make that a reality?

The Bobby Colleran Trust did not stop at Bobby zones. It has developed very helpful education tools for schools to use to help educate their pupils about road safety. One such programme is the “Superbob!” books, developed and written by local author Jude Lennon.

Superbob is, as we might imagine, a bit of a superhero. His most important job is not to fight crime or take on the bad guys, but to help people cross the road safely. The aim of the book is to create an interactive, fun, educational resource that can be used in primary school assemblies. It has been taken up not only in Liverpool but across the north-west of England. Since the book was launched, Jude Lennon has visited hundreds of schools and spoken to nearly 60,000 children about staying safe on the roads. Indeed, the book was such a huge success that it spawned a sequel, and earlier this year “Superbob S.T.O.P: Superbob Tells Off Parents” was released.

The trust has also given out around 15,000 high-visibility jackets for pupils, which make students more visible when they go to and from school, particularly in winter, and therefore easier for road users to spot. In April, the trust established a children’s bereavement counselling service in conjunction with Aquarius counselling. The service provides support to grieving children and young people between the ages of five and 19 living across Merseyside, in Liverpool, Huyton, Knowsley and Sefton. The counselling team provides therapy in creative ways, for example through artwork, music, role play, storytelling and dance. The trust has done so much good work in Bobby’s name that in some ways it is hard to put into words. The passion with which the Colleran family have pushed the issue speaks to their heartfelt desire to ensure that no child is knocked down or killed outside school ever again, and I want that to become a reality, too.

I have been a long-standing supporter of improving road safety and, in particular, recognising those who respond in the immediate aftermath. In my previous tenure as the Member for Enfield, Southgate, a similarly tragic incident led to my becoming chair of the Livia awards. The Livia Award for Professionalism and Service to Justice is an annual award given to the Metropolitan police officer in the traffic operational command unit judged to have provided the most meritorious service. It arose from an exceptional circumstance: the untimely, tragic and avoidable death of Livia Galli-Atkinson, who was killed in Enfield on her way to ballet on 12 January 1998. I have proudly chaired the Livia award panel for almost 20 years. I pay tribute to Livia’s parents, Guilietta and George. Like Joanne and David Colleran, they are dedicated campaigners for road safety.

In 2003, when I was an education Minister, I was pleased to speak at the first Safe Routes to School conference in Leicester, which had been organised by the charity Sustrans. The Safe Routes to School programme was set up by the previous Labour Government to support infrastructure developments around school catchment areas and clusters to make it easier and safer for pupils to walk or cycle to school. Surveys show that one of the main barriers for parents allowing their children to walk or cycle is concern for their safety along the way. The fund was set up to mitigate such concerns by building cycle paths and walkways, laying down road markings and introducing clearer signage to help get pupils to school safely. The Scottish Government still run a similar scheme. Will the Minister update the House on the status of safe routes to school now in England?

Every month, almost 200 children receive life-threatening injuries or tragically lose their life while crossing a road in our country. Evidence shows that 11 and 12-year-olds

are the most at-risk group when it comes to road safety. An 11-year-old pedestrian is three times more likely to be killed or seriously injured during the school run than a 10-year-old. That age group accounts for almost one third of all child pedestrian deaths. The statistic is striking, and I understand that the main explanation is that 11 is the age at which many children get their first mobile phone. Nearly a quarter of 11 and 12-year-olds say that they have been distracted when crossing a road because of a mobile phone or MP3 player.

I am told that the term for such people is “smombie”, which we think means a smartphone zombie. So-called smombies put themselves at risk by not paying attention to the road, but it also puts drivers under more pressure and risks unnecessary incidents. In fact, in some states of the United States and in Abu Dhabi, it is illegal to cross the road while using a mobile phone. I am really pleased to hear that *First News* will be running a big campaign on this specific issue during Road Safety Awareness Week in November to try to educate children about the dangers of not paying full attention when crossing the road.

It is vital that children and young people have road safety education and skills from the youngest possible age so that they can continue to put those into practice in their teens and then in adulthood. That is one of the reasons why the Superbob books are so important; they teach children a lifelong lesson—the often neglected lesson—of how to cross a road safely. What are the Government doing to ensure that all students are given high-quality road safety education in schools across the country?

Since 2010, the Government have increasingly sought to devolve transport powers to local government and to city regions. Of course, that brings with it some benefits as it allows local areas to adapt their roads and transport to local needs and priorities. However, safety around school is an issue of national significance, so I urge the Government to develop and update their national framework in conjunction with schools, the police and local authorities to ensure that best practice is enforced throughout the country.

In 2010, when the current Chancellor of the Exchequer was the Secretary of State for Transport, he told the Transport Committee,

“We have not ruled out”

a new national road safety framework. Indeed, the coalition Government released the framework in 2011, but it lacked specific recommendations on how to deal with road safety around schools. Do the Government have any plans to update the road safety framework? If so, will they consider the specific set of issues of safety around schools, including my suggestion that Bobby zones be taken up as a national priority?

Unfortunately, last year we saw in this country a small increase in the number of deaths on the road after a long period in which in most years the figures declined. In 1990 more than 5,000 people were killed on the roads. The figure for 2017 was 1,792. That fall is hugely welcome and is in part down to the extraordinary campaigning of organisations such as RoadPeace and Brake, and of course the Bobby Collieran Trust. However, 1,792 deaths is still 1,792 deaths too many. We have some of the safest roads in the world, but that does not mean we can be complacent. We must instil best practice, ensuring that roads around our schools are safe for

children and families, and listen to groups that have been working on the issue, such as the Bobby Collieran Trust, which are out in the community making changes to people's lives and wellbeing.

I would like to take this opportunity to invite the Minister to meet me and the Collieran family in Liverpool. I know that he met them briefly at the beginning of the debate this afternoon, and I thank him for that, but if he has the chance to come to Liverpool he will see the schools with their Bobby zone banners and gain an appreciation of the city-wide impact that Bobby's death had, and the city-wide effect of the campaigning efforts of his family and the trust. I wish, of course, that we were here debating the issue in less tragic circumstances, but we have an opportunity to learn the lessons from the death of Bobby Collieran and to do everything in our power to ensure that no other child is hurt or dies on our roads. In many ways, Bobby has left a wonderful legacy: 60,000 children are better educated about road safety, there are Bobby zones in every primary school in Liverpool, and now there is a special bereavement service for young people and children across the north-west of England. Let us keep Bobby's legacy going by making sure that every school in the country has a Bobby zone, and by keeping pupils and their families as safe as we can.

3.21 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak in this important debate, Mr Evans. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) for initiating it and for the way he spoke. He set out some appalling reasons why this matter is important, and why it is important for the Government to take more action—to assess what they can do to improve road safety around schools and give a lead to local authorities. The local authority aspect of the matter is what I want to talk about.

It would be wrong of me not to mention my heartfelt sympathy for the family of Bobby Collieran, who are seated behind me, in the Public Gallery. Any parent will be aware of how horrifying it is to think about one of their children no longer being with them. It is unimaginable, and I can only pay tribute to the Collieran family for the way they put their energies and focus into making things better for other parents, and for their dignity. They are lucky to have the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby as their MP, campaigning on their behalf.

I was moved to attend the debate because I serve a rural constituency of 200 square miles with many small primary schools. Naturally, they are on roads, and as those roads have got busier, the safety situation has got worse. For example, Punnetts Town Community Primary School, a few miles from where I live, is on a busy road, on the left-hand side as one drives through. On the right-hand side are the car park, sports facilities and other amenities the children go to, such as forest school. To get from drop-off, or to use the amenities during the day, which is good for their health and fitness, the children have to cross a busy road. There is no crossing, and there are no lights. There is nothing; the children just have to cross when it is safe to do so on a busy, straight road. It is not safe to do that.

My frustration, and the point on which I look to the Government to lead local authorities to do more, is about the fact that, while there is a 30 mph zone, which

[Huw Merriman]

of course tends to be flouted, and a flashing sign indicating a speed limit of 30 mph as drivers come in, we are told by East Sussex County Council that it will cost £120,000 to deliver a puffin crossing. I have put some research together, and I could do that work a lot cheaper. The difficulty is that local authorities, perhaps with their procurement on a smaller, localised basis, cannot buy equipment at as good a cost as they could if all local authorities acted together to cram the prices down. There is also a tendency to say, "It will cost this amount," and to decide that, therefore, it is a question of spending money the council does not have or doing nothing. Many of the costs in the project I have outlined would relate to moving some signage. The parents would be happy with the signage as it is, if they could get the puffin crossing. We tend to go to the platinum standard, whereas the parents would find the gold standard absolutely adequate.

Another difficulty is that there is no longer a lollipop lady, because she decided it was not safe enough. My idea was to monetise 10 years' worth of lollipop salaries and put them towards the cost of the puffin crossing. Then we would not need the lollipop lady. However, that type of thinking does not seem to work in local authorities. I recognise that the Government do not control the issue, which is devolved to local authorities—we want local authorities to keep making those decisions—but there must be a better way to lead or advise them on procurement. To some extent, there should also be a model in which they are told, "You have to provide this." It should not be enough to say, "It is too expensive and we can't afford it, so there will be nothing." I therefore pay tribute to one of the parents, Alice Conyers-Silverthorn, and the councillors, who have together rallied to try to make the change happen.

I want to champion those who go into schools to teach safety awareness, such as by helping with artwork to be displayed by the road, as happened in the village of Five Ashes. Susan King, a resident of Cross in Hand, goes into a school to give awards to pupils for their work. She also tries to encourage parents not to bring their children by car in the first place. I am afraid that parents' parking often increases the dangers to their own children or, more often, their children's fellow pupils.

The ideas behind the Bobby zone are superb, because they effectively ring-fence an area that is safe. However, that will not work in isolation, because the issue of where to park then arises. So I want every primary school in the country to have a walking bus. It should be a statutory requirement. Walking is good for health, and it would mean a school would have one central point where everyone would be dropped off and where it would be safer. Cars would then not congregate around the school gates. That should be built in.

