

**Wednesday
10 October 2018**

**Volume 647
No. 186**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 10 October 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

*The Secretary of State was asked—
Yemen*

1. **Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the humanitarian situation in Yemen.
[906947]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): Perhaps, Mr Speaker, on behalf of those who were in the Chamber a moment ago, you might convey to the Chaplain our thanks for her preface to her prayers today. Let us hope that that spirit goes with us during what could be quite a turbulent term. Her words were well chosen.

Some 20.2 million Yemenis are estimated to need humanitarian assistance, with 8.4 million facing extreme food shortages. Insecurity and bureaucratic constraints complicate the diplomatic response. We continue to work with partners to reach the most vulnerable, and we urge all parties to ensure unhindered access through Yemen. Only a political settlement can end the humanitarian crisis.

Lyn Brown: The Minister knows that I respect him, and I am grateful to him for that answer, but the United Nations says that we are losing our fight to save lives in Yemen. Some people are so desperate that they are eating leaves, and there have been more than a million cases of cholera in the past 18 months alone. What urgent and immediate action can we in this country take to prevent such huge loss of lives?

Alistair Burt: The truth is that the Security Council has invested all its authority in the special envoy to seek the political negotiation that will end the conflict. We should all be fully behind that. When I was in New York for the recent General Assembly week, I hosted a special meeting on nutrition in Yemen. We continue to work to try to make the negotiations a success. That is where we have to put all our effort, because it is only with the end of the conflict that we can fully tackle the humanitarian crisis.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Some 17.8 million Yemenis have no reliable access to food and, as the Minister just told us, 8.4 million of them face extreme food shortages. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that vital UK aid can reach Yemenis in distress?

Alistair Burt: The £170 million that the United Kingdom is putting into Yemen in this financial year is currently feeding around 2.2 million people, including children. We continue to work on nutrition and sanitary issues, and on making sure that clean water is available. I repeat to the House that the most important thing is that the humanitarian support and efforts to gain access are only a sticking plaster for the wound; if the wound is to be fully closed, every effort must be made on the political track to end the conflict.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The UK can indeed be proud of our efforts on the humanitarian side, but I agree with the Minister that we need to do more on the political track. What are we actually doing now to sustain pressure on all parties to the conflict? In particular, what are we doing to build the coalition that we need in the Security Council to secure a new resolution that is relevant to the circumstances in Yemen today?

Alistair Burt: The consensus in the Security Council is that the best thing we can do is support the envoy, because a new resolution would either not get through or not be relevant. We do not want to waste any time on efforts away from the special envoy. While we were in New York, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary had a meeting with the relevant parties, and separately I met those in the coalition, as well as people representing those who have influence with the Houthis, because this is not a one-sided issue.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The biggest tragedy of Yemen is that ultimately it is a man-made disaster that is having this appalling impact on the local population. Will the Minister confirm how the UK Government will support efforts towards a political solution, which is the only solution to these issues?

Alistair Burt: We were very supportive of the efforts of special envoy Martin Griffiths to bring the parties together in Geneva recently, and we were very disappointed and concerned that the Houthi component did not attend those negotiations. Until the negotiations are fully engaged with by all sides, we cannot proceed. All efforts must be made to support the special envoy and get the negotiations back on track.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Yemen is bleeding to death. This could be the first time in modern history that an entire country has been reduced to famine and poverty by the actions, in part, of our allies. One hundred Members have signed a letter to the Prime Minister asking her to condemn further attacks on the port of Hodeidah. Will the Minister repeat today the Government's commitment that they do not want to see any further action taken against the port, which would cause the death of a further quarter of a million people?

Alistair Burt: We have always been clear, first, that there is no military solution in Yemen, and secondly, that the port has to be kept open. There should not be action in relation to the port, either by those who might have mined the approaches to it or those who might seek to attack it, because humanitarian access remains crucial. Yemen is a tragedy of significant proportions,

as the right hon. Gentleman knows. We are doing everything we can to find the political solution to end the conflict.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): One of the major issues is access to finance and the soaring cost of basic commodities in Yemen. The UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, has said that the best way to resolve Yemen's humanitarian crisis is to fix the economy and stem a slide in the rial. Are the UK Government participating in action on that matter?

Alistair Burt: Since July, the rial has depreciated by some 20%. That, as the hon. Lady says, is putting up the prices of basic foodstuffs, which had already increased in recent years. Of course, in a war economy, people have made money: the Houthis have taxed goods and taken money from people instead of supplying goods. We are doing what we can to support the rial, because some stability in the currency is essential. The UK is supporting that process, too.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Save the Children is warning that 5.2 million children in Yemen are at risk of famine; meanwhile, an estimated 350,000 children caught up in the conflict have contracted cholera since April last year. I am sure the Minister agrees that urgent action is needed. Will he inform the House what urgent steps his Department is taking to ensure that delivery of food and medicine is not hindered by warring parties for strategic gains, but instead reaches those who are in desperate need of it?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has met and spoken regularly with the Minister in the United Arab Emirates responsible for coalition efforts to ensure humanitarian access. We have spoken to those who have access to the Houthi and the areas that they control to make sure there are no blockages there. It is a conflict, and it is a tragedy that access to humanitarian aid is used as a weapon in that conflict. Only a negotiated solution can end the conflict and enable the humanitarian efforts, and we are making every effort to ensure that.

Kerala: Summer Floods

2. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that people in Kerala have access to clean water, sanitation and shelter after the floods of summer 2018. [906948]

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): Our thoughts are with the people affected by flooding in India. The Indian Government are leading the response. We have supported the multi-donor Start Fund, which provided £250,000 to help the delivery of emergency assistance. This included the provision of emergency shelter and water purification and hygiene kits.

Daniel Zeichner: Members of the Keralan community across the UK are understandably aghast at recent events. Will the Minister say whether, in the light of this week's report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Government will heed the advice of the world's leading climate scientists to enable us to

make the rapid, unprecedented and far-reaching transitions that will be needed to avoid similar crises in future?

Harriett Baldwin: We certainly welcome the report, and I hope the hon. Gentleman welcomes the Government's commitment to contributing £5.8 billion between 2016 and 2020 to make a difference in this area. Since 2011, 47 million people have been helped to cope with the effects of climate change and 17 million have been helped to access clean energy, but there is more to do and we will do it.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Anyone who has been to Kerala knows it is a beautiful state with beautiful people. Has my hon. Friend had a chance to discuss with UK water companies their charity, WaterAid, and what they can do to help?

Harriett Baldwin: The Indian Government are of course leading on this, and I am sure that they will note my hon. Friend's suggestion. He has clearly had the pleasure of visiting that beautiful part of India. I should say that Kerala is open again for tourism, and I know that the return of tourists would be welcomed.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The recent floods in Kerala and other natural disasters in the world tragically highlight the urgency of the global climate crisis. This week, the world's leading climate scientists stated in a landmark UN report that we have just 12 years to keep global warming to a maximum 1.5° C, and the World Bank has already committed to ending upstream oil and gas projects by 2019. Can the Minister therefore explain what possible reasons there are for the UK to continue to fund fossil fuel use, particularly in countries that are already bearing the worst brunt of climate change?

Harriett Baldwin: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the fact that the UK is leading in terms of our commitment to end the use of coal. We are looking closely at the Powering Past Coal Alliance and leading an effort to get more countries to sign up to that alliance. The UK is showing strong leadership on that, and he should welcome it.

Freedom of Religion or Belief

3. **Mr George Howarth** (Knowsley) (Lab): What plans she has to promote the right to freedom of religion or belief in developing countries. [906949]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The UK promotes and protects the right to freedom of religion or belief internationally. Through our UK Aid Connect scheme, up to £12 million will be available over the next four years for organisations to promote the building of freedom of religion or belief.

Mr Howarth: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she give us some information about what she will do to collect better data about religious freedom and minority belief freedom in the countries where her Department supports programmes?

Harriett Baldwin: Clearly the right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. I am delighted to be able to tell him that we are working closely with colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on a project that will generate exactly that evidence on the persecution of religious minorities. The project's long-term objective is to generate data to better inform international policymakers to promote freedom of religion or belief more effectively.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Religious literacy is crucial to understanding the way in which our policies affect developing countries. I am therefore glad that the FCO has relaunched its course on that, but it is only voluntary. What more can be done to encourage DFID staff to take up such courses?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend's work as a Church Commissioner. She will be aware that the Prime Minister has recently appointed Lord Ahmad as her special envoy on freedom of religion or belief. In that role, he has the important job of ensuring that that is taken up as widely as possible.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister may be aware of a case in Pakistan involving a young woman called Asia Bibi who, under blasphemy legislation, faces the possible fate of execution in that country this week. What representations can the Minister make, as a matter of the utmost urgency, to try to ensure that common sense prevails in the Pakistani courts in that case?

Harriett Baldwin: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will immediately raise that case with my colleague Lord Ahmad and make sure that that representation is made forthwith.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Pakistan is one of the largest recipients of UK aid, so does the Minister agree that along with our aid should come an expectation that the recipient should do everything in their power to improve the protection of basic universal human rights?

Harriett Baldwin: I certainly think that, in his capacity as the Prime Minister's special envoy on freedom of religion or belief, Lord Ahmad will be making the points that my right hon. Friend raises as a matter of priority.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): The most recent report from the European Parliament intergroup on freedom of religion or belief and religious tolerance states:

"much of the world's population is deprived of their right to freedom of religion or belief".

What steps are the Department undertaking to ensure the protection of minority groups in Nigeria, as the Nigerian Government are reportedly unwilling to initiate forceful action?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is right to raise the fact that three quarters of the world's population live in countries with high levels of government restrictions on freedom of religion or belief. Nigeria's constitution does guarantee that freedom. When my right hon.

Friend the Prime Minister recently met President Buhari she was able to raise that important issue, and I am glad the hon. Lady shares the ability to raise it in Parliament.

Kate Osamor: I feel the need to prompt the Minister. Nigeria is one of DFID's top five recipient countries and Nigeria has been identified by both the European Parliament intergroup and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom as a "country of concern" with regards to its poor record on upholding the right of freedom to express religion. So may I ask the Minister again to tell the House what actions her Department has in place to ensure that the Nigerian Government uphold the rights of religious minorities in the country?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. I am sure she agrees that humanitarian assistance should always be distributed on the basis of need, disregarding any issues of race, religion and ethnicity. I assure her that we regularly raise this issue, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State did recently, and that there is a plan in place both at local and national level to address it.

Rohingya Women

4. **Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab):** If she will provide additional funding to support and protect Rohingya women living in refugee camps. [906950]

5. **Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab):** If she will provide additional funding to support and protect Rohingya women living in refugee camps. [906951]

9. **Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab):** If she will provide additional funding to support and protect Rohingya women living in refugee camps. [906955]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): DFID supports organisations that help Rohingya women and has committed £129 million to the crisis overall. A third of our recent £70 million allocation is being spent on protection services, including women's centres, emergency nutrition and midwifery care and support for survivors of gender-based violence. We will continue to explore additional funding options.

Vicky Foxcroft: Following what the UN referred to as a "frenzy of sexual violence" against Rohingya women and girls, surely the Secretary of State will agree that it is wholly unacceptable that protection services for gender violence have received only one third of the required funding under the UN's joint response plan. What steps is his Department taking to fill this funding gap?

Alistair Burt: I have two things to say in response to the hon. Lady's most appropriate question. First, we recognise that this appeal is underfunded. We are in the lead in relation to this and we urge other donors to come forward. Secondly, she should be aware of the care with which United Kingdom money has been used to support women in the circumstances that she has described: 30 child-friendly spaces; 19 women's centres; and 19 sexual and reproductive health clinics. I have seen these at Kutupalong camp and I know how well used they are by women who need counselling and

support. The United Kingdom has been very clear about the importance of this as part of the support that we have provided. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House very gently that we are discussing the plight of Rohingya women, which is one of the most egregious plights of any people anywhere in the world and should be treated with appropriate respect.

Sandy Martin: Hundreds of thousands of people have died in what has been widely regarded as ethnic cleansing. What assurances have the UK Government sought from the Myanmar Government that the Rohingya women who return will be safe, following the memorandum of understanding with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and should they not include a promise of citizenship?

Alistair Burt: When we talk to any of those in the camps, it is quite clear that they will return to Myanmar/Burma only when they feel that it is safe to do so and when they are citizens and their citizenship has been accepted. At present, I do not think that we have any confidence that any women returning to Burma under any memorandum would be in that position. Until that situation changes, the refugees will need to stay, but it is essential that those issues are dealt with in time.

Rosie Duffield: The fact-finding mission found that this was ethnic cleansing and sexual abuse. Rape was widely found. I thank the Minister for promising to seek assurance that that is being taken care of and that those women are being supported. Is there any more detail available on that, please?

Alistair Burt: The International Development Committee, which is led by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), questioned me about that just a few weeks ago. We have details on the counselling and support that is being provided. The tragedy is that this will need to go on for some time. It seems likely that those in the camps will not be able to return soon. What is essential—the hon. Lady's question is helpful in relation to this—is that the eye of the world does not go off this matter. The funding for the support that is needed must not be lost and people must not forget the Rohingya who are in the camps.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): A large number of vulnerable Rohingya women and children still live in Rakhine province. What humanitarian assistance are the Government providing to those vulnerable women and girls?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is correct: there is difficulty in gaining access to the Rakhine province. It has been possible for humanitarian agencies to get into only some of the province. We have sought to reshape our programme to make sure that more support is available to those who are still in Rakhine, and it should not be forgotten that they remain in a very vulnerable position.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): These vulnerable Rohingya Muslims may be destined to spend many years as refugees in camps. In addition to the aid that has already been given, has there been any consideration

of a diplomatic solution involving substantial up-front international support for refugees and for the wider region in Bangladesh to pump-prime economic and political stability?

Alistair Burt: We should always preface any remarks by expressing gratitude to the Government of Bangladesh for what they have been able to do for these most vulnerable people. Every effort is being given to the sort of diplomatic solution that will provide an answer, but it is clear from the actions of the Burma Government that this will take some time. My hon. Friend is right: we need to make sure that we keep caring for those in the camps for some period of time, because the very length of their stay will mean that they face new problems, rather than those from which they fled.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What support does the Department provide for Rohingya refugees who have suffered gender-based violence?

Alistair Burt: The support that we have provided has included counselling and making available people who are able to deal with children who have been traumatised over time. It is quite clear from talking to the aid agencies on my visit that there has been an improvement in people's condition, but of course the true horror of what they have experienced can never truly be removed until they return home.

Topical Questions

T1. [906962] **Trudy Harrison** (Copeland) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (**Penny Mordaunt**): I hope the whole House will join me in sending our deepest condolences to those affected by the devastating situation in Indonesia. We have all seen the images of destruction and of people suffering, and the UK stands side by side with the people of Indonesia. As well as providing essential supplies and a team on the ground, the UK has now made up to £5 million available, including £2 million that will match funds raised by the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal. I thank the British public for their generosity.

Trudy Harrison: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that she will be using DFID's existing budget to help the British overseas territories to rebuild after the devastating hurricanes?

Penny Mordaunt: If that sad event does occur, I have instructed my Department to ensure that our response in the overseas territories has a priority call on our DFID reserves—our non-ODA money. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence are also standing ready. We will deal with these situations as best we can, without having to make further demands on the public purse.

T2. [906963] **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State share the concerns of the Minister for Europe and the Americas, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), about the situation in El Salvador with regard to abortion being a criminal offence, even in cases of rape? Does she agree

that if we want to tell other parts of the world not to criminalise women seeking essential healthcare, we have a duty to lead by example by urgently reforming abortion law in Northern Ireland?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with the hon. Lady. The Women and Equalities Committee is looking at the issue that she raises with regard to Northern Ireland, and that will be a very helpful piece of work. The hon. Lady is right; in fact, we have some opportunities with the international women's conference that will be taking place in part in this Chamber—I thank Mr Speaker for allowing that—to send a clear message to everyone that women's rights matter and that we will work together to ensure that they are upheld worldwide.

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber, with a lot of very loud private conversations. Can we have a bit of hush for a south-east London knight? I call Sir David Evennett.