I should like more children to walk and cycle. Doing that is a bit of a double-edged sword at the moment. It is not safe to walk and cycle, so everyone drives cars, but that is what leads to its not being safe in the first place. On 10 October, it is Walk to School Day, when all pupils are encouraged to walk to school. I do not know about when you were growing up, Mr Evans, but there was a cycle ride and a walk for me. I walked to school four times a day, because I went home for lunch. Understandably,

parents are now more concerned about safety, but I would tell parents in my constituency to let their children go a little more—let them walk. If the Government can make changes that make walking safer, parents, in return, could let things go. When we consider such things as type 2 diabetes, there is more need than ever to get children walking and cycling, to be fit and well.

My final point is about police enforcement. I have written to the chief constable of Sussex police. When I knock on doors in villages, speeding tends to be the issue people raise more than anything, including Brexit. It is all a question of how they can keep their community and environment safe. Part of the issue is of course engineering, but another part is enforcement. A welcome 250 extra police officers are now coming to East Sussex, and I should like them to be allocated for at least part of their time to road enforcement, stopping those who speed, making examples of them and thus lessening the chance of its happening again.

The Minister takes great care and attention with this matter. He met a group of my constituents who came to talk about speeding on the A21, which is one of the busiest trunk roads and has a primary school on it. That is our only school with a 20 mph zone; but another one, Vinehall School, further down, does not have one. I should like more roads to be routed away from schools. If that means more housing to build the roads, it would fix two issues.

I am a member of the Transport Committee, and it is about to consider local roads. What I have heard in the debate about the Colleran family, and what they have been through, will inspire me to try to broaden the subject to include road safety around schools.

3.29 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you presiding this afternoon, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing this important debate. As he said, every road casualty is a tragedy, and the death of Bobby Colleran is no different. I join my hon. Friend in commending the campaign to remember Bobby, and I love the idea of Bobby zones. It is very personal and it makes the point.

When I was a Minister with responsibility for road safety, I had the privilege of meeting several families who were affected by a family member being killed and who channelled their grief and bereavement into campaigning for the safety of others and for road safety in general. Bobby's is a powerful story, and we want to ensure that it is transmitted across the political spectrum. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the suggestion about Bobby zones and the progress that might be made.

I hope the Minister will also respond to the points of the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) about school crossings, parking near schools, school travel plans and 20 mph zones. I know the hon. Gentleman talked about 30 mph zones, but, certainly in London, the big campaign is for schools to have 20 mph zones. Most of them are there, but enforcement is key.

I raised the issue of deaths of schoolchildren in an international context earlier this year, on 29 March and 24 April. The United Nations and the World Health Organisation estimate that about 500 children leave for

school every day and do not return home. That is one reason why the sustainable development goals contain targets to cut the numbers killed and seriously injured on the world's roads. At the moment, more than 1 million people die on the world's roads every year, and 20 million are seriously injured.

In the UK, we are lucky, because we have one of the best road safety records in the world. In a variety of ways, we also help many countries that are more challenged. The charity Fire Aid, which I chair, delivers equipment and training from fire brigades and the fire sector across the country. It also trains fire brigades in developing countries, in particular, in post-crash response. In many countries across the world, apart from delivering that equipment and those techniques, it delivers the THINK! campaign's road safety education programmes to get the message out in schools, as the Minister knows.

As has been mentioned, however, the domestic statistics do not make comfortable reading. A paper from the Department for Transport shows that, on average in 2013, which is when the last available data in the World Health Organisation's global status report comes from, one child aged nought to 15 was killed and 37 were seriously injured every week in the UK. It also shows that most were killed or injured on their way home from school.

This year, the Department for Transport published a capacity review for the UK. It says:

"The removal of the ring-fenced Road Safety Grant and the substantial reductions in local highway investments and in traffic policing levels, experienced since 2010, have had visible impact on the level and quality of activity. Most local authorities are struggling to carry out and prioritise effective road safety activity in a time of budget cuts and growing demand in other areas, such as social care, without the impetus provided in the past from national measurable objectives"—

I will come back to that later. It goes on to say:

"Britain's safety record for pedestrians and cyclists does not compare well to the leading road safety performers internationally."

The latest Department for Transport figures for 2016 on child deaths and injuries show a jump compared with other figures, as has been mentioned. The number of child deaths in reported road traffic accidents in 2016 was 69, which is 15 more than the 54 child deaths that occurred in 2015. The 2016 figures are the highest since 2009. The Department for Transport's factsheet on child casualties says:

"Children under the age of 16 are one of the most vulnerable road users",

which I think we can all understand, adding that

"child pedestrians are not experienced and well educated about using the road...78%...involved in accidents failed to look properly", and

"38%...were careless, reckless or in a hurry."

This is very much about education. Some 72% of the accidents that kill or seriously injure children on a school day happen between 8 o'clock and 9 o'clock or between 3 o'clock and 7 o'clock—clearly during the school run. That is despite the fact that the proportion of trips where children walk to school has fallen from 47% in 1997 to 42% in 2013.

To come back to my original point about measurability, in 2010, the coalition Government decided to break with the 30-year consensus on having targets to reduce the number of people killed and seriously injured on our roads. That decision was badly received by the whole road safety industry. The targets had been introduced

by the Administration of Mrs Thatcher—later Baroness Thatcher—in 1986, when I think the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) was the Minister with responsibility for road safety.

The coalition Government decided that they did not want to risk being accused of failure if the targets were not met, but the targets were never about providing an opportunity for party political point scoring. They were about creating an atmosphere for all involved and demonstrating the ambition that we wanted to do better and to have safer roads.

Perversely, the coalition Government, and now this one, have happily signed up to European Union targets and to the UN's sustainable development goals, which also have targets. We are joining in on international targets, but we will not set a target in the United Kingdom. If the Government want to demonstrate some determination in this area, they need to announce that they will go back to killed or seriously injured—KSI—targets, which were started by a Conservative Government more than 30 years ago and which should be in position today.

All hon. Members hold the Minister in high regard, have great respect for him and do not doubt the integrity he brings to his position. We all wish him well, but we need a Department for Transport policy that reflects his personal commitment. I look forward to his response to the request of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby about Bobby zones, and to other hon. Members' exhortations about doing better for schools kids. I also look forward to the response of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner).

3.37 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am more than pleased to support the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who put the case so succinctly. I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman): the constituents of the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby are lucky to have such a conscientious and hard-working constituency MP. This debate is an example of the hard work that he does, so I say well done to him. I also thank the hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and for Bexhill and Battle for their contributions.

I commend the family of Bobby Colleran and extend my sympathies to them. This debate is taking place because of the tragedy that took place. It brings it back to us all. I well remember the death in a collision of a six-year-old child down the street from one of my local schools—the Model Primary School in Newtownards—not more than two years ago. Whatever the reasons for that, a family was bereaved. I still consciously think of that family, and particularly the parents, as they continue to grieve. They are very much in my thoughts and prayers.

At most of our schools, we have warning lights in place and a sign advising people to reduce their speed, but I am an advocate for a 20 mph speed limit during school time on any road that has a school. The Minister cannot respond to my questions about Northern Ireland, but I echo the comments and the contributions that have been made, because it is the same issue wherever it may be—it does not change because it happens to be on the mainland and not in Northern Ireland, or in Scotland or Wales—and what we need to do is the same.

[Jim Shannon]

Two weeks ago, in my major town of Newtownards, Transport NI, which was previously known as the Roads Service, put in a new pedestrian crossing across from the local secondary school. That was the result of the hard work of the elected representatives, including local councillors, Members of the Legislative Assembly and me as the Member of Parliament. It was necessary, because the school has more than 1,000 pupils. The car park is alongside the school, but many pupils cross the road to get to the school, so that crossing is good news.

I am of a generation—Mr Evans, there might be at least one other person not too far from me who is of the same generation or thereabouts—that well remembers the green cross code, which was the methodology of encouraging and educating our young people on the way to cross a road. I suppose that big man in that green and white suit with a green cross on his chest was the guy who put it in our minds, and it was effective. However, times change and move on, and the reality has changed. There has been a build-up of schools and housing around schools, and the increased number of children involved means that we have to change how we do things.

It is coincidental that the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby has secured the debate this week. I think it was yesterday that the announcement was made in Northern Ireland that the Schools (Part-Time 20mph Speed Limit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2018 will come into operation on 18 September for certain schools, including one in my constituency. Carrickmannon Primary School, which I and others have been lobbying on behalf of for the last couple of years, is currently adjacent to a national speed limit area, Carrickmannon Road in Ballygowan. The effect of the order is that the national speed limit, on eight lengths of roads will be reduced to 20 mph, when a 20 mph limit is indicated by means of a variable-message traffic sign.

There will be a number of these zones in Northern Ireland. As I say, there will be one in my constituency, and I will be very pleased to see it in place, because we have campaigned long and hard for it. Carrickmannon Primary School is a rural school, and I go back to the examples the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle gave earlier of rural schools. Indeed, Carrickmannon Primary School is right out in the middle of the countryside. The road has a couple of corners on either side of the school, it is bumpy, and there are large businesses, including a quarry, close by. The traffic going up and down that road, including large vehicles, is quite exceptionally heavy, and someone who does not know about the school will not know they are coming upon it until they come round a corner and over a hump.

Those are the realities, so how do we respond to them? To be fair, Transport NI, which was formerly the Roads Service, has responded in a way that shows it agrees that the 20 mph speed limit is absolutely critical and crucial; we welcome that, and I want to put that on the record as well. Many people lobbied for that 20 mph zone near Carrickmannon, including the principal of the school, the parent-teacher association and local representatives. Again, it is a victory for community, and for pupil and teacher power. That is good news.

I met school teachers and officials from the then Roads Service back in October 2016—very close to two years ago—and it is great to see the 20 mph zone coming into place. However, such zones should not simply be for this school and the other rural schools on the Northern Ireland list, but should be established throughout the Province and indeed across the UK as a whole.

I have also lobbied for some time on behalf of Grey Abbey Primary School, which is also in my constituency. Again, there are flashing lights up on either side of the road, but the school is on a corner, so it is in a difficult place. However, it seems logical to have the 20 mph speed limit for a corner that is actually right-angled; I cannot understand why there is not one there already, but there we are. Kirkistown Primary School is another local school that comes to mind. There is a straight bit of road beside it, but a 20 mph speed limit there would still be critical and crucial.

I know that such zones are in operation near many schools across England. The UK's first 20 mph zones were introduced in England in 1991, in Sheffield, Kingston upon Thames and Norwich. Increasing the safety of road users and pedestrians has been the primary driver of 20 mph zones in the UK. It is now estimated that there are 2,150 such zones in operation in England, which again is an indication of the commitment by successive Governments to address this issue. However, what we may need to do now—it is perhaps why we are having this debate—is to try to up the ante and prioritise the issue, to see whether we can move closer to reducing the number of deaths around schools and finally stop them.

Case study evidence indicates that 96% of 20 mph zones take the form of vertical traffic calming/deflection measures, such as road humps. Only 1% of zones utilise horizontal measures, such as chicanes; 3% contain a mix of vertical and horizontal measures. Some 10% of 20 mph are speed limit-controlled areas using signing only. The UK Department for Transport recommends the use of signed-only 20 mph zones in places where speeds are already low.

We cannot ignore the statistics, even though they may be hard to listen to. The majority of pedestrian casualties occur in built-up areas; 29 of the 34 child pedestrians and 302 of the 413 adult pedestrians who were killed in 2016 died on built-up roads. Pedal cyclists are also vulnerable in built-up areas, with more than half of the cyclist deaths in 2016, at 58 out of 102, and most cyclist casualties in that year, at almost 17,000 out of nearly 18,500, occurring on built-up roads.

In total in 2016, 789 people were killed, almost 16,000 people were seriously injured and 113,055 people were slightly injured in reported road collisions on built-up roads in Great Britain. A large proportion of those accidents occurred on residential roads, with 90 deaths on B roads in built-up areas and 309 deaths on other minor roads in built-up areas. In Northern Ireland alone, we have had some 2,600 collisions close to schools, which signals—if I can use that terminology—a need for change, and although I welcome the change that has happened thus far, I believe that we need to do more.

The facts are clear. I think the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle referred to a 30 mph zone. If someone is driving at 40 mph and they hit a child, they will probably kill them; at 30 mph, the child has an 80% chance of survival; and at 20 mph, the child is likely to survive being hit, with only minor injuries. Those statistics

show quite clearly why we need to have 20 mph zones outside all schools; having them would be simple and would save lives. If anyone wants the facts and the statistics, those are the key ones; I think they prove the case that a 20 mph speed limit around schools has made a difference.

I do not make this comment for the Minister to respond to, but our current budget at home, channelled through Transport NI, does not allow us to undertake all of the prioritising that is needed for the creation of 20 mph zones. Nevertheless, I believe that the eight such zones that will be created in Northern Ireland, including the one in my constituency, are a step on the road towards trying to change things, and will hopefully initiate the drive from within to make change happen.

I agree with the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, who said in his introduction that there must be additional ring-fencing of the funding that is given centrally, and I ask for that to be considered in the upcoming Budget discussions. Also, as a result of this debate, I will go back to Transport NI, not only to congratulate it on the Carrickmannon school zone but to remind it that there are other such zones to be done—I will do that while thanking officials.

It is not difficult to see that we can and should do more, at every school, in every town, in every village and for every child—now.

3.47 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing this crucial debate. He has long been a prominent campaigner for better road safety, not only as a Member of Parliament but, as we have heard, when he was a Minister in the Department for Education, where he did a great deal of work to improve road safety around schools, and we thank him for that.

I pay tribute to the family of Bobby Collieran and to the important work that the Bobby Collieran Trust does. I know that the introduction of Bobby zones outside schools in Liverpool has been successful. The roll-out of such zones nationally is something that the Government should seriously consider. I am very keen to meet people from the trust to hear more about the great work it does.

Over the past two decades the UK has earned a reputation for having roads that are among the safest in the world. Sadly, over the past eight years progress has stalled and even begun to reverse. The latest statistics show that road deaths are at a five-year high and that serious, life-changing injuries are up by 9%. The latest data from the Department for Transport shows that child pedestrian fatalities rose by 36% in 2016, and they were up slightly the following year. The introduction of maximum 20 mph speed limit zones around schools would help reduce the number of such incidents dramatically. All the evidence shows that areas that have implemented the 20 mph limit have seen a reduction in casualties. My own city of Hull has introduced a number of 20 mph zones to address the issue. Over a six-year period, we have seen a staggering 74% drop in child pedestrian casualties.

The 20 mph zones would not just have benefits for road safety; importantly, they would improve air quality, reduce noise pollution and encourage more physical

activity, such as walking and cycling, by contributing towards a safer environment. In the Labour party's 2017 manifesto, we said that a future Labour Government "will reset the UK's road safety vision and ambitiously strive for a transport network with zero deaths, reintroducing road-safety targets, setting out bold measures that will continuously improve safety standards."

Will the Minister say why the Government scrapped the road safety targets introduced by previous Governments?

The Government talk about road safety being a top priority, but they have failed to reduce the number of people seriously injured or killed on our roads. The evidence points to the reduction targets working successfully to promote safer roads. Enforcement is a vital part of keeping our roads safe, yet the number of traffic police officers has been slashed due to huge cuts to police forces. It is not a time to be party political—the debate is far more important than that—but the evidence shows that when police officer numbers are slashed, casualty numbers near schools tend to go up. According to a Department for Transport statistical table, the number of serious road injuries increased by 7% in the year to September 2017. Do the Government not recognise the link? It is time for them to reverse the cuts they have imposed during their time in office, which have undoubtedly led to the decline in road safety we have seen in recent years. I look forward to hearing what the Government are doing.

Although we have one of the safest road networks around, we should never be complacent, and the Government should be doing much more to make our roads even safer. The roll-out of Bobby zones nationally would go a long way towards reducing deaths and serious injury. I look forward to hearing the Minister's remarks on the important points raised during today's debate.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing this debate on road safety around schools. I very much share his concern about the issue. It is a sobering fact that children are killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents every year near schools. The hon. Gentleman will have heard many stories, and he referred to a couple in his speech in a moving and heart-rending way. He will have heard such stories in his previous role as shadow Secretary of State for Education and in other positions in and around government.

I also pay tribute to Mr and Mrs Collieran for the work they have done. It was lovely to meet them briefly earlier, and I look forward to a further conversation. I absolutely pay tribute to them, because obviously Bobby Collieran was a marvellous, marvellous boy. They have vindicated his memory by the great actions and energy they have shown in promoting Bobby zones and the other measures that the hon. Gentleman discussed. I have been through their website with some care, read the stories and seen the work, and I pay tribute to them. It is a remarkable achievement.

I and my officials are only too keenly aware of road traffic fatalities and injuries and the need to protect the most vulnerable road users. As Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Gentleman will know

[Jesse Norman]

that by internationally measured standards the UK has an excellent road safety record and a long history of success in encouraging safe behaviour from all road users. This country should be proud of the fact that the number of people killed or seriously injured on our roads dropped by 61% from 1990 to 2016. There has also been a recent drop in the total number of children between nought and 17 years old who are killed or seriously or slightly injured on Britain's roads, from 23,383 in 2014 to 21,661 in 2016. In the hon. Gentleman's area of Liverpool, there has been a drop from 236 in 2014 to 232 in 2016. However, we are striving to make our roads even safer still and before turning to the specific questions that have been raised by Members, I will talk about the range of measures and initiatives we are taking to try to address these issues. I am extremely grateful for all their contributions.

I will start by talking about the THINK! campaign, which is very close to many Members' hearts. We want to build road safety knowledge. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) spoke about education and its centrality, and he is absolutely right. We want to build deep road safety knowledge and skills at reading roads and pavements among younger generations, forming good habits that last a lifetime. The THINK! team has recently completed a two-and-a-half-year project to produce new educational resources for three to 16-year-olds. They are entirely free and are available to any school, any other educational institution or non-educational institution or any individual who would like to use them, whether in the home or in teaching.

The team engaged parents, teachers, youth leaders and road safety professionals in the development of those resources, which include films, songs and games—different modes of education and play—to encourage as many young people as possible to understand the importance of using the road safely. Those resources are, in a way, the modern equivalent of the green cross code that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned. We launched the resources at a London school in April, and the campaign has received very positive support online and from the national and regional press.

We are also taking other important measures. One that has been much in the headlines recently is our cycling and walking investment strategy and the safety review that has come out of that. We as a Government are committed to increasing cycling and walking and to making our roads safer for vulnerable users, including pedestrians and especially children. We will only achieve that ambition if children feel safe when they walk and cycle to and from school, for the very reasons picked out in the debate today, because that is a point of vulnerability.

In September 2017, I announced a cycling and walking safety review, launching a call for evidence that closed in June. It was astonishingly successful in eliciting a public response. We have had something like 13,000 responses, covering a wide range of issues, from infrastructure to road user education, and with hundreds of suggestions. I have already made various interim announcements this year that reflect the input and expertise shown through that consultation process. They include measures to improve standards for infrastructure; measures to

incorporate better guidance on close passing of vulnerable road users—bicyclists or horse riders, for example—into The Highway Code; and £1 million to fund pathfinder projects to upgrade the national cycle network. We will be making further announcements in that area soon.