T5. [906966] **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was pleased to read that my right hon. Friend had introduced a new test for UK aid—no longer just proving that UK aid is spent well, but that it could not be spent any better. Can she inform the House when that test will be implemented?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are not just ensuring that the aid we provide is as effective as possible; we are introducing new tests to ensure that we are doing things that are also in the national interest. The chief economist has placed that in our aid allocation formula and we are also looking at ways of improving that.

T3. [906964] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What are Ministers doing to ensure that the Government continue their commitment to improving global nutrition beyond the next 2020 nutrition summit?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): Nutrition remains at the heart of the concerns that we have for feeding the most vulnerable. I had meetings in New York with those responsible for looking ahead to the next replenishment. The United Kingdom has always been a leader in this matter and we will remain so.

T7. [906968] **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps is the Department taking to support our Commonwealth veterans, who served so bravely alongside our armed forces?

Penny Mordaunt: We are introducing a new programme to support our pre-independence Commonwealth veterans who have been living in poverty. There are about 7,000 of these individuals, to whom we owe an immense debt of gratitude. The new programme will ensure that they can live out the rest of their lives with their families in dignity.

T4. [906965] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Freedom of expression and democracy are aid programme headings under which we fund Bangladesh, so why has it been able to imprison and torture the

acclaimed photojournalist Shahidul Alam for championing those very values? What are we doing to secure his release?

Alistair Burt: Once again in New York, I took part in a special session at the United Nations devoted to the pressures on journalists, led by Amal Clooney and others. We were able to state very clearly our support for those Bangladeshi journalists. Representations have been made, and will continue to be made. I met the family, who were there.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend welcome the fact that our Prime Minister is the first Prime Minister to visit Kenya in over 30 years? She committed to help to support the next generation of energetic, ambitious young Kenyans as they seek to build a more prosperous country in the years ahead.

Penny Mordaunt: I was absolutely delighted by the Prime Minister's visit, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on her appointment as trade envoy to Kenya. If we want to eradicate global poverty, trade is part of the answer, and we are absolutely right to put that investment into Africa, as it will lever in an additional £4 billion to grow the economies of those developing nations.

T8. [906969] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): In the week in which the UK hosts a major international conference on the illegal wildlife trade, will the Minister tell us what her Department is doing to tackle that international crime?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right—the UK is leading the world by hosting the summit this week, and it is at the forefront of tackling this heinous crime. I am delighted to announce to Parliament that there will be a further £6 million uplift to the illegal wildlife trade challenge fund, and more money for the international action against corruption programme to tackle illicit financial flows that are linked to the illegal wildlife trade.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the Palestinian Authority's continuing naming of schools after terrorists and the payment of salaries to convicted murderers? Can we be sure that UK taxpayers are not facilitating payments?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend can be absolutely sure that we share his concern in relation to this. The matter is continually raised with the Palestinian Authority. There should be no incitement to terror and no incitement to violence. We make rigorously sure that no UK taxpayers' money is spent on this.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [906970] **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 10 October.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Immediately after Prime Minister's questions I, along with other Members of the House, will watch a parade by 120 members of the British Army to Parliament. They represent the breadth of the 50,000 regular and reserve Army personnel. This is an opportunity for us to thank them for their tireless work to keep our country safe.

This afternoon, I will host a reception for World Mental Health Day. I am delighted that this week the UK hosted the first ever global ministerial summit on mental health, with a landmark agreement to achieve equity for mental health.

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

Joanna Cherry: The Polish community has long made a valuable contribution to Scottish society. My Polish constituent is a young man who has lived in Scotland since he was six, but when he applied for jobseeker's allowance last month, he failed the habitual residence test. Even the Department for Work and Pensions cannot understand the Kafkaesque letter that he has been sent. Like the Windrush scandal, is this the shape of things to come for EU citizens in the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. and learned Lady knows, as part of the negotiations with the European Union we have already come to agreements about the rights that will be available to those EU citizens who are already living in the United Kingdom. We have set out very clearly what will be the situation for those who come to the United Kingdom during the implementation period. I was able to update people a few weeks ago to make it clear that in a no-deal arrangement we will also ensure that we look after those EU citizens who have come and made their home here. As for the individual case, I am sure that the Department for Work and Pensions will look into that in some detail.

Q5. [906974] Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to encourage more tourists to enjoy the performing arts outside London?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the performing arts and the fact that there are some great performing arts to be seen around the country. She is a performing arts ambassador, and I congratulate her on her work. We are committed to supporting the UK's tourism industry and spreading the wealth it produces across the country, as we set out in our tourism action plan.

We are providing funding for the performing arts throughout the country. That includes investing £78 million in a new theatre and arts complex, The Factory, which is a home for Manchester International Festival and will encourage international collaboration, investment and visitors, and £5 million in the redevelopment of Colston Hall, the south-west's major concert venue, to make it fit for the 21st century. Performing arts are being encouraged around the whole country.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will join me in expressing our deepest sympathies to the people of Sulawesi in Indonesia following the earthquake and tsunami in which 1,500 people have

died. We wish them well in the rebuilding of their communities. I also take this opportunity to thank all those officers and ratings in the Royal Navy who did so much to help during the emergency.

Today is World Mental Health Day, and today there are 5,000 fewer mental health nurses than there were in 2010. The Prime Minister said last week that austerity "is over". When will austerity be over for mental health services?

The Prime Minister: First, I join the right hon. Gentleman in expressing our condolences to those who were affected by what happened in Indonesia; our thoughts are with them. I am pleased to say that the Department for International Development was able to respond to that, and I understand that the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal is now up to £10 million. As the right hon. Gentleman said, we were able to provide support in kind through the support that was available from our armed forces and, indeed, others. I commend all those who have been working so hard in that area.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of mental health, and I am pleased he did, because this is a Government that are ensuring that mental health is given the attention that it needs. It is this Government who have ensured that there will be parity of esteem for mental health and physical health in the national health service, and it is this Government that are putting record levels of funding into mental health.

If the right hon. Gentleman is asking me, "Do we still need to do more on mental health?" I would say yes, we do. That is exactly why we are setting out further steps today, particularly to improve the mental health of children and young people. I am also very pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), is taking on responsibility as the Minister for suicide prevention—the first time that a Government has appointed a Minister to such a post. This Government take mental health seriously. That is why we are putting record levels of funding into mental health.

Jeremy Corbyn: It was a Labour amendment to the Health and Social Care Act 2012 that put parity of esteem on the face of the legislation. It was opposed by the right hon. Lady's Government. If she thinks that mental health spending is going well, maybe she should have told the Health Secretary that, because this morning he said that it is

"still way off where we need to be".

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has found that the income of mental health trusts in England is lower than it was six years ago, and children are being sent as much as 300 miles away for urgent treatment. This needs urgent action now.

People in every village, town and city know that violent crime is rising. Some 21,000 police officers have been cut, and 7,000 police community support officers have gone. When will austerity be over for the police?

The Prime Minister: I have just said that I think there is more for us to do on mental health, and as part of our long-term plan for the national health service we will be doing more for mental health. I remind the right hon.

Gentleman that our plans for the national health service will see £394 million more a week going into our national health service.

The right hon. Gentleman then asked me about policing. Of course, this Government have made £460 million more available for policing in this current year, including the precept on council tax. If he is so concerned about funding for policing, why did the Labour party oppose that extra money?

Jeremy Corbyn: If austerity is over for the police, the Prime Minister does not seem to have told the Police Federation, because it is currently taking the Government to court for failing to implement the decision of the independent pay review body. Our dedicated police officers and police community support officers deserve better than they get from this Government.

In the last year the Education Secretary has been rebuked four times by the statistics watchdog for making false claims about education funding. I know that the Prime Minister is a stickler for accuracy so, given her commitment to ending austerity, can she confirm that austerity is now over for all teachers, who will receive the independently recommended 3.5% pay rise?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about the police pay award. It represents the highest consolidated pay award since 2010. He then went on to talk about funding for schools. He knows the announcement that has been made in relation to the teachers' pay award, but I remind him that school funding this year is at a record high. With the extra £1.3 billion that we have put in this year and next, per pupil funding is being protected in real terms. I recognise the pressures that schools are under, but I also recognise that 1.9 million more children are now in good and outstanding schools, compared with 2010, and part of that is the result of the reforms we have made to education, including free schools and academies which the Labour party would abolish.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that over half of teachers are getting another real-terms pay cut next year. They have been subject to eight years of pay freezes, with pay rises capped below inflation. It is no wonder that there is a chronic shortage of teachers and the Government have failed to hit their recruitment target.

The Conservative leader of Northamptonshire County Council said that it

"couldn't cope with the levels of cuts".

The Conservative leader of Somerset County Council said:

"I feel abandoned... there are no solutions coming."

Will the Prime Minister listen to her own council leaders and end austerity, as she promised to do last week?

The Prime Minister: In fact, there are more teachers in our schools now, and we see more people applying to be teachers. I recognise the very hard work that our teachers put in day in, day out. The good results that our children are getting are the result of their hard work and that of their teachers.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to Northamptonshire County Council. Of course, the independent inspection was clear that failures at the council were not due to a

lack of funding. We have backed councils in England: between 2015 and 2020, £200 billion are available to deliver the local services that their communities want. We will see an increase of £1.3 billion in the money available to councils over the next two years, extra money for social care was announced at our party conference—councils have access to over £9.6 billion of dedicated funding in relation to that—and there is a £31 million increase for rural services. Yes, we have had to make tough decisions, and yes, councils have been asked to make tough decisions. The reason we had to do that was the state of the public finances and the economy that we were left by the Labour Government. People have made sacrifices and they need to know that their hard work has paid off. Yes, better times are ahead, under a Conservative Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: It might be a good idea if the Prime Minister took a few minutes out of her very busy day to listen to some teachers and hear about the stress they are going through and the number of newly qualified teachers who feel that they cannot carry on anymore and leave the profession that they love.

The National Audit Office has found that local government funding from central Government has been cut by 49% since 2010, and next year Government funding for councils is going to be cut by a further £1.3 billion. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that 75% of the social security cuts announced in 2015 have yet to come into effect; £2.7 billion will be cut from working-age benefits next year alone. Can the Prime Minister confirm that this swingeing austerity on the lowest-paid and the disabled people in our society will now end, as she said last week?

The Prime Minister: What we see in the changes that we are putting forward in relation to welfare reform is encouraging people into work and making sure that when they get into work, work pays. I might also say to the right hon. Gentleman that there are £2.4 billion of unclaimed benefits under the legacy system of the Labour party that will be paid to people under universal credit—700,000 people getting the benefits that they are entitled to under universal credit for the future. He asks me about what this Government are doing in relation to the end of austerity, and I have been very clear that there are better times ahead for people. We will see debt falling and we will see support for our public services going up. Austerity is being brought to an end. What is not being brought to an end is fiscal responsibility.

Jeremy Corbyn: The poorest third of households will lose £745 a year if these cuts go ahead. Just this week, the Equality and Human Rights Commission—and the Prime Minister should listen to it—has reported that the situation facing those with disabilities has got worse and their rights are being violated in our society. After eight years of painful austerity, poverty is up, homelessness and deaths on our streets are up, living standards down, public services slashed, and 1 million elderly are not getting the care that they need. Wages have been eroded, and all the while, billions were found for tax giveaways for big corporations and the super-rich. The Prime Minister declared that she is ending austerity, but unless the Budget halts the cuts, increases funding to public

services and gives our public servants a decent pay rise, then is not the claim that austerity is over simply a great big Conservative con?

The Prime Minister: Actually, wages are going up; we have increased the national living wage as well; there are 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty under this Government; and under universal credit, 1 million disabled households will get around £110 a month more as a result. The right hon. Gentleman talks about cuts. I will tell him about some cuts that have been of benefit to working people in this country. What about the £18.5 billion of income tax cuts that have helped household incomes under this Government? What about the cuts in their household bills that 11 million households will see as a result of our energy price cap? And what about the £46 billion of cuts through freezing fuel duty, which has made a real difference to people's lives? But we know what would really hurt working people. Labour's plans would cost £1 trillion—£1,000 billion of people's money. Uncontrolled borrowing, spiralling taxes, working people paying the price of Labour—yet again, Labour taking us back to square one.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: As always, I am determined to find plenty of time for Back Benchers.

Q6. [906975] Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend recognises how important it is for every child to have the opportunity of the best start in life. For the past three years, I have been campaigning to ensure that summer-born and premature children have that opportunity. The Department for Education's recent report contains some statistical oddities and progress seems to have stalled. Would my right hon. Friend agree to meet me and parents to discuss this matter?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising what is an important issue for many parents. We are concerned that some summer-born and prematurely born children whose parents choose to delay their entry to school until compulsory school age may be missing essential teaching in a reception year. I understand that the Department for Education is looking at how best to make changes without creating unintended consequences elsewhere in the system. It is important that it looks at it in that sense. The Minister from the Department will be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this issue.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): As you well know, Mr Speaker, today is World Mental Health Day. I want to congratulate the Prime Minister on her appointment of a Minister for suicide prevention. In Scotland, we have our own Minister for Mental Health and look forward to working closely with the new UK Minister on this important issue. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that we must all work to eradicate policies and circumstances that lead people to believe that suicide is their only option?

The Prime Minister: It is right that we take the issue of suicide as seriously as we have done—in particular, the concerns raised about the number of young men who commit suicide. People in a range of different

circumstances find themselves in a position where they think about committing suicide. We must do everything we can to ensure that people are prevented from committing suicide and that support is given to people in those circumstances.

Ian Blackford: I am glad the Prime Minister agrees with me, because, as reported by *The Independent*, nearly one in every two women taking part in the UK Government's work capability assessment say they have attempted suicide after or during the process. A series of secret internal inquiries reveal that Conservative Ministers were repeatedly warned of the policy's shortcomings. Will the Prime Minister commit today to ensuring that her new Minister for Suicide Prevention looks at the impact of her Government's own social security policies and at long last scraps the appalling work capability assessment?

The Prime Minister: First, the assessments were introduced by a previous Government. It is important that we get the assessments right. It is right that we are encouraging people into the workplace and wanting to ensure that people who are able to be in the workplace are given the support that enables them to do that. That is what we want to do. It is right that we maintain assessments. Of course we look at the impact and quality of those assessments. That is work the Department for Work and Pensions does on a regular basis. It is important that we are undertaking those assessments.

Q10. [906979] Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown and head of the Financial Conduct Authority Andrew Bailey have joined the call by the all-party group on fair business banking for action against the bankers who cost the UK taxpayers trillions of pounds throughout the financial crisis, none of whom have been fined, banned or prosecuted, despite clear evidence of guilt of fraud and malpractice. Will my right hon. Friend do all she can to urge and enable regulators and crime agencies to hold those responsible to account?

The Prime Minister: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that, since the financial crisis, we have been looking at the design of the regulatory system to ensure that we have built one of the most robust regulatory systems in the world. It is designed specifically to ensure financial stability and protect taxpayers.

We have introduced a number of measures relating to the responsibility of those at the top of organisations. In 2016, we brought into force the senior managers and certification regime to hold those the top personally responsible for wrongdoing. Legislation was introduced alongside that regime that ensures that bosses whose reckless misconduct causes their institution to fail face up to seven years in prison. Although these reforms are of course very recent and it will take further time before we see the full impact of them, the FCA issued total fines of £229 million last year against individuals and firms who have broken the FCA's rules. I can reassure my hon. Friend that we will remain focused on ensuring that we build a fairer and more balanced banking system and, if there is more that needs to be done, on looking at what we should be doing.

Q2. [906971] **Caroline Flint** (Don Valley) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister agree with her Work and Pensions Secretary that half of lone parents and around two thirds of working-age couples with children should lose the equivalent of £2,400 a year under universal credit? For us to believe the Prime Minister's promise to end austerity, will she promise today to reverse the £3 billion of cuts that are built into the universal credit roll-out?

The Prime Minister: In relation to those people who are being moved on to universal credit as part of managed migration, we are of course undertaking that. It will start later next year and will be done initially on a small-scale basis to ensure that we get that right. We are putting in transitional protections for those people so that people who are moved on to universal credit as part of the process will not see any reduction—they will be protected.