Much of the focus of the review, as one might imagine, is on protecting cyclists, walkers and other vulnerable road users. However, cyclists themselves must play their part in creating safer roads. In rare but tragic cases, the dangerous or careless actions of a cyclist have led to death or serious injury. I am afraid we had one involving an e-bike recently in London, as colleagues will have seen. We are consulting on plans to create new offences—legal expertise has identified a gap in the law in England in that area—in order to bring penalties potentially for causing death or injury by dangerous cycling into line with those for driving. We expect drivers to be held to account if they carelessly or dangerously cause death or injury, and the same will potentially be true for cyclists if the consultation plays out that way. The consultation is open until 5 November.

The question of education and its link to road safety receives particular attention in Government through Bikeability, the Government's national cycle training programme designed to give children the skills and confidence to cycle safely and competently on today's roads. Bikeability has substantial funding—£50 million to cover cycle training from 2016 to 2020. That includes a £5 million investment in Bikeability Plus, which introduces four-year-olds to balance training, teaches pupils how to fix and maintain their bikes, and encourages families and children who do not currently cycle to do so.

Local authorities have bid into the Department for the training places that they wish their schools to deliver across levels 1 to 3 and Bikeability Plus. As of May 2017, more than 2.1 million places have been delivered across the country since Bikeability started in 2007, and we have secured an additional £1 million to support it during 2018-19. Bikeability is about learning not only how to ride a bike, but how to keep oneself safe on the road, and how to read roads. It therefore makes an important contribution to understanding of general road safety.

Another scheme to mention is the Walk to School project. The emphasis rightly placed by colleagues on walking buses is very welcome. During the coming year, the Government will invest a further £620,000 in the Walk to School project, which has been highly successful. It is delivered by a charity called Living Streets and aims to increase the number of children walking to school. It will support the delivery of the Government's target to increase the percentage of children aged five to 10 who usually walk to school to 55% by 2025. It builds on previous funding that targeted all kinds of schools that were not covered by the access fund "Walk To" consortium, to ensure maximum geographic reach. I have asked my officials to input all aspects of today's debate—such as walking to school, and understanding walking buses as a way of safely co-ordinating road use—to our cycling and walking safety review. We want to take all the learning today, including Bobby zones, to which I will refer in a moment, and walking buses, and add it to the process of reflection and consultation.

Another important area in which we are taking measures is pavement parking. Parking on the pavement can, of course, cause serious problems for child pedestrians,

and not just those in wheelchairs or with visual impairments. A child's-eye view of the world is a much lower one. It is harder to see where one is, and if the pavement is being blocked it is harder to negotiate for a young person who may have very limited experience. It is also bad for parents with prams or pushchairs.

Within London, as Members will know, there is a statutory ban on pavement parking. Outside London, local authorities have powers to prohibit pavement parking by making traffic regulation orders—TROs—under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984. They may also use bollards to protect pavements physically. We have heard a lot of concern from interested groups, the general public, those with disabilities and the elderly about the incidence of pavement parking outside London. We are currently gathering evidence to try to understand the effectiveness of current legislation. That includes considering alternative methods for tackling inappropriate pavement parking. The review is in progress, and I expect it to draw some conclusions by the end of the year. It is an internal review, and if it concludes that there is a case for change, the next stage will be to proceed to consultation sometime next year.

Stephen Twigg: Pavement parking is a big issue nationally, as the Minister says, and certainly in my constituency. I encourage him to seriously consider extending the London ban to other parts of the country, including Liverpool.

Jesse Norman: It is interesting the hon. Gentleman should say that. As a former London MP, he will be extremely familiar with this matter. Of course, the London experience is part of the data that officials are being asked to consider as they frame future proposals.

On parking around schools, under section 122 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide appropriate traffic management schemes for local roads. They are free to make decisions about the streets under their care, provided they take account of the relevant legislation. Local authorities can put in place “school keep clear” markings that are legally enforceable when used in conjunction with an upright road sign and a traffic regulation order. Local authorities with civil parking enforcement powers can enforce those restrictions by issuing penalty charge notices to any vehicles found parked in contravention of them. Although there are certain restrictions on the use of CCTV by local authorities for parking enforcement, the Department has ensured that CCTV can continue to be used to enforce parking outside schools to protect children.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby raised the question of whether every school should have a Bobby zone. Bobby zones are something I was unfamiliar with until now, so it is hard for me to comment directly on that. What I can say is that all schools can have them under existing law. Local authorities have all the legal powers required to create Bobby zones, and Liverpool is a great example of that. It has those powers, and has applied them to create a cluster of local regulation, which has created that protective effect. That possibility is in play already.

Huw Merriman: I thank the Minister for mentioning kerbside parking—I should have done so, as it is hugely important. He talks about local authorities having the

powers. In my constituency I have two of the 15 local authorities that do not have the powers because they have not brought in civil parking enforcement. Is there something that the Government could do to try to incentivise the handing over of the power from the police, who of course do not have the resources, to local authorities, so I will have the same rights in my constituency that other authorities do around the country?

Jesse Norman: This is, of course, a matter for local authorities, and my hon. Friend is right to raise it. Some authorities have those powers, and some do not. Colleagues across the House have expressed concerns about that, and we are looking at it. To the extent that traffic regulation orders in relation to pavement parking may require some kind of reform, there may be scope to extend such reform to cover the kinds of aspects he describes.

One of the key issues that many colleagues across the House have discussed is 20 mph speed limits. It is important for the House to be aware that over the last few years we have introduced several new measures that can help local authorities to improve safety near schools. Local authorities have the power to introduce all-day 20 mph speed limits, and to introduce speed limits that apply only at certain times of day. Schools that are located on through roads, for example, where there may be conflicting desires on the part of local government, can have 20 mph zones imposed for periods of time, precisely to protect children at the beginning and end of the school day. Those limits can be indicated with variable message signs. Alternatively, authorities can now introduce an advisory part-time 20 mph limit using traffic signs with flashing school warning lights. They were prescribed in 2016 and can be a more cost-effective solution, as well as reducing sign clutter.

Some offences—this point has been acknowledged in the debate—are better tackled by training than punishment. Colleagues will be aware that earlier this year we commissioned some evaluation of the effectiveness of speed awareness training as an alternative to fines and penalty points for low-level speeding offences. That evaluation was broadly positive, and the national speed awareness course is now offered, as colleagues will know, by most police forces in England and Wales. We are also improving training for new drivers outside local roads by allowing learners to go on motorways with an approved driving instructor. Those are all part of trying to get safer drivers. We have new materials in progress to develop and improve learners' awareness of hazards in different weather and lighting conditions.

On crossings, the new parallel crossing has been developed to enable pedestrians and cyclists to cross where a signal-controlled crossing is not justified. The now-ubiquitous pedestrian countdown units can be used to give extra information, allowing children to understand how much time they have left to cross the road. That is being supplemented by the Department with updated guidance. Chapter 6 of the “Traffic Signs Manual” will bring together and update existing advice on designing traffic signals and provide new guidance, which should be helpful.

Stephen Twigg: The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) raised the issue of the costs that local authorities often attach to the kind of measures

[Stephen Twigg]

that the Minister is outlining. That was precisely our experience in Liverpool after Bobby died. It was quite a battle to persuade the authority to spend the money, and the amounts seemed surprisingly high. Is there anything the Department can do to take a lead in terms of procurement and guidance to local authorities to reduce the costs of the measures?

Jesse Norman: It is a very important issue. As the hon. Gentleman will know, in a previous incarnation, I led a vigorous and successful cross-party group to try to reduce costs in private finance initiatives. Believe me, I understand how expensive public procurement can be. As he will have seen, the Department has taken some steps to try to provide lower cost alternatives. If there is a reform of traffic regulation orders, that may well enable the reduction of costs. Local authorities have existing powers to band together to share procurement powers if they wish, but it is right to say that there are some parts of the country, particularly under framework contracts, where one could be seriously worried about some of the costs that local authorities find themselves operating under. One would like to see the democratic process operating in order to encourage them to take the low-cost but effective solutions wherever possible.

Before I come on to the questions that have been raised, I would just mention one more thing—mobile phones. We have taken a tougher stance on drivers who use a handheld mobile phone at the wheel. The penalty doubled to six points and a £200 fine last year, which means that drivers face having their licence revoked if they are caught using a mobile phone while driving.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) raised the issue of procurement costs. He is absolutely right; I have responded to that, and to the point he raised about walking buses.

My great friend, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, has been a superlative campaigner for international road safety and the genius of the fire service internationally, as many colleagues will know. He focused on national targets. As he says, the country is bound to international targets. We have taken the view that national targets do not necessarily play a role in improving safety. It is a contested matter. There are countries that have national targets with very good safety records, but it is very hard to point to a process of causation. We have taken the approach of trying to balance a wide range of interventions. Although the general trend remains broadly downwards, it is true that it has levelled out, and that is certainly something we are taking seriously. The Department is doing a lot of work on the areas of causation for that. Part of the current work on the two-year road safety strategy is looking specifically at older and more vulnerable users, young people, rural users and motorcyclists—they are four of the most at-risk categories. Work in the cycling and walking safety review very much targets a portion of those groups.

The hon. Member for Strangford was absolutely right to emphasise the impact of speed and the speed differential. The case for 20 mph speed limits rests heavily not just on the evidence of the more civilised approach that they bring to urban traffic—or that they are likely to bring if combined with the appropriate traffic calming measures

and the like—but also on that of the initial impact of 30 mph versus 20 mph causing greater injury or greater risk of death. The hon. Gentleman was right to raise that point.

I have discussed the point raised by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) about national road safety targets. I understand why he raises the point. It is important to say that our road safety record remains the second best of any country in the EU and the fourth best in Europe. The concern about its levelling off is not restricted to the UK. There are similar concerns in many other countries with good safety records around Europe, and that is why it raises some difficult questions.

I have a couple of other points to touch on in response to the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby. I have talked a little bit about the question of whether schools should have Bobby zones. I pay tribute to the work of Highways England and the police in educating young people in schools, and other charitable organisations such as Brake and RoadPeace have been mentioned. They have all had very important impacts.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the question of smombies. Our two-year road safety action plan is looking into that issue as part of the young persons' component. Whether that is responsible for some of the increased injuries that we have seen in city environments is an interesting and open question. I should mention that Bikeability has entered a very interesting pioneering arrangement with Halfords, so they can leverage off each other in terms of spreading the word about road safety to potential users.

As I mentioned, I have asked officials to take the details from this debate, including the very interesting conversation we have had about Bobby zones, as input to the cycling and walking safety review. If there is evidence from Liverpool on the beneficial effect that Bobby zones have—it may be anecdotal at this stage rather than fully evidential—we will be very interested to see it.

The Government are taking an active and wide-ranging approach to tackling road safety in general and around schools. We will continue to support and work closely with all parties in making our roads safer for everyone who uses them.

4.17 pm

Stephen Twigg: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive, thoughtful and reflective response. In particular, I am grateful for his comment that he will treat what I said during the debate as an input into the safety review. I will ensure that additional information is available from the Bobby Collier Trust, Liverpool City Council and Merseyside police to assist in those efforts.

I thank colleagues from all parties who participated in the debate. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for undertaking to raise some of these issues in the Transport Committee, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who was the road safety Minister and is tireless in raising the international dimension. The sustainable development goals are so important in tackling poverty and inequality around the world. Road safety is one of the major killers in many of the poorest countries. I pay tribute to Fire Aid, which is an absolutely brilliant organisation. On the

issue of targets, the UK submits itself to the UN for a voluntary national review next year as part of the sustainable development goals, and I encourage the Department for Transport to consider making road safety a priority for its submission as part of the wider voluntary national review.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for reminding us that, although the focus of this debate has been on England, there are many similar challenges in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. I, too, remember the green cross code and learning about safety on our roads in that way when I was a child. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) for agreeing to meet the Bobby Collieran Trust, and for all that he said today.

We have had a very positive debate. It is one of the strengths of Westminster Hall that we get these opportunities to demonstrate cross-party concern on behalf of our constituents. I am very pleased that the

family has been here to hear the debate. I know that they will be encouraged by what has been said, but the test is what we do after the debate. We must ensure that we learn, and we have a real opportunity, with the review that the Minister described, to have Bobby zones not only in Liverpool but right across the country.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): On behalf of all parliamentarians and those who work in Parliament and in the processes of government, I pass on our deepest condolences to the family. I commend the fact that, through you and your work, Bobby has a living legacy that is saving lives.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered road safety around schools.

4.20 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 13 September 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Retail Sector

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The UK's retail sector is a driving force in our economy and plays an important social role in communities across the UK. The industry employs 3.1 million people and generated £93 billion of gross value added in 2017—5% of UK GVA.

Change has always been an inherent part of the UK's dynamic retail sector and the Government are clear that we want all types of retail to thrive now and in the future. We are supporting the sector as it undergoes structural change and responds to changing consumer expectations, embraces new technology and prepares for EU exit.

Government and industry have recognised that positive action is needed to ensure the sector thrives in the future. To achieve this, and as part of the industrial strategy, we established the Retail Sector Council in March.

The council is jointly chaired by the Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Corporate Responsibility and Richard Pennycook (chair of the British Retail Consortium). All retail activity in the UK is represented: large and small; independents; and traditional and online or disruptive retailers. Through the council the Government are helping the retail industry to come together to develop sector-led solutions to support its productivity and growth. The council has now met twice and is identifying its priorities and actions to be agreed at the next meeting later this year.

In addition, the Government are also committed to supporting the retail sector through a range of measures.

In July the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) appointed a panel of experts to diagnose issues that currently affect the health of our high streets and advise on the best practical measures to help them thrive now and in the future. Chaired by Sir John Timpson (chairman of Timpson—the multiple service retailer) the panel will focus on what consumers and local communities want from their high streets. They are holding a series of evidence sessions across the country to hear directly from communities. The panel will look at the current challenges and work out options to ensure our town centres remain vibrant. The panel of experts have a wealth of experience and include representatives from the retail, property and design sectors.

We have taken action to reduce the business rates burden faced by some businesses, with reforms and reductions worth over £10 billion by 2023, and the

Government are currently reviewing the wider taxation of the digital economy to make sure all businesses pay their fair share.

The Government understand the concerns of those affected by job losses in the sector, and the uncertainty this can cause. Where job losses occur, Jobcentre Plus, along with other Government Departments, works with the companies affected to understand the level of employee support required to get people back into employment as soon as possible.

British retailing is transforming and the Government are committed to doing all they can to ensure the sector continues to thrive.

[HCWS968]

CABINET OFFICE

Senior Public Sector Pay Awards

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I am today announcing the Government's decision on pay for the senior civil service, senior military and police and crime commissioners.

The Government received the Senior Salary Review Body's (SSRB) report on 2018 pay for the senior civil service, senior military and police and crime commissioners on 4 July 2018.

The Government are committed to world-class public services and ensuring that public sector workers are fairly paid for the vitally important work they do. We ended the 1% pay policy in September 2017 because we recognised more flexibility is now required to deliver world-class public services—with higher awards in return for improvements to public sector productivity.

It is vital that we consider all pay awards in the light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. In reaching a final decision on all 2018-19 public sector pay awards, we have balanced a need to recognise the value and dedication of our hard-working public servants with ensuring that our public services remain affordable in the long term, to contribute to our objective of reducing public sector debt. We have also sought to ensure that pay awards are fair and consistent across public sector workforces, reflect existing pay and benefit packages, as well as recruitment and retention levels.

The Government value the independent expertise and insight of the SSRB and take on board the valuable advice, principles outlined, and constructive challenge to the Government's recommendations outlined in the report. Within the current context there remains a need to take into account affordability when making decisions on senior pay, as well as fairness in the approach for senior and junior grades.

Senior civil servants

The Government's evidence to the SSRB in December 2017 set out a vision for a future SCS pay framework which—in line with the civil service workforce plan—will help us attract, retain and develop the very best senior talent for government.

This new pay system will aid us in achieving our vision for a future SCS which is more diverse, experienced and professionalised, with a better mix of specialist and generalist leaders.

We are pleased that the SSRB welcome the direction of travel laid out in our vision for the future SCS and look forward to engaging with SSRB to further articulate our strategic plan to reach this vision.

Over the next year, and among other commitments set out in our response to the SSRB's recommendations below, we will be articulating plans to:

- move to a set of consistent pay ranges by professional grouping over time.
- provide greater reward for high performers and those who develop capability by remaining in role.
- explore options for reforming the SCS performance management system.

Taken together, this will start tackling some of the biggest issues identified with the current pay system as well as ensuring that the civil service is able to attract and retain key, scarce skills from the external market and balancing incentives in the current system.

The Government value the independent expertise and insight of the SSRB and take on board the valuable advice, principles outlined, and constructive challenge to the Government's recommendations outlined in the report.

Within the current context there remains a need to take into account affordability when making decisions on senior pay, as well as fairness in the approach for senior and junior grades.

Senior civil service recommendations and response for 2018-19

This year the SSRB made six recommendations for the senior civil service (SCS):

- all SCS members should receive a 1% consolidated basic pay increase.
- 0.25% of the pay bill should be used to increase the pay band minima for all pay bands to £68,000, £90,500, and £111,500 respectively.
- the pay range maxima are reduced for new recruits and those currently paid below the new maxima, to £102,000, £136,000, and £167,500 respectively.
- 1.25% should be allocated and distributed to address pay anomalies.
- The Cabinet Office should provide evidence to demonstrate the application of the award to specific target groups of staff.
- the introduction of a corporate recognition scheme with awards of around £1,000.

The Government accept the recommendation of an overall 1% figure for consolidated increases but will continue to give Departments flexibility to target that overall 1% award at the individual level. This aligns to SSRB's principle of targeting reward to higher performers and those lowest in the pay range and is consistent with the approach taken for delegated grades.

The Government accept the recommendation to increase the minima for all pay bands to the figures suggested by SSRB. The Government also agree that the 1% pay award should be applied after any increases from the raising of the minima.

The Government agree in principle to the recommendation to reduce the maxima for SCS in non-market facing or niche roles. This will not be

achievable for this year's pay round as further consultation is needed to understand the makeup and workability of professional groupings before pay ranges are set.

The Government accept the recommendation to set aside further money to address pay anomalies, and agree to provide clear criteria for use. However to put aside the 1.25% suggested would move significantly away from coherence between the approach for SCS and delegated grades and risks affordability issues. Efficiencies found from controlling movement around the system will be put aside to cover anomalies and increases to the minima, and we anticipate this to be 0.25% rather than the 1.25% SSRB proposed.

The Government accept the recommendation to monitor the use of the aforementioned pay anomalies money, as well as the recommendation to extend in-year non-consolidated performance related awards to 20% of the eligible population and introduce a new recognition scheme for corporate contribution.

The Government note the SSRB's additional comments outside of the formal recommendations and commit to:

- providing a clear articulation of the desired application of the SCS pay system, be that centralised management of the workforce, delegation to departments or a specified balance between the two.
- review the SCS performance management system as a priority.
- outlining clear guidance and principles to ensure the workability and fair application for the movement to pay ranges based on professional groupings.
- exploring options for a credible capability-based salary progression model.
- providing a clear proposal on the future of the SCS 1A grade.

The Government would like to work proactively with SSRB to help develop our proposals further and invites the review body to contribute towards the further review of the senior civil service pay framework including the commitments made above.

Senior military officers

The Government have accepted the spirit of the recommendation of a 2.5% increase to senior military salaries with effect from 1 April 2018 with a 2% increase to pay and a 0.5% non-consolidated one-off payment. This decision is made to be consistent with the main armed forces' pay award and in consideration of long-term affordability. The Government have also accepted the recommendation that there is no change to the current pay differentials for senior medical and dental officers.