Q11. [906980] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): Last week, Access Community Trust, working in conjunction with other Lowestoft voluntary groups and Waveney District Council, launched the thin ice project, which will provide emergency accommodation for the homeless not just during the period of below zero night-time temperatures but for the whole winter period from 1 November to 28 February. On World Homeless Day, will the Prime Minister build on the rough-sleeping strategy and provide a long-term funding system so that charities such as Access Community Trust and St Mungo's can put in place bespoke initiatives that prevent homelessness before anyone actually has to sleep rough?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue, because we do not want to see anybody having to sleep on the streets. That is why we have committed to ensuring that we eradicate and end rough sleeping by 2027 and halve it by 2022. That is why we are supporting various projects across the country to do that. I recognise his point about local authorities, their involvement, their need to build capacity and capability in their teams to ensure that they can deal with this and the role that the voluntary sector can play, too. We are investing more than £3 million a year with voluntary sector groups to train and advise local authority teams so that they are able to address these issues. We want to ensure that rough sleeping becomes a thing of the past.

Q3. [906972] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Members of the Scottish Fishermen's Association and the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations are jointly lobbying Parliament today. They ask for a very simple undertaking from the Prime Minister—namely, that in negotiating the Brexit deal she will not trade away their right to fish in UK waters. Will the Prime Minister give our fishermen that undertaking?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely recognise the importance of the fishing industry across the UK and particularly in Scotland. I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that as we are going through these negotiations, we will be very clear that once EU rules no longer apply to the United Kingdom, we will be an independent coastal state and

we will be making those decisions. We will control access to our waters and we will be seeking to gain a fairer share of quotas.

Q12. [906981] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): In 2005, the then Labour Government closed accident and emergency at Crawley Hospital. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has committed to have additional resources for the national health service, including as part of the Brexit dividend. Can I get an assurance that the upcoming NHS plan will include a return for local services at its heart?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Obviously, the long-term plan for the national health service is being developed by the national health service in conjunction with clinicians and people at a local level. It is absolutely clear that we need to ensure that we recognise the importance of those community services. As my hon. Friend says, it is this Government who are not only putting in place a long-term plan to support the national health service but also that longer-term funding, which will see the biggest cash boost ever in the history of the national health service.

Q4. [906973] **Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Modern slavery is a scourge on our society, affecting thousands of victims, including Ján, who lived in an attic in Oldham and was forced to work without any pay by his gangmasters for six years. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating businesses such as the Co-operative Group on their work, which includes offering paid work placements to help victims to rebuild their lives? Can she explain why it has taken the Government five months to get around to recruiting the anti-slavery commissioner?

The Prime Minister: As I think the hon. Gentleman will know, modern slavery is an issue that I have taken a particular interest in and worked on. I am proud of the impact that our Modern Slavery Act 2015 is having, but, sadly, we continue to see people being effectively enslaved in this country. We are seeing more cases in which criminals are prosecuted, but we need to ensure that support is available. I certainly commend the Co-op, which he referenced, and other businesses that are working to help people who have been victims of modern slavery. My right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary tells me that when she chaired a session on modern slavery at the UN General Assembly, the role of the private sector was given particular prominence. We will continue to do all we can to ensure that we are dealing with modern slavery.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): It is obvious that the biggest task facing the Prime Minister this winter is, first, to obtain a compromise agreement with the other 27 European Governments on the terms of our withdrawal, and then to win the approval of a majority in this House for that same agreement, or something like it, in a meaningful vote on the terms of our departure. Does she equally accept that the maths makes it obvious that that majority can only be obtained if the agreement retains the support of the pro-European Conservative Back Benchers in this House and wins the support of a significant number of Labour pro-European

Back Benchers? That would reveal that the hard-line Eurosceptic views of the Bennites on the Labour Front Bench and the right-wing nationalists in our party are a minority in this Parliament. Will she therefore proceed courageously on that basis in the formidable task that lies ahead of her?

The Prime Minister: We are working to ensure that we get a good agreement for the United Kingdom—an agreement that delivers on the vote that the people took in the referendum to leave the European Union, to bring an end to the jurisdiction of the European Court, to bring an end to free movement and to bring an end to sending vast sums of money every year to the European Union and that does it in way that protects jobs and ensures that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. We are working for that deal, and when we come back with a deal, I would hope that everybody across the whole House will put the national interest first and not only look at a good deal for the future of the United Kingdom, but remember that having given the decision on whether we stay in the European Union to the British people, and the British people having voted to leave, it is our duty to ensure that we leave.

Q7. [906976] **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): Yesterday, we marked the start of Baby Loss Awareness Week. Oliver Gill was 24 weeks old when he lost his life to cancer on Christmas day 2010. Since then, his parents Andy and Jennifer have, through the charity LoveOliver, raised well in excess of half a million pounds to fund research into childhood cancers and provide much-needed emotional and practical support for families affected by those terrible illnesses. The Prime Minister will know, having met them in 2016, what a remarkable couple they are. Will she join me today in thanking them for all that they have done and continue to do?

The Prime Minister: It is very good of the hon. Gentleman to raise that issue. I pay tribute to other Members across the House who have put clear emphasis on this issue and ensured that, in Baby Loss Awareness Week and outside it, we recognise the tragedies that sadly take place and the circumstances that are faced by too many families in this country. I am very happy to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's constituents and the amazing work that they have done in raising the funds that he has referred to. We do not want anybody to have to face and deal with this, but out of such a terrible tragedy has come the good of that fundraising, which can help others. I hope that his constituents are proud of what they have done.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): In Somerset, we have been working for years to pay down the huge debts left by the Lib Dems when they last ran county hall, which means that funding for many essential services is now being withdrawn. Will the Prime Minister meet me and Somerset colleagues to discuss this challenge and will she look favourably on our bid to fully retain business rates from April 2019?

The Prime Minister: I understand that the issue of business rates and the bids to which my hon. Friend has referred, from Somerset and others, are currently being assessed. A decision will be announced alongside the

local government finance settlement later this year. I can tell my hon. Friend that I have already received representations from a Somerset Member of Parliament on the issue, but I am sure that Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will be willing to meet him and others to discuss it further. I am sure that they will be happy to sit down and discuss the details.

Q8. [906977] **Mr Ronnie Campbell** (Blyth Valley) (Lab): In 2010, after the crisis of the banks, the national debt stood at £768 billion. Now that the Tories have been in for 10 years, albeit five of them with the wishy-washy Liberals, can the Prime Minister tell the House how much the debt is today?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised the issue of debt, and it is an important issue to raise. What the Government are doing is seeing that we will actually—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman does not need to ask me the question if he has the figure already. What the Government are doing is ensuring that debt is going to fall, and, crucially, we have seen a reduction in our deficit of three quarters under this Conservative Government. The hon. Gentleman should not look quite so pleased with himself when he starts to think about what a Labour Government would do to our debt in the future, which is take us back.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The 120 soldiers who will march through the north door of Westminster Hall straight after PMQs are actually representing the 3,000 who are currently deployed in 28 countries around the world. I am delighted that the Prime Minister—and, I hope, colleagues from across the House as well as staff from the Palace—will be there to welcome them and thank them for all that they do. Can we at that time remember these people—First, the families without whose support their deployment would not be possible; secondly, those who are returning from overseas, injured both mentally and physically; and thirdly, those comrades who will never return?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend puts his point extremely well. Of course we are proud of everything that our servicemen and women do, and I, and other Members, will be pleased to welcome those servicemen and women and give thanks to them in the way that we can here in the House. However, my hon. Friend is absolutely right: we should never forget the families of those servicemen and women, and we should ensure that we support them. We should also recognise the importance of supporting those who return with injuries—some, of course, physical, and some mental—and of ensuring that we recognise both physical and mental injuries. We should never forget those who have laid down their lives for our freedom and security.

Q9. [906978] **Anna McMorris** (Cardiff North) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House will have been horrified at the sight of mothers feeding their chicks to death with plastic because of the tons of waste that we pump into our oceans every day. We must take urgent action, but our waste system is broken. Will the Prime Minister commit herself today to working with me to stop this tide?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has raised a very important issue. As she will know, the question of plastics is one that the Government are taking extremely seriously. Our 25-year environment plan includes a pledge to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste such as microbeads and straws. There are shortcomings in the current regulations relating to plastic recycling and how we incentivise better packaging designs and material choices. We will consult on our proposals later in the year, and we will of course consider any ideas from Members about how we can ensure that we are dealing with the scourge of plastic.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) has just won an award for her commendable work on speech and language services, so she should be a celebrated denizen of the House. I call Rebecca Pow.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Thank you so much, Mr Speaker; I will save a question about that for later.

As the Prime Minister will know, the Agriculture Bill comes to the Chamber today, and it presents a great opportunity to rethink our land use policy and everything about the way we run our land. Does the Prime Minister agree that it demonstrates that this Government are leading the way in supporting a sustainable biodiverse environment and supporting our farmers and food producers and our rural communities—especially those in Taunton Deane?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend and commend her on all the work she does on issues relating to the environment. She is absolutely right: leaving the European Union and the common agricultural policy enables us to take another look at our support for farmers and their use of the land, and as we do that to address issues such as the impact on the environment. It means we are able to ensure not only that we see the sustainable environment and biodiversity to which my hon. Friend refers, but that we are a generation that leaves the planet in a better state than we found it.

Q13. [906982] **Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Ind): We have heard this week that the world is facing ecological and human disaster from climate change and that radical transport reforms are vital for our future. Will the Prime Minister give her personal support to the proposed GB Freight Route rail scheme, which would take some 5 million lorry journeys off our roads each year, cutting thousands of tonnes of CO₂ and other emissions that are contributing to global warming and poisoning the air we breathe?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the need for us to ensure that we get freight off our roads and on to the railways. There are real benefits in doing that, both for the environment and in relation to congestion, and we are investing more money in the strategic freight network. I will have to look into the specific proposal the hon. Gentleman has raised, but I can assure him that the principle of ensuring we are encouraging freight on to our railways and off our roads is a good one.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The House will have heard the Japanese Prime Minister say that Britain would be welcomed into the trans-Pacific partnership with open arms. Does the Prime Minister agree that post-Brexit it would be wonderful if our country could meet Japan's embrace?

The Prime Minister: Obviously I have spoken to the Japanese Prime Minister about this issue, as I have spoken to other Prime Ministers of countries involved in the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. I am very pleased that they want to welcome us into that trade agreement with open arms, and we stand ready to do exactly that.

Q14. [906983] **Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): Last week, a judge was unable to make a secure accommodation order for a young man involved in gangs who has psychiatric problems and is at serious risk of harm. The judge said that "an opportunity to help him and keep him safe" was being lost, and added:

"Like many colleagues I am dismayed, frustrated and outraged, and deeply worried that we will have blood on our hands."

On World Mental Health Day, will the Prime Minister guarantee that she will investigate this case and make sure action is taken and also guarantee that no other vulnerable children will be left in such a terrible situation in future?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that we are all concerned about the particular case the hon. Lady raises. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will be happy to meet her to discuss it and look at the issues it raises. We want to ensure that support is available for vulnerable people, particularly vulnerable young people.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The effect of the recent tsunami, earthquake and volcano at Palu in Indonesia's Sulawesi islands has been devastating, and the welcome response from our embassy and Department for International Development includes two RAF A400M aircraft and supplies, as well as a team of humanitarian workers who are out there now. "Teman yang membantu saat dibutuhkan adalah teman sebenarnya": a friend in need is a friend indeed. Will my right hon. Friend join me in sending our condolences to President Jokowi, and our thanks to British citizens and JCB for their help, and will she encourage DFID to do even more, including extending the matching of funding from the Disasters Emergency Committee Indonesia tsunami appeal?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises again the important issue that was referred to by the Leader of the Opposition earlier. Of course our condolences go to all those who have lost loved ones in the terrible disaster that has taken place, and to those who have been affected by it in whatever way. We commend all those who have been working there to bring support, aid and help to those who are affected, and we recognise the significant contribution that has been made by British volunteers and companies and by our armed forces. The Department for International Development has already made some commitments in relation to match-funding the money that the Disasters Emergency Committee is raising, but it will of course continue to look at what support it can give.

Q15. [906984] **Emma Dent Coad** (Kensington) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister please update the House on the progress being made to appoint independent panel members—as agreed with, among others, the Muslim Council of Britain—for the inquiry on Islamophobia in the Conservative party?

The Prime Minister: I can say to the hon. Lady that issues relating to any particular concerns or allegations that have been raised in the Conservative party are properly investigated and considered through the new code of conduct that we have introduced. Every complaint that has been made is being or has been investigated, and appropriate action has been taken, including in some cases suspending and expelling members. We are also taking further steps. We are working in conjunction with TellMAMA, making diversity training more widely available and improving how local associations deal with complaints. There should be no place in this country for discrimination, and it is right that as a political party we are working to ensure that we take action when any complaints are made about those within our party.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): In March, colleagues and I met the Prime Minister to discuss sleep-in shifts, and I thank her very much for her focus. I appreciate that Ministers are still in discussions since the Court of Appeal ruled not to uphold the Unison case, but in the absence of clarity, some local authorities are now reverting to paying a single through-the-night rate, whereas we have rightly said that people should be paid the national minimum wage. Please will the Prime Minister and her Ministers tackle this as urgently as possible? Also, I am not sure that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is interpreting the Court of Appeal's ruling either.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, which she and others have raised on a number of occasions in the House. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is looking urgently at the issue, but as I understand it, a case relating to this matter is going to the Supreme Court, and we will of course have to consider any outcome of those court proceedings.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): In a few minutes' time, 57 Members of all political parties will be launching an important new report on acquired brain injury. This is a hidden epidemic that affects more than 1.3 million people in our country. On average, every primary school class in this country will have at least one child who has a brain injury, and they are sometimes unaware of this.

The good news is that if we get good rehabilitation to every single person affected, we can save the NHS £5 billion a year. Will the Prime Minister meet with me and others involved in the group? And I do mean her: I understand that she often wants other Ministers to meet people on her behalf, and that she is very busy, but this affects our prisons, our schools, our armed forces and the whole of Government. We can save lives, and give people a better quality of life, but we can only do it if we join up the dots.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman speaks with passion about this issue, and rightly so. It is an important issue, and I will ensure that he is able to bring that information appropriately to Ministers. He makes a point that covers not only this issue but other issues in Government too. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), is working to ensure that on issues such as this we see joined-up working between Government Departments to ensure that the right action is being taken. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is chuntering from a sedentary position, "Meet with you." It seems to be his preferred mantra of the day, and doubtless it will now be recorded in the *Official Report*.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Does the Prime Minister share my concern that drugs-related deaths in Kent have doubled in the past three years and that the rise in county lines operations means that there are now 48 separate gang operations there? Does she agree that it is important for the Home Office to put more priority on ensuring that we win the war on drugs?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I understand that a new co-ordination centre is being set up to ensure that the work on county lines that the National Crime Agency has been leading is properly integrated with the work of the forces involved. I am pleased to say that we saw a recent case in Birmingham in which an individual was sentenced to 14 years for having effectively enslaved three children to sell drugs for them as part of this county lines approach after having pleaded guilty to charges of modern slavery. We recognise that the problem is growing, and the Home Office is taking action.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Nearly 70% of all children excluded from school have special educational needs or a disability, and the reason cited for the exclusion of a fifth of all excluded children is "other"—a category for which no further information is held. Does the Prime Minister agree that this unfolding national crisis is totally unacceptable? Will she commit to stopping the use of that category, which encourages off-rolling in our schools? Will she press Ofsted to ensure that its new framework supports and encourages inclusive schools and an education for all our children?

The Prime Minister: We want to ensure that every child is in the right school setting for them. For many children with special educational needs that will mean a mainstream school, but for others that will be in a special school. I recognise the hon. Gentleman's point about exclusion, about which we do have concerns. That is why a review of exclusions is being undertaken by my former colleague the previous Member for Crewe and Nantwich, who took a particular interest in this area as Children's Minister, and we will look carefully at the results of the review.

Points of Order

12.51 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In answer to a question about school funding, the Prime Minister repeated the statistic about 1.9 million children being in good or outstanding schools that was proven not necessarily the full truth only this week following investigation by the shadow Secretary of State for Education. The UK Statistics Authority has also proven the number not to be true. Will you advise, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her perspicacity and her fleetness of foot in raising this matter immediately after Prime Minister's questions. As the House will know, I have many roles here, but they do not include that of "truth commissioner". Each Member is responsible for the accuracy of what he or she says in the House, and if a Member, including a Minister, thinks that he or she has erred, it is that Member's responsibility to correct the record. Meanwhile, the hon. Lady has put her thoughts on record, and she will have to content herself with that for now.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The day would not be complete without a point of order from Mr Peter Bone.

Mr Bone: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Unusually in Prime Minister's questions—or at any time in the House—a hon. Member held up a placard with a slogan on it. What was coincidental is that I understand that a photographer, to whom I am sure you had given permission, was taking photographs from the Gallery above me. I wonder whether you would investigate that coincidence, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: That is a coincidence. The House photographer was working in the Gallery, but I did not note of what the House photographer took pictures. More particularly, as the hon. Gentleman has raised a perfectly proper point, the Chair has to judge in the circumstances of the time whether it is best to intervene or simply to allow matters to proceed. I felt that the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell) might have, as it were, luxuriated in the lather of further attention if I had commented on the matter, but he was behaving in a mildly disorderly manner. As he knows, I am a little concerned that his propensity to consume very hot curry might be encouraging him in this somewhat untoward behaviour, from which I hope he might desist when he gets a bit older—he is only a young, new Member.

We will leave it there for now, but I am sure that the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), who regards his colleagues and those who work in the service of the House highly, would not cast aspersions on the integrity of a House Officer and, as it happens, a superb photographer—[*Interruption.*] Oh Mr Campbell, you must compose yourself; we are at an early stage in our proceedings.

BILL PRESENTED

RAILWAYS (FRANCHISES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Farron, supported by Sir Edward Davey and Tom Brake, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to terminate a rail passenger services franchise agreement in certain circumstances; to repeal section 25 of the Railways Act 1993; to make provision for local franchising authorities in England; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 271).

Criminal Records (Childhood Offences)

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

12.55 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the criminal records of persons aged under 18 on the day an offence was committed; and for connected purposes.

I am bringing forward this Bill to highlight the need for reform of the rules in England and Wales on the disclosure of offences committed in childhood. I became involved in the issue after being approached separately by two of my constituents. Minor incidents during their teenage years, one leading to a caution and another to a police warning, were showing up on their Disclosure and Barring Service checks and causing risk-averse employers to turn them down for work in healthcare and schools.

We have one of the most punitive approaches in the world to childhood criminal records, and the case for change is strong. Support for reform has come from many quarters, including the Select Committee on Justice, the Ministry of Justice's Charlie Taylor review, the Law Commission, and a number of charities and campaigning organisations. The system has been extensively litigated on several occasions and was ruled to be unlawful by the Court of Appeal, and a Supreme Court judgment is imminent. Whether the Government win their case or not, the current approach is not working, and change is needed.

Convictions can potentially become spent, meaning that they no longer have to be declared to employers and do not appear on basic criminal records checks, but rehabilitation periods can be lengthy and some types of conviction can never become spent. Even spent convictions and cautions continue to appear on standard and enhanced DBS checks, which are accessible to an expanding list of employers and organisations, including the care sector, the NHS, schools and financial regulators. Some cautions and convictions can be filtered from a standard and enhanced check, meaning that they no longer appear, but the filtering system is limited. If a person has committed two offences, no matter how minor, they will not be filtered, and there is a long list of offences that can never be filtered. In one of the cases considered in the recent Supreme Court litigation, a boy hit a school bully and was charged with actual bodily harm. ABH is an offence that cannot be filtered, so that will appear on his DBS record for life.

A key problem is that we have no distinct criminal records system for children. Apart from some limited differences providing for slightly shorter rehabilitation periods and other timeframes, children are subject to the full rigours of the disclosure system that I have outlined. Records relating to under-18 offences are retained for life. I believe that the childhood criminal records system in England and Wales is anchoring children to their past and preventing them from moving on from their mistakes. It is acting as a barrier to employment, education and housing. It is therefore working against rehabilitation, undermining a core purpose of the youth justice system. The current rules also perpetuate inequality. The Government's race disparity audit concluded that

children from a black and minority ethnic background are sadly more likely to end up with a criminal record. A system that is unduly penal in its treatment of such records has a harder and more disproportionate effect on BME communities. Similar points can be made about children who have spent time in care.

A report by the Standing Committee for Youth Justice examined the treatment of childhood criminal records in 16 comparable jurisdictions. Ours was the most punitive of all those examined, including every one of the US states considered in the report. Children in England and Wales are more likely to receive a criminal record and, according to the charity Unlock, the effect of that record is more profound and lasts longer than anywhere else in Europe. We need a fairer, more proportionate and flexible system that protects the public without unduly harming people's opportunity to change and turn their lives around. We need wide-ranging reform, not a piecemeal response to losing a court case.

I acknowledge that children who commit very serious crimes should be excluded from the reforms, but careful consideration should be given to where to draw the line. With that caveat, a new distinct system for childhood criminal records could include the following: first, it could reduce the period before an offence can become spent; secondly, it could restrict the circumstances in which police intelligence relating to events in childhood can be disclosed; thirdly, it could scrap the rule that provides that someone with more than one offence can never have their offences filtered out of a DBS check; and, fourthly, it could reduce the list of offences that are never eligible to be filtered from such a check.

Even some offences that sound serious can result from relatively minor episodes. For instance, a child who pushes over another child in the playground and takes their phone could technically be guilty of robbery. Other reforms that should be considered include the introduction of a discretionary system for filtering those offences that are deemed to be too serious for automatic filtering, with an independent review process. I appreciate the concern about introducing a discretionary, and hence administrative, element to the system, and the cost and time that that could involve, but both Scotland and Northern Ireland include such an element in their legal systems, and it could really help in hard cases when the context in which the offence was committed can show it in a completely different light from how it first appears.

A further reform that has been floated is a provision for the deletion of childhood offences from police computers altogether, if certain conditions are met, perhaps along similar lines to the judicial rehabilitation process that operates in France. I know that that sort of change would give peace of mind to many who feel that their lives have been ruined by their childhood convictions.

I fully accept that those who commit criminal offences in childhood should face prosecution and punishment. If they have the capacity, they must face the consequences of their actions. But, except in cases of really serious criminal offences, I just do not believe that it is fair for people to have their entire lives blighted by the poor judgments and mistakes that they made in childhood. The sad fact is that many of us make bad choices and foolish decisions when we are young. Thankfully, for the vast majority of us that does not result in involvement

with the criminal justice system, but for those children who do end up with convictions, it should not mean a life sentence.

Many people in that situation have the potential to make a big success of their lives and contribute positively to our economy, public services and society, but they are being held back by convictions, cautions or warnings for minor offences committed many years ago when they were completely different people from the adults they have now become, and those offences should have no relevance for the careers that they now wish to pursue. The situation can be a cause of shame, anxiety and distress. People's past is robbing them of hope for their future. Putting up unnecessary barriers that deter or prevent people from working in sectors such as education, the NHS, social care or the City means that the country is losing out on real talent and energy. I have felt genuinely inspired by what constituents have told me about how they have turned their lives around. They are studying at university or doing an apprenticeship—they are aspiring to a better life.

I am introducing the Bill because I believe that if we are here to do anything in this Chamber, it is to ensure that this country is a place where people have opportunity. We are here to make sure that the constituents we represent have the chance to get on and make a success of their lives—to go as far as their talents and hard work will take them. If we are going to be serious about giving people a chance in life, that should include giving them a second chance. Lord Trimble once said:

“Just because you have a past, doesn't mean you can't have a future”.

The reforms that I am advocating would help to remedy a grave injustice in our legal system. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Theresa Villiers, Victoria Prentis, Sir Bernard Jenkin, Mr Nigel Evans, Mr Iain Duncan Smith, Dr Phillip Lee, Mr David Lammy, David Hanson, Kate Green, Liz Saville Roberts, Jim Shannon and Sir Edward Davey present the Bill.

Theresa Villiers accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 October, and to be printed (Bill 272).

Agriculture Bill

Second Reading

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the names of the representatives of the official Opposition.

1.6 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

We are lucky in all four nations of the United Kingdom to have the best farmers in the world producing the best food in the world. This, the first comprehensive agriculture Bill for five decades, will provide those farmers with a new platform to modernise agriculture; to be able to produce, sell and export more food; and, at last, to receive the rewards that they deserve for their environmental work and the other public goods that they provide.

I am grateful for the enormous amount of hard work that has gone into the preparation of the Bill. I am grateful to the civil servants at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and I am grateful to those non-governmental organisations that contributed to our consultation paper “Health and Harmony”. Above all, I am grateful to our farmers, who are Britain's backbone and on whom we are reliant for the food that we enjoy and for the health of our rural economy and society. Every measure in the Bill is designed to ensure that our farmers receive the support that they deserve to give us the healthy food that we enjoy and the beautiful rural environment on which we all depend.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): In the course of his remarks, will my right hon. Friend reassure me that the Bill will be a vehicle for the support of common land, which accounts for 20% of our areas of special scientific interest and nearly 40% of open access, but which is nevertheless the subject of fragile traditional systems?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to meet some farmers who farm common land in the Lake district, and the particular work that they and others who farm common land do, to ensure both that traditional agricultural methods continue and that environmental benefits survive and are enhanced, is critical. We can provide for them with enhanced methods of support.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): In April this year, the Secretary of State said that food production is “ultimately about health”, and I agree with him. That being the case, will he explain why he has not listed public health as one of the outcomes in clause 1? Will he think again about putting public health right at the heart of the Bill and his policies?

Michael Gove: It is crucial that we all recognise that food production in this country is critical to the improvement of public health. My Department is working with the Department of Health and Social Care and others to ensure that, not only in this Bill but in other measures that we take, we put the importance of improving

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public health at the heart of everything that we do. The hon. Lady will be familiar with the actions that we have already taken on air quality, and she will also know that we are launching a food strategy, the first aspect of which I announced at the Conservative party conference last week: measures to ensure that we deal effectively with food waste and that healthy and nutritious food is provided to those who need it.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Secretary of State was just speaking about the commons, and many of the farmers on the commons are sheep farmers. Would he care to say whether the report in *The Times* that large numbers of sheep will have to be slaughtered in the event of no deal is correct?

Michael Gove: *The Times* is a great newspaper of record, but I did not recognise today's report. Sheep do have to be slaughtered eventually to ensure that upland farmers and sheep farmers more broadly can get a fair price for the sheepmeat they produce. Indeed, our Bill has specific provisions to ensure that all farmers get a fair price in the market and that we can intervene where necessary to safeguard their economic interests.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Michael Gove: I will give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) and then to my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne).

Mr Prisk: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is right to highlight the important role of farmers. I have met many of my local farmers and other quality food producers, and the question they have put to me in recent weeks is how will the new regime enable them to compete against often cheaper and often lower quality imports?

Michael Gove: This Government have emphasised that we will ensure that the high environmental and animal welfare standards of which we are so proud and which our farmers uphold are defended. We will not enter into trade or other agreements that undercut or undermine the high standards on which British agriculture's reputation depends.

Mr Dunne: My right hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. I congratulate him on his opening remarks. Speaking as a farmer and for the many farmers I represent in my constituency, we are heartened to hear that he is putting farmers front and forward in the Bill. Further to his response to our hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), will he elaborate on the extent to which food security will be improved by the Bill, to ensure that we protect a viable agricultural sector in this country?

Michael Gove: Food security is vital. Throughout the history of the United Kingdom, food security has depended on both quality domestic production and access to food

from other markets. Some 60% of our food, and 75% of the food capable of being grown or reared on our shores, comes from the United Kingdom, but of course we also have access to food from other nations, and it is vital that we continue to do so. The Government's approach as we leave the European Union is designed to ensure both that we have the best possible access to European markets—I am sure that the House knows that we import more than we export to the EU—but that we take opportunities for our farmers to secure new markets. Critically—I am sure the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) will be interested to hear this—the sheepmeat sector not only has significant exposure to the EU, but benefits from trade deals with the middle east and the far east, where there is a growing market for the high-quality lamb and mutton that we produce in this country. Leaving the EU therefore gives us an opportunity not just to maintain our existing trading links, but to expand them.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State not accept that, as we approach Brexit, there are concerns about food shortages and barriers to trade and to imports that may be followed by an open market situation where agriculturalists and farmers are subjected to low-price competition and perhaps questions about quality? Those investing in agriculture will face both demands for greater production and intense competition, and will that not create real problems for the industry?

Michael Gove: I absolutely take on board the hon. Gentleman's points, but we have some of the most productive, commercially successful and progressive farmers in this country ready to take advantage of both new markets and increasing demand among UK consumers and UK producers for high-quality UK produce. Supermarkets are often criticised in this House, but I think it is notable that UK supermarkets, from the Co-op to Waitrose, are increasingly responding to the demand from UK consumers for UK-sourced produce.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Is it not true that the high standards we have in this country and some of the niche products we produce are what make our exports so attractive, so the Bill, by creating a greener agricultural system and rewarding farmers for doing the right thing in managing our environment for the long run, is good not only for our economy, our environment and our people, but for trade?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes the case brilliantly. Members of the House will be familiar with the work of the Soil Association, which under its current leader, Helen Browning, manages to secure export markets for high-quality British pigmeat in Germany and beyond on the basis of doing precisely what my hon. Friend describes: meeting demand for high-quality organic produce and trading on the basis of the United Kingdom's reputation for high environmental standards.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I am happy to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies), then my right hon. Friends the Members for

East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) and for Wokingham (John Redwood), and then my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston).

Mr Speaker: Order. The approach the Secretary of State is taking is most engaging, but it is not necessary for him to conduct an orchestra in proceeding with the debate, nor is it necessary to give a precise chronological guide to his intended order of taking interventions. Nevertheless, it is a notable eccentricity, which the House might enjoy. I call Sir Hugo Swire.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I am most grateful to you, Mr Speaker, as I think you have just given me an earlier slot than my right hon. Friend was indicating so effortlessly, like Herbert von Karajan.

My right hon. Friend just talked about supermarkets' desire to stock more British and locally sourced products, which if true is manifestly a good thing. Will he commit to conducting a root and branch overhaul of food labelling and the country of origin system, which is currently misleading and has often been abused? The British consumer deserves to know where food is produced and where it is packaged and not to be misled by labelling.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. Traceability and knowing the provenance of our food are vital. Outside the European Union, we can reform our food labelling system so that we have greater honesty about where our food comes from. He gives me an opportunity to say also that, as the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), made clear yesterday, we are looking urgently at how we reform labelling to ensure that the safety of the consumer is guaranteed. Recent tragic events underline the need for action, and we will act.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Why does schedule 3 give too wide-ranging powers to Welsh Ministers to offer financial support to food production and food-related businesses that are denied to England? Will my right hon. Friend not speak for England? He is England's Agriculture Minister. Surely he can trust himself with those important powers. Does he not understand that we really do want more food production domestically and locally?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for making two important points. First, at the beginning of the Bill we stress that grants can be made by any Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to improve food productivity in the United Kingdom, but we have also made provisions so that the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly can follow their own policies in their devolved Administrations in tune with the principle of respecting the devolution settlement across the United Kingdom. I regret that the Scottish Government have not taken advantage of such provisions, despite repeated lobbying from Members of Parliament who represent Scottish farming constituencies. I hope that the Scottish Government and the excellent Minister, Fergus Ewing, will pay attention to the demands from my hon. Friends, who have been crystal clear that the Bill provides a greater degree of

clarity and certainty about food production and the environment than the Scottish Government have yet been capable of providing.

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Davies.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I preferred the way my right hon. Friend was conducting matters, as I would have been called first.

Is a specific, ring-fenced budget for agriculture to be agreed under the Bill? Will there be ring-fenced provision for the devolved Governments in times to come?

Michael Gove: I do not know whether I am Karajan, Furtwängler or Mahler, but one thing I do know is how vital it is to listen to Welsh male voices, such as my hon. Friend's. He is absolutely right. That is why shortly we will publish the terms of reference for a review of funding across the United Kingdom. I can guarantee, however, that agricultural funding will not be Barnettised, and the generous—rightly generous—settlement that gives Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales more than England will be defended. More than that, I underline in particular the fact that we provide for all UK farmers a greater guarantee of future funding than farmers anywhere else in the European Union enjoy. Our funding is guaranteed until 2022, whereas in the EU the current common agricultural policy is guaranteed only to 2020. UK farmers have greater financial certainty than farmers anywhere else in Europe.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The chief medical officer, Dame Sally Davies, has described antimicrobial resistance as a "catastrophic threat", and the Secretary of State will know that it is not only in human healthcare but sometimes in farming that we see inappropriate use of antimicrobials, thus increasing the risk that we will lose their benefit to human health. Will he use the Bill as a vehicle to drive down further inappropriate antimicrobial prescribing in agriculture and to incentivise farmers who do the right thing? Will he also make sure that we are not exposed to products from places around the world where antimicrobials are used wholly inappropriately, including with environmental contamination?