Police and crime commissioners

The Government have accepted in part the SSRB's recommendation to increase the bottom four PCC salary bands. With effect from 1 May 2018, these pay bands will be increased by 2%. PCCs taking on responsibility for the governance of fire and rescue services will also receive an additional consolidated allowance of £3,000.

The Government have accepted the SSRB's recommendation that PCC pay should be reviewed again in 2020-21 to enable a full assessment of the role, particularly in the light of the additional responsibilities for fire and rescue services; thereafter, full reviews should be conducted on a four-yearly basis. However, future reviews should be aligned to the PCC electoral cycle. A further review should therefore take place to set PCC pay ahead of the 2024 elections.

The SSRB also recommended that from May 2019, PCC salaries should be increased by 2% in line with the pay award for local authority staff and that this link should continue annually until the next formal review of PCC pay. The Government have not accepted this recommendation. The role of PCCs continues to evolve and the Government are of the view that automatic pay increases are not appropriate while change is ongoing. The Government also seek to avoid creating a disparity between PCCs and police officers whose pay increases are not automatic.

The SSRB recommended that a review of the pay structures for PCCs should be conducted in advance of the next formal review of PCC pay. The Government have not accepted this recommendation. PCC pay structures are currently aligned to those of chief police officers, and their pay is under review as part of sector-led reforms to deliver a new pay and reward framework. PCC pay structures will be reviewed following the completion of the ongoing review of chief officer pay.

The SSRB recommended that PCCs who lose their seat at election should be entitled to a loss of office payment. The Government will further consider the issue.

[HCWS967]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I want to update the House on the implementation of the Government's strategy to eradicate bovine TB in England by 2038.

Today the Animal and Plant Health Agency has published data showing there has been a drop in TB incidence in the first two cull areas, where the number of new confirmed breakdowns has dropped by around 50%. In Gloucestershire the incidence rate has dropped from 10.4% before culling began to 5.6% in the 12 months following the fourth cull, while in Somerset it has dropped from 24% to 12%.

Data on TB incidence in the next eight areas has also been published today although, as we anticipated, it is too early to see any impact on TB in those areas.

Bovine TB remains one of the greatest animal health threats to the UK and the Government are continuing to take strong action to eradicate the disease and protect the future of our dairy and beef industries. Today I am announcing further steps to enhance and strengthen our eradication strategy; opening a new round of applications to our badger vaccination grant scheme and issuing new licences for badger control in 2018.

Although it does not provide complete protection or cure infected animals (which continue to spread TB), badger vaccination has a role to play and three projects have received Government funding in 2018 to vaccinate badgers in the edge area of England. Therefore, applications for the "Badger Edge Vaccination Scheme" will be re-opened later this year, with grant funding available to private groups wishing to carry out badger vaccination in the edge area. Groups will receive at least 50% funding towards their eligible costs.

There is broad scientific consensus that badgers are implicated in the spread of TB to cattle. This year, following the effective licensed badger control operations in 2017, culling operations will take place across 39% of the high-risk area. This includes a further 10 new areas which have been licenced to undertake culling operations in 2018. Alongside our robust cattle movement and testing regime, this will allow us to achieve and maintain long-term reductions in the level of TB in cattle across the south-west and midlands, where the disease is widespread.

In order to eradicate a pocket of infection in both cattle and badgers in the low-risk area, we have also licensed an area within Cumbria to undertake culling operations in 2018. Along with six-monthly cattle testing, movement restrictions and good biosecurity on farms this approach offers the best opportunity to deal quickly with this real and serious threat in the low-risk area.

To ensure we have a successful and resilient industry as the UK enters a new trading relationship with the world, we are determined to implement all available measures necessary to eradicate this devastating disease as quickly as possible. To aid this, a review, led by Professor Sir Charles Godfray, is looking at options to take the bTB strategy to the next phase and will report to Ministers by the end of September 2018. The findings will be published in due course along with information on next steps.

[HCWS963]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council (18 September 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 Brussels on 18 September 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:

Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-27

Ministers will discuss progress on the multiannual financial framework proposals with the presidency.

Presentation of the priorities of the Austrian presidency

The presidency is expected to present its top priority areas during its six-month tenure. These are: security and illegal migration; maintaining competitiveness through digitalisation; stability in the western Balkans; and securing an orderly Brexit.

Preparation of the European Council on 18 October 2018

The Council will discuss the draft conclusions for the October European Council. The conclusions are expected to cover migration; internal security; and external relations.

Rule of law in Poland article 7(1)

The Council will hold a hearing on article 7(1). The Commission and Poland will provide updates on the 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.

Legislative programming

On 12 September 2018, the Commission published a letter of intent which set out its proposals for the Commission work programme for 2019. Ministers will debate the proposals included in the letter before the CWP for 2019 is adopted in October. Ministers will also consider progress on legislative files in the joint declaration on the EU's legislative priorities for 2018-19.

[HCWS962]

EU Exit

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): As announced by the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on 18 July 2018, the Government are publishing a series of technical notices during August and September. On Thursday 23 August, we published 25 of these notices. Today, on Thursday 13 September, we are publishing a further 28 technical notices, and will publish more in the coming weeks. These notices are designed to inform people, businesses and stakeholders about steps they may need to take in the event of a “no deal” scenario.

Technical notices are being published on the following areas:

- Accessing public sector contracts if there is no Brexit deal.
- Appointing nominated persons to your business if there is no Brexit deal.
- Broadcasting and video on demand if there is no Brexit deal.
- Connecting Europe facility energy funding if there is no Brexit deal.
- Data protection if there is no Brexit deal.
- Driving in the EU if there is no Brexit deal.
- European regional development funding if there is no Brexit deal.
- European social fund (ESF) grants if there is no Brexit deal.
- Funding for UK LIFE projects if there is no Brexit deal.
- Getting an exemption from maritime security notifications if there is no Brexit deal.
- Handling civil legal cases that involve EU countries if there is no Brexit deal.
- Industrial emissions standards (“Best Available Techniques”) if there is no Brexit deal.
- Merger review and anti-competitive activity if there is no Brexit deal.
- Mobile roaming if there is no Brexit deal.
- Recognition of seafarer certificates of competency if there is no Brexit deal.
- Reporting CO₂ emissions for new cars and vans if there is no Brexit deal.
- Running an oil or gas business if there is no Brexit deal.
- Satellites and space programmes if there is no Brexit deal.
- Trading goods regulated under the “New Approach” if there is no Brexit deal.
- Trading in drug precursors if there is no Brexit deal.
- Trading under the mutual recognition principle if there is no Brexit deal.
- Travelling in the common travel area and the associated rights of British and Irish citizens if there is no Brexit deal.
- Travelling to the EU with a UK passport if there is no Brexit deal.
- Travelling with a European firearms pass if there is no Brexit deal.
- Upholding environmental standards if there is no Brexit deal.
- Using and trading in fluorinated gases and ozone depleting substances if there is no Brexit deal.
- Vehicle type approval if there is no UK exit deal.
- What telecoms businesses should do if there is no Brexit deal.

Notices are being published on gov.uk. These can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/how-to-prepare-if-the-uk-leaves-the-eu-with-no-deal>

Copies of notices will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses to ensure all Members have access, and we will continue to ensure that technical notices are made available to Members.

[HCWS965]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): As part of the clearance of the Calais camp in October 2016, the Government transferred 769 unaccompanied children to the UK, all of whom claimed asylum in the UK. The Government acted decisively at this time to remove vulnerable children from a dangerous situation where they were at risk of violence and abuse. The unique situation in Calais and unprecedented action we took to safeguard children demonstrated the Government’s commitment to supporting the most vulnerable children affected by the migration crisis.

Of the 769 cases, 220 cases were transferred in accordance with section 67 Immigration Act 2016 (the Dubs amendment), and formed the first tranche of these cases. Some of these cases did not qualify for refugee or humanitarian protection under the existing rules; as such, in June 2018 we introduced a new form of leave (section 67 leave) for these cases.

The remaining 549 cases were transferred to reunite with family members already in the UK. These cases have been considered carefully and on their individual merits, and a large proportion of these cases have been recognised as refugees.

It is our view that all those 549 transferred from Calais to the UK to reunite with family should be able to remain here with their family members. In keeping with our commitments to family unity, we do not consider that it would be in their best interests to separate children from their families, having received significant support from UK authorities to reunite and integrate.

It is our intention to introduce, by laying a new immigration rule, a new form of leave for any of these cases that have not already been considered refugees. This leave will only be available for those that were bought over as part of the Calais clearance exercise in October 2016, who were under the age of 18 at this time, and who had recognised family ties in the UK. Individuals who qualify for this leave will have the right to study, work, access public funds and healthcare, and can apply for settlement after 10 years.

[HCWS961]

Abortion Clinic Protest Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): As Parliament will be aware, concerns were raised with my predecessor about the tactics of some of the protest activities taking place outside abortion clinics in England and Wales. In response, she ordered an in-depth assessment to understand the scale and nature of the protests and to establish if more needs to be done to protect those requiring an abortion.

Understandably, there has been a significant level of interest in this review. The Home Office published a call for evidence in January this year and received over

2,500 responses. These came from a range of interested parties, including abortion service providers, abortion service clients, those engaging in anti-abortion demonstrations, police forces and local authorities. The review explored the existing laws to protect people from harassment and intimidation. It also considered the experiences of other countries in addressing problems relating to anti-abortion activities outside clinics and hospitals.

The review gathered upsetting examples of harassment and the damaging impact this behaviour has had on individuals. This behaviour can leave patients distressed and has caused some to rebook their appointments and not follow medical advice in order to avoid the protestors. In some of these cases, protest activities can involve handing out model fetuses, displaying graphic images, following people, blocking their paths and even assaulting them. However, what is clear from the evidence we gathered is that these activities are not the norm, and predominantly, anti-abortion activities are more passive in nature. The main activities reported to us that take place during protests include praying, displaying banners and handing out leaflets. There were relatively few reports of the more aggressive activities described above. Nevertheless, I recognise that all anti-abortion activities can have an adverse effect, and I would like to extend my sympathies to those going through this extremely difficult and personal process.