Michael Gove: The Chair of the Select Committee on Health and Social Care makes an absolutely important point. I have had the opportunity to talk to Dame Sally Davies, who has written a brilliant short book about the vital importance of dealing with antimicrobial resistance. I should also pay tribute to Lord O'Neill, who led work under Prime Minister David Cameron on this. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the Bill contains provisions to provide support and payments to farmers who take the appropriate animal health and welfare measures to ensure that we can fight the overuse of antibiotics, which is both a threat to human and animal health, and an environmental danger.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): May I go back to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) about schedule 3, which gives specific powers to Wales? Is the Secretary of State telling the House that those specific powers are available to England as well?

Michael Gove: The powers in Wales are different, but we have powers for improving productivity and providing farmers with the grants, support and loans they need not just to improve productivity but to ensure that producer organisations can work effectively in the market to secure for UK farmers, whether in England or in Wales, all the advantages they need to market effectively and secure the right price for their product.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Secretary of State use the new system of farm support to discourage the intensive farming methods that can lead to low welfare standards and the overuse of antibiotics?

Michael Gove: At the heart of everything we wish to do is making sure that we have an ethical approach and that farmers in the UK, who, overwhelmingly, are doing the right thing and leading the way in progressive farming, are supported. One thing I should say, which I believe is mentioned in the policy statement that accompanied the publication of this Bill, is that Dame Glenys Stacey is leading a review of farm inspection, because one problem we have at the moment is that, notwithstanding the good efforts of our field force, the level and intensity of farm inspection is not what we need it to be in order to ensure the very highest animal welfare and environmental standards.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Gove: I shall seek to make some progress, because I know that more than 30 Government Members and some 14 Opposition Members wish to speak in this debate. I hope the House will recognise that I have been generous in accepting interventions. I will say a little more about the contents of the Bill before, of course, listening to the contributions in this debate.

I should preface my remarks by saying that I want to pay a particular tribute not just to my predecessors in this role, my right hon. Friends the Members for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), for the work they have done to ensure that DEFRA has been well led in recent years, but to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). This week marks his fifth year in DEFRA. I think everyone from across the House will agree that someone who was brought up in farming, who has dedicated his whole life to getting the best possible deal for British agriculture and who has been an exceptionally thoughtful, courteous and wise guide to a succession of DEFRA Secretaries deserves the House's thanks and congratulations. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

I also wish to stress my gratitude to those from devolved Administrations. As we know, sadly there is no Assembly in Northern Ireland, but the excellent civil servants who work in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs have been instrumental in making sure that provisions are there for Northern Ireland in this Bill. I also want to pay tribute to Lesley Griffiths of the Welsh Assembly and Fergus Ewing of the Scottish Government. Lesley Griffiths has taken advantage of the provisions in this Bill, as a number of Members have pointed out, to shape a settlement specific for Wales. I am delighted that the Labour Government

in Wales are supporting the Bill, even if not every Labour Member here is taking the same pragmatic and positive line.

This Bill will set a clear direction for the future of agriculture. It will ensure that farmers have time to make the appropriate changes required: there will be a seven-year transition period from 2021 in order to enable our farmers to take advantage of the new opportunities that this Bill provides. We believe that strikes the right balance between addressing the urgency of the need for change in order to reward farmers better for the environmental and other public goods that they provide, and providing people with an opportunity to change their business model, if necessary, in order to take advantage of those changes in a staged and appropriate way.

It is striking that during the consultation we undertook on what should replace the common agricultural policy there was a universal embrace of the need for change; not one of the submissions we received argued that the CAP status quo should remain. It is striking also that in the pages of *The Guardian* George Monbiot, not naturally a friend or supporter of Conservative Governments, points out that this legislation takes us in the right direction. It is striking also that the National Farmers Union has pointed out that although it understandably would like to see more detail about how these schemes would operate—that detail will be forthcoming—it, along with the Country Land and Business Association, The Wildlife Trusts and Greener UK, welcomes the direction in which this Government are taking agriculture.

Of course, one reason why no one can defend the current system is that it allocates public money—taxpayers' money—purely on the basis of the size of an agricultural land holding. As we know, many of the beneficiaries are not even UK or EU citizens, but foreign citizens who happen to have invested in agricultural land. Many people have made the point, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire have done today, that we must support our upland farmers particularly well. At the moment, the CAP does not give the bulk of its funds to those who are farming in marginal or upland areas; it gives the bulk of its funds to major landowners. It is a simple matter of social justice and economic efficiency that we need to change that system.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The approach my right hon. Friend has adopted of building the big tent coalition in support of the Bill's principal aims and objectives is the right one. However, will he address a concern that I have? Will he confirm that food production and food security are integral parts of the Bill, and that farming and food production are seen as important and not as an attractive add-on to broader environmental issues?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is right about that. When I was visiting an agricultural show recently—that is one of the many pleasures of this job—I was talking to a farmer who, although wholly supportive of the approach we were taking, reminded me that if we want all the environmental benefits that our farmers can produce, because they are responsible for 70% of the landscape of the United Kingdom, we must ensure that farms remain profitable businesses. This Bill will not

only reward farmers for the public goods they provide, but provide a platform for increased productivity, because food production is at the heart of every farm business—as that farmer reminded me, “You can’t go green if you are in the red.”

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State spell out what assurances he can actually give on food standards and various other standards that apply to this Bill? A lot of people want assurances on that and, in particular, environmental issues too.

Michael Gove: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that consumers are increasingly demanding, and rightly so, about the provenance, quality and standards of the food being produced. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon made clear, we have the opportunity to reform our labelling system, to ensure both that human health and safety are better protected than ever before and that people have a guarantee of the circumstances in which their food has been produced.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State is well aware that the UK Government withheld £160 million of convergence uplift money that was due to Scottish farmers. How much lobbying have Scottish Tory MPs done to recover that £160 million? How much of that money have they secured for Scottish farmers?

Michael Gove: I mentioned earlier that an enjoyable part of my job is visiting agricultural shows, where I have had the opportunity of meeting Scottish MSPs, but I have never met a Scottish National party MP at any agricultural show in Scotland that I have visited. I have seen my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) standing up for Scottish farmers. I have seen my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) standing up for Scottish farmers. I have seen my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) standing up for Scottish farmers. I have seen my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) standing up for Scottish farmers. I have visited farms with my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair). We can tell by the representation of Scottish Conservative Members here today, and by the dearth of SNP Members, who stands up for rural Scotland. The hon. Gentleman makes a signal and it shows exactly what the Scottish Government are doing for Scotland’s farmers—sweet zero.

Food production is critical, and making sure that farmers get a fair price for their products is important. For too long, farmers have been price takers, because there has been inadequate information about how supply chains work and inadequate powers to intervene. The Government have a duty to step in to support farmers, and we have in this Bill powers to ensure that the data is there for farmers to get a fair price at the farm gate for their produce and, in the event of severe market disturbances, that we can also intervene to ensure that farmers get a fair price.

There is one other critical thing. I mentioned the role of producer organisations earlier. Collaboration is critical not just in delivering environmental improvements at

landscape scale, but in making sure that farmers get a fair price for what they produce. This Bill makes provision for increased collaboration.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am enjoying the speech—not all of it, but most of it—but I hope that the Secretary of State will remember not just to tilt at windmills that are easily demolished, but to take on vested interest that will oppose him. I would like to hear more on the supermarkets. The role of the supermarkets in the agricultural and food sectors in this country is very dominant and sometimes very negative. Is he willing to take them on?

Michael Gove: I appreciate the vital importance of supermarkets and other retailers. The powers that we are taking in this Bill should ensure that farmers get a fair price. However, I do want to stress—I had an opportunity to do so briefly earlier—the increasingly progressive role that those leading our supermarkets and our food retailers are taking. They are responding to consumer demand for more information about where food comes from. They are also responding to some of the criticisms in the past about the uniformity of vegetables that are capable of being sold. The Co-op and others who have responded to Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall’s campaign for wonky veg—I am all in favour of wonky veg—are doing the right thing. The hon. Gentleman is right: we do need to remain vigilant both for the consumer and for the food producer to ensure that we have the right outcomes.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I am glad that the Secretary of State has turned his attention to the food supply chain. He will be aware, I am sure, of the reforms introduced last week by the French Government that will radically alter the power within the supply chain away from supermarkets to the producer. Is that something that the British Government are looking at?

Michael Gove: I am always interested in what we can learn from France. We want to make sure that food and drink, which is our biggest manufacturing sector overall, can continue to be world leading. Critical to that, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned and as I acknowledged in responding to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), is making sure that there is a fair price at the farm gate for our food producers. Our farmers do not want subsidy; what they want is fairness, and that is what this Bill seeks to deliver.

Talking of fairness, I just want to stress the critical importance of recognising what a public good is. There has been some debate over what a public good might mean. It is some time since I studied economics, but public goods have a clear definition: they are non-exclusionary and non-rivalrous. We can all enjoy them, and as we all enjoy them, no one, if they are enjoying a public good, does so at the expense of anyone else. I am talking about clean air, soil quality and making sure that we invest in carbon sequestration, that farmers get supported for the work that they do to keep our rivers clean and our water pure, that the public have access to our glorious countryside and that the contribution that farmers make to animal health and welfare is recognised. We all benefit from those public goods, but, at the moment, our farmers are not adequately rewarded for

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them. We in the UK spend a higher proportion of common agricultural policy funds on rural development and on environmental schemes than any other country in the European Union—I should say that the Welsh Administration lead the way in this—but far too much of our money still goes on coupled support based on hectare payments, rather than on rewarding farmers for what they do and on giving DEFRA the opportunity to intervene to give farmers the deal that they deserve.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab) *rose*—

Michael Gove: I am very happy to give way to—ah—the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George).

Ruth George: I congratulate the Secretary of State on his reading ability. He has mentioned animal welfare. Various Members have asked about the difference between Wales and England. Local abattoirs are very important—as important as farms—to high standards of animal welfare. Will he commit to supporting small abattoirs, a third of which have closed already, in the investment that they need to comply with the regulations and to looking again at DEFRA's decision last week not to award grants to small abattoirs as is being done in Wales?

Michael Gove: It is important that we have a network of abattoirs that enables, wherever possible, sustainable local food production. I know that it is an issue close to the hon. Lady's heart; it is also close to mine. I pay tribute to Patrick Holden and the sustainable farming network for the campaigning work that they have done. We are doing everything we can to support small abattoirs. When it comes to animal welfare, it is also important that we make sure that we have a strong network of official veterinarians guaranteeing the quality of our food. It is also important that we recognise that this Government—originally under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom)—have introduced, or required, CCTV in all abattoirs to make sure that there is no hiding place for animal cruelty. It is critical that we recognise that our farmers thrive on the basis of producing high-quality food with animal welfare at its heart.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In the timeline that was published this morning, it says that higher animal welfare standards will be defined in 2020. Will the Secretary of State assure me that the bar for those will not be set any lower than they are at present? Ideally, they should be considerably higher.

Michael Gove: Absolutely. I recognise that I have been on my feet, although taking questions, for 27 minutes now, so I do want to draw my remarks to close.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) *rose*—

Michael Gove: I must give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Jamie Stone: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that he would be very welcome to come and visit us at the Black Isle show next summer. It is self-evident to me that we cannot do much with the straths and glens in

my constituency other than rear sheep. I want to push him on one other point. Tourism depends on seeing our straths and glens populated with livestock and on vibrant and successful farming. May I push him for his comments on the tourism aspect of agriculture?

Michael Gove: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. I would be delighted to visit the Black Isle show and also to visit Lairg in his constituency, where I know that some of Scotland's finest sheep farmers have an opportunity every year to demonstrate what they can do. He is absolutely right: iconic landscapes from Caithness and Sutherland and Easter Ross through to the Lake District and, indeed, Exmoor and Dartmoor depend for their tourist appeal and for their pull on the human heart on the work of our farmers. It is inconceivable that those iconic landscapes could survive and flourish without the rural, economic and social network that sheep farming and other forms of farming provide. Absolutely, we do recognise that. It is a public good, and public access to our countryside is placed here.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con) *rose*—

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con) *rose*—

Michael Gove: I am happy to give way, but this will probably be the last pair that I give way to.

Alex Chalk: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend. I warmly support this Bill because it incentivises farmers to enhance biodiversity and to promote animal welfare. This is not just a rural issue; it is an urban issue as well. What can he say about how there will be better potential for my constituents in Cheltenham to access this even more diverse and even more beautiful countryside?

Michael Gove: I know how important the environment and animal welfare issues are to my hon. Friend, as he has tirelessly campaigned on them. I also know that his constituents will be able to enjoy improved access to the countryside through the provisions in the Bill. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education is making £10 million available to ensure that more schoolchildren have an opportunity to understand what goes on in our countryside. Making sure that the next generation understands where our food comes from and the vital importance of food production will be absolutely critical. When the Department for Education set up the school food plan and when this Government ensured that all children up to the age of 14 received lessons in where food comes from and in cooking, that was an earnest example of our commitment to ensuring that everyone appreciates the vital importance of our farmers and the work that they do.

Nick Boles: I am seduced by the vision of the future of British agriculture painted by the Secretary of State, but I am puzzled why he wants to take so long before he can get started on it. Why do we have to remain trapped in the limbo of the transition, whereby we will still be trapped in the common agricultural policy when, by joining the European Free Trade Association and the European economic area on our way out of the EU, we could start on his magnificent reforms next March?

Michael Gove: I am delighted to have been able to seduce my hon. Friend. What is striking in the seduction is that, rather than asking for a slower hand, he wants a rough wooing. He makes the best possible case for his proposition, but I must respectfully disagree with him. The transition period, both the one that is being secured as we leave the European Union and the one for our farmers, is the right balance between urgency and space for reform.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): My right hon. Friend was talking about public goods—an approach that I welcome. May I bring him to the question of health? Can he assure me that his Bill will support the production of fruit and vegetables in this country, which is so important to the nation's health?

Michael Gove: Absolutely; the consumption of more fruit and vegetables is critical to improving public health. I am delighted that, thanks to the lobbying of my hon. Friend and so many Conservative Members, we were able to introduce a seasonal workers scheme pilot to ensure that fruit and vegetable growers get the support that they deserve. We will also have new schemes—improved over those that the EU provides—to ensure that the producer organisations that represent our growers continue to do the brilliant job that they do.

I should stress that the Bill will also ensure that the UK can take its seat at the World Trade Organisation and negotiate on behalf of the whole United Kingdom. Some people have suggested that the Bill constitutes a power grab from our devolved Administrations—nothing could be further from the truth. The Bill will empower the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Government and the Scottish Government to do what they believe is right for our farmers, and what is right for our farmers is to move away from a system that has constrained their energy, undermined their enterprise, held back innovation in food production and inadequately rewarded them not only for the food that they provide, but for the environmental and other goods that they provide for us.

The Bill gives us an opportunity to put farming across the United Kingdom on a surer footing, so that we can produce more, sell more and export more, but also hand on our environment in a better state to the next generation. I commend it to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It will be very obvious from the number of people now on their feet that there is a huge demand for time to speak this afternoon. Although we have many hours ahead, I will have to impose a time limit from the very beginning. I give warning now—so that people can throw away pages and pages of their notes—that the time limit will initially be eight minutes, and I anticipate that it might well reduce later.

1.42 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “That” to the end of the Question and add:

“this House, whilst recognising that on leaving the EU the UK needs to shift agricultural support from land-based payments to the delivery of environmental and other public benefits, declines to give a Second Reading to the Agriculture Bill because it fails to

provide a strategy to safeguard the nation's food supply at a time when food poverty and foodbank demand are rising rapidly alongside an epidemic in food-related health inequality, fails to recognise the central importance of UK sustainable food production and supply, leading to a greater reliance on imports, while failing to provide for controls over the production methods, working conditions, or animal welfare and environmental standards in countries from which the UK's food is imported, and, when the natural environment is in crisis, with species decline at an alarming scale, soil degradation and increasingly volatile and extreme weather conditions driven by escalating climate change, provides the Secretary of State with wide-ranging powers but no duties or legally enforceable environmental protection targets, whilst giving Parliament limited ability to scrutinise any changes in the regime, and fails to legislate for current funding to continue until 2022 as Ministers have promised; and is of the opinion that the publication of such a Bill should have been preceded by a full process of pre-legislative scrutiny of a draft Bill.”

This country is in desperate need of an Agriculture Bill that provides certainty and clarity for our food and farming industry, but instead the Secretary of State has laid before us nothing but a huge missed opportunity. There are no targets for environmental improvements or reducing carbon emissions; there is no commitment to producing healthy, home-grown food in a post-Brexit world; and there is no commitment to protecting the people of this country from food poverty at a time when thousands rely on food banks. We need an Agriculture Bill, but we need it to be better than this.

The Labour party absolutely agrees with the need to shift financial assistance in the way proposed by the Bill, from support for simply owning land to the principle of public money for public goods to help those who work our land to restore and improve the natural environment. This has been rightly welcomed by environmental campaigners as a real turnaround in the Government's thinking. I join those campaigners in applauding the Secretary of State in this regard, because—make no mistake—our natural environment is in crisis, with soil degradation, species in alarming decline, increasingly volatile and extreme weather conditions, and air pollution that has remained at illegal levels since 2010. But does the Bill actually match up to the scale of the environmental crisis facing us?

The Bill provides only powers. Clause 1 states that the Secretary of State “may” give financial assistance for environmental purposes—there is no duty or requirement for him to actually do anything. The environmental outcomes we need delivered are not prescribed. There are no targets and no mechanism for setting any targets. No funding is identified in the Bill. No delivery or regulatory bodies will be resourced by it.

Geraint Davies: My hon. Friend is making a marvellous speech. She will be aware of the warning from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that we will reach the 1.5° C threshold in 12 years, by 2030, and of the contribution of cattle and agriculture in general towards our carbon emissions. Does that not underline the importance of having targets, which are so sadly missing from this Bill?

Sue Hayman: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. The report was deeply shocking and the Bill must reflect that urgent action needs to be taken.

Let me bring the Secretary of State's green Brexit dream into the cold light of day. At first contact with the Chancellor and all the other competing demands on

[Sue Hayman]

the Treasury, the reality is that the Secretary of State's green Brexit will soon wither on the vine without any commitment written into the Bill to maintain the current levels of spending. Farmers and green campaigners are in complete alignment on this.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. I had hoped to intervene on the Secretary of State but he refused to let me. I would have told him that many small upland livestock producers in my constituency are really concerned about the lack of detail in the Bill, particularly given that the Secretary of State says that he wants to support them and enhance their profitability. Does my hon. Friend share my concern about when we might get this detail and whether the Government will even consider the different scenarios that Brexit could bring to these upland producers?

Sue Hayman: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There are also many upland farmers in my constituency, and they have raised exactly the same concerns with me.

We know that for farmers to be sustainable environmentally, they must also be sustainable economically. I remind the Secretary of State who the farmer he quoted earlier actually was: Minette Batters, president of the National Farmers Union, who said that farmers cannot be green if they are in the red. Farmers need to be able to invest with certainty over long periods, especially in sectors such as forestry. How can they be expected to stay afloat when the Secretary of State has proved himself unable to make good in the Bill any of the funding promises?

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Lady is making a very sensible point, specifically regarding basic payments for farmers. However, the post-Brexit agricultural policy of the Welsh Labour Government more or less mirrors exactly what has been proposed by the Secretary of State. After the hon. Lady finishes her speech, will she get on the phone to the branch manager, Carwyn Jones, and tell him to introduce a more sensible policy?

Sue Hayman: Well, I think that more powers are provided in this Bill for some Welsh Ministers than for English Ministers. I have had a long discussion with my counterparts in the Welsh Government and will continue to work with them to discuss these points.

Alan Brown: Will the hon. Lady explain why the Welsh Government appear to be supporting this Bill and the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, yet her colleagues are opposing this legislation?

Sue Hayman: As I have said, we believe that greater powers are provided for Welsh Ministers than English Ministers in this Bill; there is more certainty. It is really important that we bring that back.

On Sunday, I attended a harvest festival at my local church, and I am sure that many hon. Members did something similar. I know that the whole House will join me in expressing our thankfulness for everything that the farming community in this country achieves to help feed the nation, often against the odds. After the extreme weather that farmers endured last winter and

this summer, they are probably more affected by climate change than any other sector.

However, agriculture now accounts for 10% of UK greenhouse gas emissions—a larger share than at any time since 1990—and the Committee on Climate Change has reported that there has been virtually no change in agricultural emissions since 2008. This means that agricultural emissions are not on track to deliver the carbon budget savings required by 2022.

Net carbon sequestration from forestry has flatlined but the Bill provides only for mitigating or adapting to climate change. It seems that the Secretary of State has not heard the Committee's call, made only in June, for this Bill to link financial support to agricultural emissions reduction and increased carbon sequestration.

Caroline Lucas: Does the hon. Lady agree that the Bill needs to have a net zero emissions target for the agricultural sector? If we shifted to more support for organic farming, that would help too: organic soils are much better at retaining carbon than intensively farmed soil.

Sue Hayman: The hon. Lady makes a good point. It is critical that we begin looking across all industries to see how we can shift to net zero.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Will the hon. Lady explain how much, according to her calculations, it will cost to achieve net zero in agriculture? Will that be met from general taxation through the Government or through increased food prices at the supermarket?

Sue Hayman: I do not believe that I made that commitment, so it is not something on which I have done calculations at this time.

Continuing to deplete soils, lose pollinators and pollute waters does nothing for farm productivity; that is why we need a Bill that delivers food security as well as environmental outcomes. It is self-defeating and academic to separate those objectives, as the Secretary of State is attempting to do. This is the first time in more than 40 years that a Secretary of State has been directly responsible for the nation's food security, yet food security has drifted off the Government's agenda, and they are not offering any clear vision for the future of our nation's food supply. The Bill is worryingly silent when it comes to food poverty. It says nothing about the balance between the production of healthy and sustainable British food and reliance on imports, the jobs and health and safety of agricultural workers, and preventing trade deals involving lower standards, undercutting British producers.

It is 71 years since the Agriculture Act 1947 was passed by the great post-war Attlee Government. Attlee judged that its author Tom Williams

"effected nothing less than a revolution in British agriculture"

and that

"his place in history is assured as the greatest British Minister of Agriculture of all time".

I remind the House that the purpose of the Act was

"promoting and maintaining...a stable and efficient agricultural industry capable of producing such part of the nation's food and other agricultural produce as in the national interest it is desirable to produce in the United Kingdom, and of producing it at

minimum prices consistently with proper remuneration and living conditions for farmers and workers in agriculture and an adequate return on capital invested in the industry.”

Article 39 of the treaty of Rome set out the aims of the common agricultural policy, including ensuring

“a fair standard of living for the agricultural community...the availability of supplies”,

and that

“supplies reach consumers at reasonable prices.”

It is a matter of strategic national interest and social justice that we should ensure that our country is better able to feed itself with healthy, nutritional food while protecting itself against volatility. That is why it is important for sustainable food production to be a central part of the Bill.

John Redwood: Why did we lose so much market share and end up importing so much food under the CAP?

Sue Hayman: That is a good question, but one to which I do not have a detailed answer—I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman for that. It is a really important point: we were increasing production, but then it began to drop. It is an issue that we need to address. If there is a dramatic reduction in UK food production, greater reliance on imports would result in a lack of control over production, animal welfare, and environmental and working standards.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): The answer lies simply in the tastes of the consumer. We like oranges—we like food that grows abroad but which we do not grow. That demand has grown over the years, so we import more. We should be careful lest we try to search for set levels of output or demand in what is still a market economy.

Sue Hayman: Clearly, we cannot grow everything that consumers would like to purchase in this country, but we can do more to increase the production of food that can be produced in this country. It is important that we protect standards too, and any trading deals should protect the standards that our farmers currently work to.

Simon Hoare: I think the answer will be yes, but does the hon. Lady agree that it will be a hallmark of success for the whole Brexit process if, 10 or 15 years down the line, we find that we are importing no more foodstuffs than we do today, and preferably less because we are producing more?

Sue Hayman: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

I would like to think about health, because the Bill fails to recognise the importance of food and diet for health. Why, when we spend so much money subsidising our food producers, are so many of them on the verge of bankruptcy or breakdown? Why is there so much wasted food when foodbank demand has never been higher? While the quality of our home-produced food has never been higher, why do we have an epidemic of obesity and diabetes? The Bill completely misses the opportunity to tackle those problems. We need a Bill that strengthens and enshrines support for sustainable

food production, promotes healthy outcomes and supports rural economies, because we believe that access to good-quality, healthy food must not be allowed to become the preserve of only those who can afford it.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Given the shadow Minister’s concern about these issues—green Brexit, food, food waste and all those things—it is interesting that she was not given a major slot on the main stage at the Labour conference. In my meetings, I have not come across a single environmentalist or farmer who does not support the initiatives in the Bill.

Sue Hayman: The hon. Lady may recall that the Leader of the Opposition discussed the environment and issues connected with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in his speech.

All over the world, nearly all farmers are supported financially to produce food, and our farmers must be able to compete with them, but to do so they will need the right financial and policy framework so that they are not disadvantaged in a competitive and volatile global marketplace. We need to move away from the current system of direct payments, but if we are to bring in land management contracts, they need to be accessible. The recent delivery of payments to farmers and landowners has been poor, and the hoops that have to be jumped through put many people off signing up in the first place. We need to ensure that the agencies are adequately resourced—only then can they properly help the farmers who need the support that subsidies provide.

Ruth George: Does my hon. Friend agree that, given their excellent relationships with farmers and landscape managers, national parks are ideally placed to provide that network in our national park areas, where so much farming goes on?

Sue Hayman: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. I have discussed that with the Lake District national park, which is in my constituency, and I am sure that there will be other discussions in this area.

Sir Hugo Swire: An important point was made about the number of forms that farmers have to fill in to access funds. Does the honourable not agree that one of the most important things is ensuring the availability of reliable broadband, given that the amount of farming now done online is way in excess of the amount of farming when Clement Attlee was the post-war Prime Minister?

Sue Hayman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that important contribution. It is disappointing that the digital roll-out came before farmers could access it. I would add that mobile connectivity is as important, because when farmers submit their application online, they are sent a text message with a code that they need to put in; if they do not have a mobile signal, they cannot continue with the application. All these things need to be considered before we move forward.

We praise all our farmers for the important role that they play in environmental stewardship. The Secretary of State talked about the fact that the food and drinks industry is such a huge manufacturing sector. It is incredibly important that we get more support for our farmers than the Bill currently offers. At the moment,

[Sue Hayman]

the Bill offers our family farmers just a payoff, which we believe risks leaving our fields to ever larger, more intensive factory farms run by global big business.

It worries me that the vision of the UK as a leading free trade nation with low tariff barriers is completely at odds with the commitment to thriving British food and farming sectors. Combining and delivering those two objectives will be a considerable challenge for this Government, who are and always have been in favour of more deregulation and who have a blind reliance on the free market to deliver social outcomes. Labour will oppose any free trade deal that threatens existing standards: we will fight any such deals tooth and nail.

In conclusion, the development of a new post-Brexit UK agriculture policy is a seminal moment for the future of our environment, our food production and our countryside. Never has it been more important to lift our line of sight and to talk proactively about what we want to see as part of a long-term strategy for food, farming and the environment. Sustainability, above all else, has to be at the forefront of a thriving farming, food and drink sector.

It is right that we shift agricultural support for land-based payments to the delivery of public and environmental benefits, but the Bill sadly falls short in a number of areas. There is no strategy to safeguard our nation's food supply or recognition of the importance of sustainability to reduce the reliance on imports. There is no provision for controls over production methods, working conditions, animal welfare or environmental standards in countries from which our food is imported. The Bill hands wide-ranging powers to the Secretary of State but includes no legally enforceable environmental protection targets, and there is no provision for current agricultural funding to continue until 2022, as Ministers have previously promised.

This House should have had the chance to conduct proper prelegislative scrutiny of the Bill. What we are discussing here is fundamental to the future of British agriculture, and getting it right is crucial. For those reasons, I am afraid that Labour cannot support the Bill's Second Reading, and that is why I strongly urge colleagues to vote for our reasoned amendment tonight.

2.3 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): This is an historic moment, as we last had an agriculture Bill in this House in 1947, since when there have been 15 Prime Ministers and many Governments. We therefore really need to get this Bill right.

The Bill is about agriculture and the environment not just today, but in the future, so I welcome our Secretary of State's commitment on food security. During the Bill's passage, I will look for us to adopt for England provisions similar to those in schedule 3 for Wales to ensure that we can support high-quality food production and high animal welfare standards in England and across the United Kingdom. Food security—the ability to have plenty of food, and good food, for our constituents—is very much a public good, and we will debate that further.

While I very much welcome the Bill, I am disappointed that my Select Committee was not offered the opportunity to subject it to prelegislative scrutiny. However, the Secretary

of State and Ministers should not worry, because we will do our utmost to ensure that we scrutinise the Bill carefully, clause by clause. While the Bill is very good, I am sure that a little tweak here and there will not do it any harm.

I welcome the long transitional period because it gives farmers certainty over that time. We also need to ensure that as we build stewardship schemes, land management schemes and environmental schemes, we also enter into contracts with farmers of at least five to 10 years. Ministers and the Secretary of State might say that we cannot bind successive Governments, but we must ensure that we have a contract in place so that land management and farming can go hand in hand. We talk as though the environment, food production and farming are all separate, but they are not—they are very much combined. I believe that farmers are the original friends of the earth, and we will ensure that we deliver better soil, a better environment and great food while having as much food security as possible in this country.

I also welcome the Bill's attempt to tackle unfairness in the supply chain.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Before my hon. Friend moves on, I share his ambition in those respects, but does he agree that as the general framework for subsidy support or payment for ecosystem services lies in this Bill, and the general framework for the environment will lie in the environment Bill, it is appropriate that issues such as the contracting he describes should be covered in secondary legislation?

Neil Parish: I welcome my right hon. Friend's intervention. He is right that that can be dealt with in secondary legislation, but I am, shall I say, a little bit naturally suspicious, so I am trying to ensure that we get everything covered as soon as possible. I like the Bill's direction of travel towards the environment, but I am convinced that having good, healthy, affordable food is absolutely essential, and that is one of the issues towards which I will maintain my driving forces.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again. The question of how the Select Committee will proceed under his chairmanship seems an important one to resolve. I think that many of us would welcome his driving on that issue, as long as it is done in a way that recognises that we are not trying to build it into the two pieces of primary legislation, which would confuse the issue.

Neil Parish: I will take on board my right hon. Friend's wisdom, and we will look at that as we go through the Select Committee process to ensure that do not do that. I thank him for his intervention.

The Bill very much attempts to tackle unfairness in the supply chain. That is essential. We need to ensure that the groceries code covers all aspects of trade—from the big retailers through to the processors and right down to the big suppliers—so that we can have true fairness in the supply chain. Often, when a consumer buys a product, enough money is paid to the retailer to ensure that there is enough money for the producer, and it is a question of ensuring that that money then gets back to the producer. There is an uneven relationship, with producers often being the weaker partner and not having enough strength in the market.

I welcome the proposals to request data, which will improve transparency in the supply chain, but the way in which that increased transparency will improve fairness in the supply chain remains unclear. Furthermore, there are proposals to streamline support payments and reduce bureaucracy, which I believe we all welcome. I look forward to the Secretary of State and the farming Minister coming before our Select Committee to explain exactly how that can be done. Whether people love or hate the common agricultural policy, there is no doubt that we can have an agricultural policy that suits the four nations of the United Kingdom and that we can devise a better system than the one designed for the 28 countries of the European Union. I have direct knowledge of that, having previously chaired the European Parliament's Agriculture Committee, so I know that we can do better and I look forward to that.