Through the review, we also found that anti-abortion demonstrations take place outside a small number of abortion facilities. In 2017, there were 363 hospitals and clinics in England and Wales that carried out abortions. Through the review, we found that 36 hospitals and clinics have experienced anti-abortion demonstrations.

Having considered the evidence of the review, I have therefore reached the conclusion that introducing national buffer zones would not be a proportionate response, considering the experiences of the majority of hospitals and clinics, and considering that the majority of activities are more passive in nature.

In making my decision, I am also aware that legislation already exists to restrict protest activities that cause harm to others. For example, under the Public Order Act 1986, it is an offence to display images or words that may cause harassment, alarm or distress. This Act also gives the police powers to impose conditions on a static demonstration if they believe it may result in serious public disorder, serious damage to property or serious disruption to the life of the community or if the purpose of the assembly is to intimidate others. There are also offences under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 when someone pursues a course of conduct which they know will amount to the harassment of another person.

Civil legislation also exists and can be used to restrict harmful protest activities. We have seen evidence that such legislation has been effective. Ealing Council recently introduced a public spaces protection order under the Antisocial Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 to restrict anti-abortion demonstrations. The Government will publish information on the current legal remedies that are available in tackling intimidation and harassment.

In this country, it is a long-standing tradition that people are free to gather together and to demonstrate their views. This is something to be rightly proud of. However, it is vital that how views are demonstrated is

carried out within the law, and never more so than on such an issue that can have such a personal impact on individuals. This Government are absolutely clear that no one should feel harassed or intimidated simply for exercising their legal right to pregnancy advice and abortion services, and I am adamant that where a crime is committed, the police have the powers to act so that people feel protected.

Where protesters are breaking the law, we will do all we can to ensure those people are brought to justice and for support to be provided to victims. I am asking the police to work closely with abortion service providers, offering advice on public safety and security, as well as helping to ensure that all incidents of intimidation and harassment are recorded and appropriate action taken. The police will also continue to actively engage in community discussions in areas facing heightened tensions.

We want to ensure that all those who are affected are properly supported. Police and crime commissioners (PCCs) have a role to play with their responsibility for commissioning victim support services. This year, the Government have allocated £68 million to PCCs to locally commission or provide support services for victims of crime. I am asking PCCs to ensure that services are available and accessible to those affected by crimes that are committed during abortion clinic protests, regardless of whether the crimes have been reported to the police.

We are engaging with the Welsh Government on the outcome of the review.

While the evidence today suggests that national buffer zones would not be a proportionate response, I will keep this important matter under review.

I thank Members across this House for their engagement on this issue.

[HCWS958]

Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation: Reports

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): In accordance with section 36 of the Terrorism Act 2006, Max Hill QC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, prepared a report on the operation in 2016 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and part 1 of the Terrorism Act 2006, which was laid before the House on 25 January 2018. He also prepared a report on the use of terrorism legislation following the Westminster Bridge terrorist attack, which was laid before the House on 22 March 2018.

I am grateful to Mr Hill for his reports and have carefully considered the recommendations and observations included in them. I am today laying before the House the Government's responses to both reports, copies of which will be available in the Vote Office. They will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS960]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ebola: Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): An outbreak of Ebola was declared in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), on 1 August. I am updating the House on what the British Government are doing to support the immediate

response, to support neighbouring countries to be prepared if the outbreak were to spread, and to help countries to improve public health systems and strengthen their resilience to deadly diseases like Ebola.

DRC outbreak and UK response

The DRC Government and World Health Organisation issued a single response plan on 10 August. DFID has contributed financially and the plan is now fully funded and delivering a range of activity including vaccinations, treatment centres, mobile laboratories, case management and logistics. As the response has progressed, the authorities have identified confirmed cases beyond the initial affected area. It is highly likely that the single response plan will be revised in coming weeks, in which case the UK stands ready to provide additional funding.

The UK also supports other international response mechanisms which are contributing to tackling this latest outbreak, including the UN central emergency response fund (CERF) and the World Health Organisation's (WHO) contingency fund for emergencies. The UK is the largest donor to CERF and the second largest donor to the WHO contingency fund.

We are supporting this Ebola response in other ways. In 2014, DFID worked with the Wellcome Trust to develop an Ebola vaccine, which was subsequently developed by others into the vaccine now being administered by the WHO, Médecins Sans Frontières and the DRC Government. This vaccine was also used in the previous Ebola outbreak in DRC, in May. Furthermore, an epidemiologist from the UK public health rapid support team was deployed with the WHO team of experts to the affected area to carry out initial technical assessments.

Neighbouring countries and preparedness

This is a serious outbreak, taking place in a conflict-affected region close to the borders of Rwanda and Uganda. The region also hosts a high number of refugees and internally displaced persons. Preparedness work in neighbouring countries is therefore critically important.

A member of the UK's emergency medical team has been deployed to Rwanda, to support the WHO in helping Rwanda to prepare in case of potential spread of Ebola over the border with the DRC.

In Uganda, the UK is supporting the Ministry of Health and WHO preparedness work, and will provide funding for WHO, UNICEF, the UN High Commission for Refugees and the World Food Programme.

In South Sudan, we provided initial funding to WHO to support preparatory work. We will consider with other donors, including the United States, the best way to support further contingency measures.

Risk to UK is low, but we are prepared

Public Health England assesses the risk of this outbreak to the UK as negligible to very low. It will continue to monitor and assess the outbreak closely. The UK remains ready to respond should that risk change.

There is no link between Ebola and Monkeypox.

Longer-term UK support to tackle deadly diseases

Deadly diseases like Ebola, Zika and Yellow Fever pose a serious threat to global health security. The 2014 outbreak in West Africa threatened to affect 1.4 million people, cost African economies at least US \$1.6 billion, and required a major international effort to contain, with the UK leading the response in Sierra Leone.

We have a vested interest in helping sub-Saharan Africa improve public health systems and build resilience against these diseases. DFID is investing £40 million over four years through the tackling deadly diseases in Africa programme (TDDAP) to support preparedness, detection and response work in the countries most at risk. This is complemented by Public Health England's £16 million programme focused on preventing and responding to similar outbreaks. TDDAP is designed to reduce the impact of communicable disease outbreaks and epidemics on African populations. This will also benefit the UK, by reducing the risk of an outbreak spreading far beyond its source.

[HCWS966]

Humanitarian Situation: Idlib

The Secretary of State for International Development

(Penny Mordaunt): The Syrian regime's systematic and blatant disregard for international humanitarian and human rights law during the eight years long civil war has resulted in the worst humanitarian catastrophe of this century so far. An estimated 400,000 people have been killed, 13 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, 6.2 million have been internally displaced and 5.6 million refugees have fled to neighbouring countries.

The UK remains extremely concerned over escalating military action in the north-west of Syria by the Syrian regime and its international backers, putting at risk almost 3 million people, many of whom have fled to the region to seek shelter. The last few days have seen dozens of Russian and regime airstrikes against areas of Idlib. Last weekend, we received reports of three hospitals, two White Helmets offices and three ambulances being attacked and put out of service, leaving thousands with no access to medical care. Last month alone there were over 100 civilian fatalities, and since the start of this month, already 30,500 people have been displaced.

A disaster in Idlib is still avoidable. It is not too late for the Syrian regime and Russia to change tack. The British Government continue to call on them to work with Turkey, the UN Security Council and the rest of the international community to find a negotiated way forward to avoid the needless loss of human life. If they were genuinely concerned about the presence of terrorist groups, this is what they would do. Sadly, the experience of Aleppo, eastern Ghouta and elsewhere is that this is just a pretext, and that their real intention is to reimpose regime control through brutal military means regardless of the cost.

So, in addition to our diplomatic efforts, we are working with the UN, Turkey, humanitarian agencies and our international partners to undertake contingency planning in case the regime and Russia indeed launch a full-scale offensive against Idlib in the coming days and weeks. Our aim is to ensure that the lives of innocent Syrian civilians are saved.

For this reason today I announce that the UK will provide additional aid funding of up to £32 million for north-west Syria. This money will help to provide shelter, clean water and sanitation, mental health services, and support health workers and facilities. This is our second uplift of emergency funding for northern Syria in recent

weeks. On 17 August I announced a £10 million package of support, including the provision of emergency assistance and vital support for medical centres and mobile medical clinics.

Sadly, north-west Syria is just the latest target for the regime in eight years of devastating civil war. Over that time the UK has been at the forefront of the international response, providing life-saving and life-changing support for millions of people in places like Idlib, Aleppo, eastern Ghouta and most recently south-west Syria. We are the second largest bilateral donor and have pledged £2.71 billion to date, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. Last year our support in Idlib governorate provided approximately 653,000 people with access to clean drinking water, immunised 1,335,000 children under five, helped 321,000 children access education and provided 398,000 medical consultations.

But money alone is not enough. We are working with the UN to ensure robust planning and preparation for north-west Syria. With our international partners, the UK continues to use our position in the UN Security Council and the International Syria Support Group to advocate above all else for the protection of civilians, and calls on all parties to allow humanitarian agencies unfettered access to deliver aid to those most in need.

Regardless of what happens in Idlib, this sadly will not be the end of the suffering of the Syrian people. To achieve that requires a political solution, leading to an inclusive, non-sectarian Government which can unite the country and protect the rights of all Syrians. That is why we continue to support the UN-led Geneva process aimed at reaching a negotiated settlement.

[HCWS969]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Export Control Policy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): This statement is guidance given under section 9 of the Export Control Act 2002.