We welcome this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to shape British farming and the environment. We can improve policies such as our stewardship scheme, for example by ensuring that it runs for a minimum of 10 years and involves forestry. We can also ensure that we do not have to work out when a tree is a sapling and when a sapling is a tree. If we want to include water management, our schemes can include planting trees on banks to hold back water and so on. We can do so much better, and I look forward to hearing about that from Ministers.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman, who chairs the Committee on which I serve, agree that there is a real danger that it will be the big landowners and farmers who will be best able to apply for environmental grants? We have to guard against that by reducing bureaucracy, as he has indicated.

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. We have to ensure that applying for grants is simple enough for all farmers, not just the big landowners who can employ offices full of people to do that, and I believe that we can. With some of the ideas coming forward about how we make payments, we can also ensure that, as we transition, family farms and smaller applicants can have less taken from them in the first instance. There are ways we can make this much more palatable.

Upland farming, which the Secretary of State mentioned, is very important, especially because of lamb and beef production. It is coupled with that great environment on the hillside, and we will not be able to pay public money just to keep sheep and cattle on the hillside; we have to ensure that they are profitable. Profit is what will drive this because—this point has already been made—if you are in the black, you can go more green. That is absolutely essential.

We produce great food. We also have a very effective poultry industry, although sometimes that is not mentioned. That is why we can produce good-quality chickens for under £5. Let us look at how we deal with our food industry and our production.

Sir Hugo Swire: Does my hon. Friend agree that post Brexit there will be a real opportunity to buy “British first” through the procurement of British-sourced food?

Neil Parish: My right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour makes a really good point. We must redouble our efforts to encourage our armed forces, our schools

and our health service to procure our high-quality British food. Let us ensure that we can feed our nation with our food, because that is absolutely essential.

I also think that healthy food, as a public good, can be recognised naturally across the piece. This is an agricultural Bill, but if we think about the NHS, we could save nearly £2 billion when we consider the type of healthy food that we can produce. Buying from local producers will allow us to reduce our carbon footprint and improve the environment, so we also need joined-up thinking about future-proofing the Bill. If we weaken our farming sector to the extent that we have to import more food from abroad, there will be many consequences. When we import food from other countries, we also import their water and their means of production, and some countries can little afford that. We have to ensure that we continue to produce good, high-quality food and that, if possible, we produce more of it in future.

2.14 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see so many members of the armed services here to observe the debate—I hope that the Secretary of State was not so alarmed by the prospect of my speech that he called them in.

The Bill lacks a foundation, because as yet there is no Brexit deal and no trade deal. No one here knows what rules will have to be followed in order to allow agricultural produce into the European single market. No one even knows where the UK's borders will be—perhaps in the middle of the Irish sea. It is that uncertainty that is causing the most concern to farmers and other food producers.

There is a need to be prepared, and I acknowledge that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has to try to guess the future framework that will be needed. I appreciate that Ministers have to bring forward proposals for consideration. Being prepared for what is to come seems sensible at first glance. I have to observe, however, that preparing for Brexit is a wee bit like someone blindfolding themselves before jumping off a cliff: they cannot see the horror, but it is still going to hit them pretty hard. I appreciate where Ministers are coming from, but they seem to have gone off a little prematurely. However, that is not all that is wrong with the Bill.

I think it is important that we talk about what agriculture is for, and what it has been for since the first sod was turned: food production. Agriculture is about producing food or it is about nothing. The advantages to the human race of being a species that can produce its own food rather than just hunt or gather it have been immense. There have been some downsides, not least the environmental damage that some farming practices wreak, but agriculture is what has allowed us to build the civilisations and lifestyles that we now have.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Lady, my colleague, will of course be aware that during the recess the British Government appointed a food supplies Minister, in preparation for a no deal Brexit—such is the panic at the heart of the British Government. Is it not somewhat incoherent that in agricultural policy there is not that focus on food production that she mentioned, either from the British Government in relation to England or

[Jonathan Edwards]

from the Labour Government in relation to Wales? The Scottish National party Government in Scotland, however, will maintain basic payments to help farmers produce food.

Deidre Brock: I thank my friend the hon. Member for that intervention. I will be coming to that point shortly.

It is agriculture that gives those of us who are worried about the environmental effects the time and space to do that worrying. Agriculture is what lies behind civilisation, because food production and food security—the nourishment of people who can be productive in other ways because they do not have to find or produce their own food—is what underpins the modern economy. Take away the food supply and we destroy the rest of the economy.

John Redwood: Of course, once we leave the EU we will be able to settle our own schedule of tariffs, including those, if any, that we might wish to impose on European continental food. What level of tariff would the hon. Lady recommend?

Deidre Brock: I am not sure what the right hon. Gentleman is speaking about, because we will also have tariffs imposed on us as a result of these discussions, and they are alarming. Lamb farmers in Scotland are certainly very concerned, and a tariff of something like 46% has been suggested to me.

With the stark warnings about chaos in the chain for imported foods post-Brexit, one would think that domestic food security would be top of the agenda in DEFRA just now. As my friend the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) has just said, the situation is serious enough for a Minister to be appointed to oversee food supplies. That is the kind of ministerial brief we associate with wars in the middle of the last century. With that kind of concern, which is clearly a feature of Whitehall's panic after failing to plan for Brexit, one would think that domestic food production would be getting a look-in now.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): During the recess a constituent of mine was in a care home and saw a poster that said:

“Rationing means a fair share for all of us”.

Does my hon. Friend think that was nostalgia or forward planning?

Deidre Brock: I certainly hope that we will not get to that situation, because it is an alarming thought. I thank my hon. Friend for that point.

Food production is missing from this Agriculture Bill. We have a Bill to regulate agriculture that is silent on the very essence of agriculture. I appreciate that not every aspect of a portfolio area can be present in every piece of legislation and that there will be times when things are missed, but surely we cannot miss out the core point of the legislation. We really cannot talk about how to regulate or support farming unless we also talk about producing food. Agriculture is not agriculture if it is only land management and form filling.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith, that famous farming constituency, is making a powerful speech.

“The Scottish Government's climate change ambitions...pose a bigger threat...than Brexit”.

They are not my words, but those of Jim McLaren of Quality Meat Scotland. Would she care to comment on that?

Deidre Brock: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's intervention, although I do not really appreciate the snide remarks about Edinburgh North and Leith, because people there actually eat and they are interested in food.

Returning to my subject, which was food, there is plenty in the Bill to allow Ministers to gather information about food chains and to interfere where they see fit, but nothing about how it will change the structures or the framework around producing food or how Ministers might want to protect, improve and increase food production, food security or food quality. We really need to know a bit about the direction of travel. There is nothing in the Bill that tells us, and the public pronouncements of the DEFRA Secretary suggest a move away from support for food production—or farming, as I like to call it—towards a style of support that would be perfect for managers of large estates, but not those with less land. Grouse moors could benefit, but farmers will not.

None of that detail is in the Bill. There is nothing even to suggest a route map, far less lay out the steps that the Government intend to take. There is nothing about the proposed support mechanism. That is massively important. A farm in Cambridgeshire is very unlike a farm in the Yorkshire dales and even more unlike a farm in Sutherland, where my parents-in-law live, let alone one on Scotland's islands. Promises were made to Scottish farmers that Brexit would not see them losing cash, at the same time as convergence cash intended for farms in Scotland was being distributed elsewhere, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) mentioned.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The hon. Lady has spent a lot of time criticising this Government's legislation. I would like to ask the question that many of my constituents who are farmers are wondering about: what is the Scottish Government's plan for farming post Brexit? We have not got a clue.

Deidre Brock: I am rather surprised that the hon. Gentleman has not yet read our very sensible proposal for stability and simplicity, which sets out the route map. Let us not forget either that the Scottish Government were the first UK Administration to set out detailed plans for the short and medium term after Brexit. I suggest that he goes online and has a look at our proposal.

Where now are the pledges and promises that were made? Where are the guarantees for Scottish farmers that they will not lose out? Where in this Bill is the guarantee that the cash going to Scotland for Scotland's farmers will not fall under some newly invented Barnett guillotine or that the additional support that has been available for less favoured areas, which is so important to Scotland, will not simply vanish, like so much else that Scotland is due but Whitehall absorbs? Perhaps we

should be looking for a red bus with some numbers on the side and a promise to Scotland's farmers of untold riches to come. Without that certainty from Whitehall and the news that the funding for Scotland's farmers is secure, protected from the Brexit meltdown and protected in the long term, farmers in Scotland cannot start planning for the future, and not even the near future.

I looked at the National Audit Office's report card on DEFRA's progress in preparing for Brexit and it did not make for pretty reading. It was in fact quite stark, saying:

"DEFRA has not been able to make progress in supporting business in their preparations,"

although it makes it clear that this is partly the fault of the Department for Exiting the European Union for choosing to restrict Departments' ability to engage with their stakeholders. But whose fault that is will not concern farmers, nor will it be a great concern for those who would like to see food continuing to appear in their shops. The NAO goes on to point out that no information was available on the DEFRA website about the EU exit or any potential changes following Brexit and that, almost ironically, stakeholders such as farmers had to look to the EU agencies' websites for information about what was likely to follow. The warning about lack of preparedness was pretty stark:

"there is no guidance on Defra's website for businesses exporting food products to the EU. Some of these may have to apply for an export health certificate for the first time and change trading routes so that their products enter the EU through a border inspection post."

The most damning part of the report, though, might be the observation that

"DEFRA does not have a clear vision either for the new services and functions it has to introduce or for the organisation as a whole post-EU Exit".

No clear vision, no plan and no action, but here we are with a Bill to set the future direction. In spite of a 37% increase in the number of legislative staff in the Department, the portfolio board heard in June that

"DEFRA is at high risk of being unable to deliver a full and functioning statute book by end March 2019"

if there is no deal, due to the number of statutory instruments that need to be drafted, but here we are with a Bill that will need further secondary legislation.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I am slightly surprised by the hon. Lady's criticisms of DEFRA. I understood that agricultural policy was devolved in Scotland.

Deidre Brock: Which is of course the very point we are making. I thought that everyone would welcome the opinions of the Scottish National party and the people of Scotland, because of course in this precious Union surely we are all equals, although I will come to points that directly affect Scotland shortly.

DEFRA admitted to the NAO that it will be unable to handle the increase in export health certificates needed for farmers to carry on exporting their produce to the world's largest single market because it is currently done on a spreadsheet that only one person can operate at a time. The Department's long-term ambition is to get up to the same standard of e-certification that other nations use, but the Treasury has not yet seen the business

justification document in order to approve it. I will lay odds that the costs of sorting that out will be more than the spare change down the back of the DEFRA sofa.

If anyone thought that animal exports getting done over was enough bad news, they had better not look at animal imports. The UK will lose access to the EU's TRACES, or trade control and expert system. Data on animal imports will have to be entered manually at border inspection posts, so we can expect higher error rates, delays at borders while manual checks are carried out and an increased biosecurity risk, according to DEFRA's report card from the NAO. Potentially, we will have high-quality beef sitting on one side of the border waiting for its turn on the spreadsheet to get a health certificate for export, while the supermarket lasagne is sitting on the other side waiting for a border guard to punch its information into the system. In the meantime, farmers will be watching their livelihoods disappear, while every truck in the game is held up at the border.

There are two points, parallel to those issues, that are vital to Scotland's food production and marketing. The first is the need for seasonal workers. My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) will go into our concerns about that at length, but I will quickly add that the pitiful pilot scheme announced recently for seasonal workers would have been laughed at, had we not already seen crops rotting in the fields this year for want of workers to pick them. The other issue is the need for protection in global markets. Those needs are being ignored in Whitehall.

The position on geographical indicators and other protections is similar. The EU currently protects Scottish produce in international markets, including Scotch whisky, Scotch lamb, Scotch beef, the cheeses, Stornoway black pudding, and so on. There are similar products elsewhere—the Melton Mowbray pork pie springs to mind, along with Fenland celery and Yorkshire rhubarb. The Minister of State for Trade Policy gave evidence to a Committee of the Scottish Parliament last month, and said that Scotch whisky would continue to be protected because of the importance of Scotch whisky exports to the UK economy, but that the others were basically up for grabs. He said:

"PGIs present quite serious difficulties in free-trade negotiations because some nations regard them as unfair protection or non-tariff barriers to trade."

He went on to say that the issue is not straightforward in trade negotiations because we would have to demonstrate market penetration or recognition. In other words, protections in international markets for goods produced here will be negotiating chips on the table in each new trade deal that the UK looks for. Scotland's farmers, having built a reputation for quality and traceability that helps to sell their products across borders, are about to see their market share threatened, even if they can get through the border posts, because they will be losing easy access to the world's biggest single marketplace, but also because the protections that the machinery of the EU afford will be stripped away as the UK struggles to learn once again how to negotiate trade deals and negotiates away any protection that our unique products might have had.

It is notable that the briefings on the Bill that I have received from organisations in England are broadly in favour of it, while the briefings from organisations in Scotland are not.

[*Deidre Brock*]

In this, as in so much else, Scotland and England are different, and the differences cannot be easily reconciled. There was a time when Ministers in Whitehall acknowledged and accepted those differences and to an extent celebrated them as part of the diversity of the UK they sought to govern. Acknowledging that diversity and respecting its history could be achieved by respecting the devolved Administrations. There is no need for a power grab. There is no need for the centralisation of responsibility in Smith Square. Indeed, we know, and I am sure the Secretary of State will concede, that the plans being made for agriculture in England and the policies already being implemented would not suit Scotland; they will be harmful to Scottish food producers.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The hon. Lady speaks about briefings. Does she agree with the National Farmers Union Scotland, which said in its briefing that the Scottish National party Scottish Government should accept the offer from the Westminster Government to include a schedule for Scotland? Why is the SNP refusing to do that?

Deidre Brock: I note the selective quote from the hon. Gentleman. The NFUS also said that any such schedule should be one that comes from the Scottish Government. One could ask whether the DEFRA Secretary would be willing to accept Scottish Government amendments.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is very important that we hear from the SNP, because the Bill does pertain to Scotland. However, as the hon. Lady has just said, a large part of this area is devolved. Is it not then fair that the SNP abides, as we all have to, by the eight-minute limit, instead of taking twice that amount of time?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I appreciate the point made by the hon. Gentleman, but the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (*Deidre Brock*) is her party's Front-Bench spokesman. She is therefore not subject to a time limit. I am quite sure that, being an hon. Lady and a good orator, she will not take more time than is suitable, but it is up to her to decide what that is.

Deidre Brock: Thanks for that, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is always a delight to hear just how warmly we are welcomed by Members in this place from other parties, especially those on the Government Benches.

Returning to my point, these are plans made by England's Ministers for England's industry: policies created by English Ministers to be English solutions to English problems. The sensible approach, I would argue, is to embrace Scottish solutions to Scottish problems and Welsh solutions to Welsh problems. Ministers in the Scottish and Welsh Governments should be in full control.

Michael Gove: Why is it that the Welsh Administration are capable of providing a schedule to the Bill for Welsh needs, but the Scottish Government are not? Why are the Scottish Government silent on future policy for Scotland's farmers? Why is it that we are providing certainty for farmers in the United Kingdom, as the Welsh Labour Administration are doing, but the hon. Lady is so recklessly negligent of rural Scotland's interests?

Deidre Brock: I am afraid that, unlike Welsh Labour Government Ministers, our Ministers are prepared to stand up for Scotland rather more forcefully. Ministers in the Scottish and Welsh Governments should be in full control of environmental, food and rural affairs policies, including agriculture. Let England be England; let Scotland be Scotland; and let Wales be Wales. There are fully functioning Administrations ready to take up the reins.

The Bill should be taken away and thought through again, so that there is something resembling sensible proposed legislation to be considered. We have a Bill that came prematurely: a lack of focus on the actual purpose of agriculture, a senseless and damaging power grab, the absence of any indication of a financial underpinning of Scottish agriculture and the protections that Scottish produce currently enjoys being stripped away. The Secretary of State is not a stupid man and he will know that the Bill is not fit for purpose. He has a leadership campaign to consider, no doubt, but legislation made here affects people who are trying to work, earn a living, get ahead and plan for the future. It should be done with care and a great deal of thought.