I would like to inform the House of the introduction of a new policy relating to strategic export controls.

The Government take breaches of export controls and trade sanctions very seriously, by investigating, disrupting and taking the appropriate enforcement action against companies and individuals who breach our controls. As part of the continuous improvement of export control policy, we have considered what other means could be used to disrupt illicit activities without increasing the regulatory burden on organisations that operate legitimately.

The Government wish to strengthen their powers in order to mitigate any potential risk that those engaged in activities in breach of export control and sanctions legislation could still separately apply for and receive export or trade control licences in respect of legitimate business activities in which they are simultaneously engaged.

Therefore, when assessing licence applications, the Government may take into account the risk that the proposed legitimate activity will directly or indirectly facilitate other activities that violate UK export control

or sanctions legislation. In doing so, the Government will consider, inter alia, the conduct of the licence applicant.

[HCWS957]

PRIME MINISTER

Intelligence and Security Committee: Diversity and Inclusion Report

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): On 18 July 2018, the Intelligence and Security Committee's report on diversity and inclusion was laid before Parliament. I responded to this on the same day in a written ministerial statement, *Official Report*, column 23WS.

The Government have given additional consideration to the Committee's important conclusions and recommendations, and I have today laid a further Government response before the House.

Copies of the response have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS959]

SCOTLAND

Response to Opposition Day Debate: the Claim of Right for Scotland

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): On 4 July 2018, this Parliament debated a motion to endorse the principles of the claim of right for Scotland.

This debate was an opportunity to discuss the democratic tradition in Scotland, of which both the 1689 and 1989 claim of right documents form a significant part. The claim of right, set out by the Scottish constitutional convention in 1989, was a key part of a process which ultimately led to the devolution of powers from the Parliament of the United Kingdom to the new Scottish Parliament in the Scotland Act 1998.

The claim of right sought to mobilise and secure the approval of the Scottish people for a new Parliament and then to see that Parliament established. The referendum of 1997 resoundingly secured that approval and the new Parliament was convened in 1999.

While this debate on 4 July secured the UK Parliament's endorsement of the principles of the claim of right, with the Parliament and the Government voting to support the motion, the UK Parliament has already demonstrated its endorsement quite clearly by legislating for the existence of the new Scottish Parliament in the first place.

Furthermore, the UK Parliament has continued to demonstrate its support with significant deepening of devolution via further Scotland Acts in 2012 and in 2016, along with many statutory instruments which have further strengthened the settlement. For example, the Scotland Act 2016 has transferred a wide range of powers to the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament, including significant powers relating to the transfer of

£12 billion worth of income tax powers and welfare powers worth £2.8 billion in 2015-16. By devolving historic new powers, the Act makes the Scottish Parliament one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world and demonstrates the UK Government's commitment to the devolution envisaged in the claim of right.

Devolution and implementation of the Scotland Act 2016 remains a key priority for the UK Government and we are committed to implementing the Scotland Act in full. We are working constructively with the Scottish Government to bring remaining sections into force.

In line with the principles of the claim of right the people of Scotland have also provided their approval to another key part of Scotland's democratic tradition: that of the Union. In the referendum of 2014 the people of Scotland voted clearly to remain part of the United Kingdom, and have two Parliaments and two Governments.

As we prepare to leave the EU, the arguments for Scotland remaining a part of the UK are just as compelling as they have always been.

Now is the time for the United Kingdom to be pulling together, not pulled apart. The Scottish Government should be working with the UK Government to get the right deal for the whole of the UK, and we should be putting all our energies into making sure that we get that right deal for the UK and the right deal for Scotland in our negotiations with the European Union.

The debate featured passionate voices from all sides of the House. It also demonstrated the importance of respecting Scotland's democratic tradition, which this Government have done and will continue to do; a tradition which respects the principles of the claim of right and of the Union which the people of Scotland have determined is the best way to achieve a strong Scotland.

The focus now should be on working together to achieve our aims and ensure that the significant powers that the Scottish Government and Parliament have are used in ways that deliver practical benefits for the people of Scotland.

[HCWS964]

Petition

Thursday 13 September 2018

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum decisions

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the current government policy which states that initial asylum decisions “will be usually decided within six months” has not been followed in many cases, with some people waiting years without being able to work, choose where to live or move forward with their lives; further that in 2017, almost half of all asylum claimants waited six months for their initial decisions; and further that, this leaves many people in a state of uncertainty regarding their future, affecting their health, mental health, careers, education, and their financial situation as evidenced in the report, “The Waiting Game” produced by Refugee and Asylum Seeker (RAS) Voice, a group of people seeking asylum living in Manchester.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to follow its guidelines and ensure initial asylum decisions are made within six months, failing this, the Government should ensure that claimants are informed of the reasons behind any delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Kate Green, Official Report, 24 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 984.]

[P002252]

Observations from the Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes):

In considering the request to urge the Government to follow its guidelines and ensure initial asylum decisions are made within six months, and failing this, the Government should ensure that claimants are informed

of the reasons behind any delay, the Government have noted the concerns of the residents of the United Kingdom about this issue.

The Government have a Service Standard to make an initial asylum decision on 98% of straightforward claims within six months of the date of claim, this target was met for 40 consecutive months. However, there are a number of older cases, mostly non-straightforward cases that require a decision, many of which have a barrier that needs to be overcome in order to be able to make a decision—many of these barriers are outside of the Home Office’s control and take time to resolve. The Government acknowledge that there is more to do to resolve these older cases and have reprioritised case working teams to speed up decision making for these cases.

In the Government’s response to the Chief Inspector’s report in November last year, we accepted his recommendation to review the guidance and process in respect of non-straightforward claims and we also committed to reviewing our approach to service standards.

The Government also acknowledged the Chief Inspector’s concern around the rising vacancies in asylum decision making teams and pressure that this, and having a relatively high proportion of new staff, may place on progressing cases within service standards. We continue to recruit and train decision makers and are working on a range of measures to improve retention rates.

The Government appreciate that some people in the asylum process may be under emotional pressure, particularly while awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. We provide information to asylum claimants throughout the process, including signposting to any support they may require. All asylum claimants are provided with a comprehensive leaflet that sets out what to expect at the asylum interview, the possible outcomes of the asylum claim, how to obtain legal advice to support their claim, details of support organisations that might be relevant, rights and responsibilities of asylum seekers, and information about asylum support and how to apply. The Government continue to work with non-government organisations to improve the information provided to asylum claimants, including on how to keep claimants updated on the progress of their claim.

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 13 September 2018

WORK AND PENSIONS

Widowed Parent's Allowance

The following is an extract from questions on a statement on Widowed Parent's Allowance on 5 September 2018.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It seems clear that the will of the House is that a child who has lost a parent should not be penalised because of the marital status of the parents. Does the Minister intend to carry out an equality impact assessment of this benefit?

Justin Tomlinson: Actually, as part of the commitment to bringing in the new bereavement payments, we will do a full impact assessment, which will be shared with

the House. One of the key changes is the additional £1,500 in the initial payment for those in a marriage or civil partnership who had children. We understand the importance of making sure that those with children get additional support.

[Official Report, 5 September 2018, Vol. 646, c. 193.]

Letter of correction from Justin Tomlinson:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens).

The correct response should have been:

Justin Tomlinson: Actually, as part of the commitment to bringing in the new bereavement payments, we will do **an evaluation**, which will be shared with the House. One of the key changes is the additional £1,500 in the initial payment for those in a marriage or civil partnership who had children. We understand the importance of making sure that those with children get additional support.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 13 September 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
INTERNATIONAL TRADE	841	WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—continued	
Export Strategy	846	Employment Opportunities	861
Free Trade Agreements	844	Gender Pay Gap: Reporting Process	856
Topical Questions	849	Islamophobia	862
Trade and Investment: India	842	LGBT Equality	857
Trade Co-operation: UK and Israel	841	Maternity Discrimination	860
Trans-Pacific Partnership	848	Sexual Exploitation: Accommodation	859
		Shared Parental Leave	853
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	853	Topical Questions	862
Access to Abortion Services	860	Universal Credit Roll-out	855

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 13 September 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY	29WS	HOME DEPARTMENT—continued	
Retail Sector	29WS	Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation: Reports	38WS
CABINET OFFICE	30WS	INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	38WS
Senior Public Sector Pay Awards	30WS	Ebola: Democratic Republic of the Congo	38WS
		Humanitarian Situation: Idlib	40WS
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS	33WS	INTERNATIONAL TRADE	41WS
Bovine TB	33WS	Export Control Policy	41WS
EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION	34WS	PRIME MINISTER	42WS
EU Exit	35WS	Intelligence and Security Committee: Diversity and Inclusion Report	42WS
General Affairs Council (18 September 2018)	34WS		
HOME DEPARTMENT	36WS	SCOTLAND	42WS
Abortion Clinic Protest Review	36WS	Response to Opposition Day Debate: the Claim of Right for Scotland	42WS
Immigration	36WS		

PETITION

Thursday 13 September 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>	<i>Col. No.</i>
HOME DEPARTMENT	25P	
Asylum decisions	25P	

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Thursday 13 September 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>
WORK AND PENSIONS	5MC
Widowed Parent's Allowance	5MC

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CONTENTS

Thursday 13 September 2018

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 841] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for International Trade
Minister for Women and Equalities

Royal Assent [Col. 869]

Bedford Prison [Col. 871]

Answer to urgent question—(Rory Stewart)

Scallop Fishing: Bay of Seine [Col. 882]

Statement—(George Eustice)

Business of the House [Col. 892]

Statement—(Andrea Leadsom)

Proxy Voting [Col. 914]

General debate

Burma: Humanitarian Situation [Col. 966]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Deaf Children's Services [Col. 385WH]

Road Safety (Schools) [Col. 410WH]

General debates

Written Statements [Col. 29WS]

Petition [Col. 25P]

Observations

Ministerial Correction [Col. 5MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