Finally, once upon a time, there was a Prime Minister called David Cameron, who started his term of office by visiting Edinburgh and then Cardiff to promote a respect agenda. He said that he wanted to make sure the UK was a partnership, not a dictatorship, and that he was determined to make devolution work. His Government, which contained many of the members of the current Government, promised to uphold the devolved powers to make sure that Scotland's Parliament was properly respected. That agenda has vanished in the rush of blood that characterises the current Government's planning for Brexit. Instead of respect for Scotland's democracy and instead of upholding devolution, this Government are guilty of a centralisation of power the likes of which has not been seen in Europe for a lifetime. The political equivalent of an asset-stripping raid on the powers and responsibilities of Scotland's Parliament and Scotland's Government is breathtaking in its scope. Perhaps more breathtaking, however, is the truly outrageous determination of Ministers to pretend that there is nothing to see here, that nothing is being removed and that everything is being done for our own good.

The truth is that this is an assault on Scotland's democracy that bears parallels to a previous Tory Government's assault on Scotland's industrial base. The ramifications of that assault are still being felt in Scotland and the ramifications of this one, if it is allowed to proceed, will hold Scotland back for decades to come. No decent Scottish MP could stand by and allow that to happen, no matter what party rosette they wear. No Scottish MP should be supporting a Bill that is part of that command-era-style centralisation. Every Scottish MP who wants to protect Scotland's democracy, Scotland's Parliament and the right of the Scottish people to choose their own Government will not be voting for the Bill today.

2.36 pm

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (*Deidre Brock*). I am glad she has finished. I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

This is a great day. We can debate the details of an agricultural policy for which we are responsible. We may not agree with the shadow Secretary's speech, but she made points that now have to be answered in this House. On day one in DEFRA, I was amazed to receive my brief and hear that we were being fined—called “disallowance” in Europeak—£630 million because the Commission did not like the cack-handed manner by which the previous Labour Government had gone from historic payments to area payments. That cannot now happen. The people now responsible, I am delighted to say, are sitting on the Government Front Bench. They have brought forward the Bill, which enables us to deliver what I think will be a real future for our farming industry and for our environment.

At DEFRA, I set four priorities: grow the rural economy, improve the environment, protect the country from animal disease and protect the country from plant disease. They can all be fulfilled within the Bill. The common agricultural policy had got itself completely stuck. Originally begun as a heavily subsidised production regime that produced vast amounts of food that could not be sold but had to be dumped on third markets with great export subsidies, it is morphing slowly into an all-encompassing environmental scheme for a continent where, as was pointed out to the Commission during the CAP negotiations, it is minus -45 in northern Sweden and plus -45 in Andalusia. It is impossible to have an all-encompassing regime for the continent. We have ended up with muddles such as the three-crop rule, which is deeply damaging to the mixed variety of farming in this country. We can now design a policy tailored to our own environment for each of our regions, as we touched on just now.

My first criticism is that it would be nice to have in the introduction a mention of food. Food and drink production is huge. It is worth £85 billion a year to the economy, supporting 3.5 million jobs and providing 62% of the food we eat. By the way, that is down from 78%. In 1978, we produced 78% of the food we eat. The CAP has failed even on self-sufficiency. It would be appropriate to have food in the title of the Bill, because that surely is the first role of farming.

What I would like to see—I am delighted no one has touched on it—is our leaving food production to farmers. I cite two countries from which we should take an example. New Zealand and Australia stopped all food subsidies. New Zealand used to have 70 million woolly raggedy things called sheep running around causing appalling environmental damage, including soil erosion and water pollution. In one year, I think 1983, 6 million tonnes of sheep had to be turned into fertiliser—it could not sell them. It now has zero subsidies for production and has improved its technology enormously. Today, there are about 27 million sheep, but it exports more lamb. That is an incredible achievement and that is the lesson for the Secretary of State: we should not subsidise food production. The New Zealanders have created whole new industries—with wine, and with venison. They hardly had any deer, but that industry is now worth a significant sum in exports for New Zealanders—about \$100 million New Zealand dollars..

Those are the clear lessons. Where the Government can help, and there are opportunities in the Bill, is on technology. The Secretary of State came with me to Harper Adams University and we saw a prototype

machine that will go along a row of strawberries in a polytunnel, leave the brown one because it is rotten, leave the green one for tomorrow and pick the big red one for one supermarket and the little red one for another, and pack it on the machine, avoiding all contact with human hands and swiftly delivering, healthy food to our consumers. The university would like help to get that prototype moving, and that is the sort of area where the Government have a direct opportunity to help.

Secondly on technology, the Secretary of State came with me to Saulton Hall and saw my young constituent Tim Ashton, who has gone for no till. He has managed to reduce costs in wheat production by 60%. In North Shropshire, just outside Wem, he can look Kansas, Australia or Argentina in the eye at world prices. He will make money at world prices. So long as we are not idiotic about glyphosate, with no till, there are the most amazingly beneficial environmental outcomes. Less water is going in the river and there is a huge increase in flora and fauna—so much so that he has stopped counting barn owls because there are just too many. On soil, having seen that, I would flag up to the Secretary of State that clause 1 really ought to list soil improvement as a public benefit to be sought. He has a pretty good list of public goods, but I would add soil and animal welfare, which is very important. I do not think that there is a single person in the House who would not like to see improved animal welfare standards. That is a clear public good that costs. We saw what happened when Lord Deben unilaterally improved our regime on tethers and stalls; there was a huge cost to our own industry and we ended up importing pork products from regimes that are less beneficial. But animal welfare is a public good; we would all support it; and there is room in this Bill to pay for that.

The other country that I would consider would be Switzerland. Do not subsidise food production—leave that to technology, to development and to individual farmers—but consider that livestock farming has an enormous environmental role. Tourism is worth about £30 billion in the rural economy. People will not go to the Derbyshire dales if there are no elders and willows and the stone walls have fallen down. They will not go to the Lake district; they will not go to Scotland; they will not go to north or mid-Wales. They will go there if there is a managed number of livestock maintaining the environment. That is the lesson from Switzerland. Very large numbers of sheep, cattle and calves are taken up to the highest Alps in the summer at vast expense—probably the most ludicrously uneconomic way to produce food in the world, but one with a massive environmental benefit, maintaining the landscape. That is the lesson on public goods, most of which are cited in clause 1.

Let us copy New Zealand and Australia on zero food subsidies and following technology, and copy Switzerland on significant payments—more than we get on the CAP at the moment—for the maintenance of those rural and marginal areas where one cannot survive at world food prices alone. Lastly, and very briefly, we are talking about public goods and if the farm is large and provides lots of public goods, I do not mind if it gets more public money. The Secretary of State is quite right to criticise the old basic payment in which people just got paid for having vast amounts of land and not delivering public

[Mr Owen Paterson]

goods, but I think it is unfair to penalise large, efficient units if in future they are going to provide lots of public goods.

I congratulate the Secretary of State heartily. We will see a lot of detail in the statutory instruments, but the Bill broadly gives us a very good framework to copy New Zealand and Switzerland. With that, I look forward to voting for it tonight.

2.44 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): This is a Bill that I hoped we would never have to discuss. No Russian cyber-attack could ever do as much damage to the UK as we are about to do to ourselves by leaving the world's biggest market. The best deal we can get could only ever be second best to what we already have. However—and here I agree with the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson)—if there was one aspect of leaving the European Union to which I could see a silver lining, it would be the ability for the United Kingdom to design and deliver its own policy for supporting agriculture, food security, and the productive and environmentally sustainable management of land.

Westmorland and Lonsdale is not just my home but the home of upland farming and of our most spectacular natural assets—the lakes and the dales. After London, it is Britain's biggest visitor destination and a vital centre of high-quality food production. How we support agriculture is of colossal importance to me and the communities that I am proud to represent.

The Bill aims to do a lot of good. The commitment to having public money for public goods is commendable and to be encouraged. Moving to enhance the already significant environmental benefits of agriculture is also right. But the detail is everything: the Bill has good potential, but it also contains the potential for some of the most disastrous unintended consequences if this House fails to act wisely and long-sightedly.

I welcome the Bill's commitment to maintain our environmental and animal welfare standards in farming, but it makes no mention of standards for imported food from trade deals. If standards on imports are not guaranteed, our farmers will be at a competitive disadvantage. The Secretary of State must therefore ensure that all food imported into the United Kingdom is produced to at least equivalent standards on animal welfare, environmental protection and production quality.

When UNESCO granted world heritage site status to the Lake District last year, it did so in large part in recognition of the landscape management of our hill farmers. I am proud of them and I fear for them. Perhaps the biggest blind spot in this Bill is a failure to ensure that those who farm the uplands and other less favoured areas get a sustainable deal that will guarantee them a future and, crucially, draw new entrants into the industry.

The Federation of Cumbria Commoners has asked me to express its concerns about the Bill's failure to provide an effective framework for Government to support its members. Their collective stewardship of common land has helped to create and conserve the landscape, wildlife and archaeology of the Lake district, the Pennines, the Howgill fells and the western dales.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): When I was a Minister at DEFRA, I was quite shocked by some people—even those who were quite senior in the local national park—who had an aggressive attitude towards precisely the kind of farmers that the hon. Gentleman is talking about. Rewilding has its place in certain areas, but a landscape that has been farmed and created by human beings since the time of the Norse people surely needs to be supported, not attacked, by those who have responsibility for it.

Tim Farron: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. The importance of recognising that our landscape is as diverse as it is because it is managed and maintained is huge. He makes a very good point.

In my view, the Bill should state that traditional hill farming and commoning are a public good. This finely balanced system is at risk and will disappear without explicit public investment. When hill farmers have made changes to how they work to benefit the environment they should be rewarded for that too, but there must be a baseline payment, equivalent at least to the old hill farm allowance, so that they can have security and stability in the long term.

I want the Government to understand not just what farmers do but why they do it. Their chief motivation and purpose is to produce food. We think too little about food security: some 45% of the food we consume today is imported, whereas 20 years ago that figure was more like 35%. That is a very worrying trend. If UK farmers' ability to compete is further undermined, that will only get worse.

If farmers got a fair price for their produce, there would be no need for direct payments and farmers would not want them. That is not the case—not even close. The food market is so warped by the power of supermarkets that removing direct payments to farmers could leave them entirely at the mercy of the forces of that skewed market, so the powers and scope of the Groceries Code Adjudicator must be vastly expanded to ensure an effective referee on this extremely uneven playing field.

I know it is not an either/or, but the Government should be strengthening the Groceries Code Adjudicator, not, as they propose to do in the Bill, strengthening the failing and discredited Rural Payments Agency. The Government's proposal to phase out direct payments without a guarantee of an immediate and equivalent replacement is unwise and will not work, either for hill farmers or the country.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): One issue regarding the fact that frameworks across the UK no longer need to be agreed but can be imposed is that less favoured area status makes up less than 20% in England, but more than 80% in Scotland and Wales and more than 70% in Northern Ireland. For people in those areas, direct payments are even more critical.

Tim Farron: Indeed, and we need to understand that the fact that this has been part of our payment landscape, and therefore our farming landscape, for the last 45 years has affected the actual landscape and our ability to produce affordable food, so it will have differential impacts across different parts of the United Kingdom.

John Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Farron: I will make progress. If we combine that failure to recognise the impact of phasing out payments with the Bill's failure to impose standards on imports, we do not see a very pretty picture for farmers or the communities in which they live. The unintended but utterly predictable consequence is that the Government will flood the market with cheap foreign imports and remove the lifeline of direct payments. Hundreds of farmers, especially hill farmers, will then go under. This is not a nice, gentle seven-year phase-out for hill farmers or those in less favoured areas; for many, it is a seven-year notice to quit the landscape altogether. When we can already meet only 55% of our food needs domestically, the last thing we need is a disastrous loss of capacity because of such a poorly thought-out and dramatic change.

If we remove direct payments for farmers without an immediate equivalent and tariffs are introduced on imports into this country, we will see a significant rise in the price of food on the shelves. The wealthiest people in this country spend 10% of their income on food, but the poorest spend 25%. Removing direct investment in farming will hit every family on a low or medium income in catastrophic and heartbreaking ways. It is shameful that we collectively preside over a society in which food bank usage is at its highest level ever. If we get the Bill wrong, the result will be greater poverty, greater need and greater misery for families who seek to budget for their weekly food shop.

That is why I fully support the NFU's call on the Government to include the support of domestic agriculture to secure food security and stability of food supply as a cause for financial assistance. I can think of no greater public good. Food security does not need to come at the expense of caring for our land: there is no point in having food security for the next 20 years if the land is unusable after that. Biodiversity and the sustainable management of land must be central to the new systems that are devised. Alongside the lack of clarity over the transition period, there is an absence of guarantees beyond 2022. That is simply not good enough. Anyone who thinks that three years constitutes the long term knows absolutely nothing about farming.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Farron: I am sorry, but I will not. The NFU and environmental groups alike want a long-term funding solution so that the issue cannot be used as a political football down the road, and they are right. If the money is not there, we may end up with a fantastic environmentally friendly farming system but no farmers left to deliver it. That is why the Liberal Democrats advocate a 25-year funding plan, to fit alongside the Government's existing 25-year environment plan, to maintain agriculture spending beyond 2022 to at least the current level.

Helping farmers to deliver public goods and improving the productivity and resilience of UK agriculture will mean releasing farmers from the burdens of bureaucracy, badly run payment agencies and, worst of all, insecurity. The Bill is therefore well-intentioned but inadequate. If we want a rich, diverse, beautiful and bountiful ecology, we need farmers to steward it and deliver it. If we want

a better environment, we need farmers. Many of the words in the Bill are good, but the detail and the understanding of farming is lacking. It reads as if it has been written in Whitehall, not Westmorland. Could do better—must do better.

2.54 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Having spent a lifetime immersed in both the environment and farming—I grew up on a farm—this, for me, is a very exciting moment. It is an opportunity to rethink our land use policy. It is a chance to build on the health of our environment, from soil to water to air, and to set ourselves on track to produce healthy, sustainable food and reset the biodiversity gauge.

Given that a quarter of all agricultural holdings are in the south-west, producing a third of the nation's beef and lamb, the proposals are really important for our farmers, too. They are possible only because we are leaving the EU, and they have become a reality because the Government are putting not just their aspirations, but their financial support behind this endeavour.

As other colleagues have mentioned, the Bill is very much a framework Bill, which provides the finances and the tools for us to transition out of the common agricultural policy and gives us the chance to have a dialogue in every relevant area. We can now design our own tailor-made approach and not be dictated to by 27 other countries in the joint system that we have been part of. That system has often not been suited to the UK, but to get the money—all £4 billion of it—our farmers and landowners have had to accept the system. Who would not? Who could blame them?

Dr Whitford: Does the hon. Lady recognise that the same issue exists within the United Kingdom, in that the land in Scotland, which makes up one third of the UK land mass, is utterly different from that being farmed on the south coast of England?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Lady makes a good point, but the new Bill will allow us to tailor our approach to suit every part of the UK. Wales is taking this opportunity, and schedule 3 states clearly what it will do. Interestingly, we have not heard from Scotland yet.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The real risk to Scottish farmers is the fact that the SNP Scottish Government have failed to opt in to this Bill and failed to introduce a Bill in the Scottish Parliament to allow Scottish farmers to get the support they will desperately need after Brexit. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is the SNP who are letting Scottish farmers down?

Rebecca Pow: Our Scottish Conservative colleagues provide strong representation for farmers. Farming is very important to Scotland, which is a rural area. The SNP and the Scottish Parliament have really missed an opportunity to get their details down on paper so that they can play a full role in the really exciting future that this Government are creating. If it were not for the Conservative Government and our coming out of Europe—I say this even though I was a remainderer—we would not have this great opportunity.

[*Rebecca Pow*]

Crucially, the essence of the Bill is to move away from making payments simply for the privilege of owning land, as has been mentioned, and towards the concept of paying for public goods. That is the cornerstone of the Bill, and it is absolutely the right thing to do. The basic idea of receiving money for doing something for the public good has met with universal approval, not just from farmers but from environmentalists and right across the board with everybody I have met in Taunton Deane so far. That is true of improving the quality of our water—currently, only 14% of our rivers are classed as clean, which is absolutely shocking; planting more trees to help to reduce the speed of run-off from the hills to the Somerset levels, which will help to reduce the terrible flooding that we have had over many years; and creating new habitats to improve biodiversity and reverse the catastrophic declines in plant and animal populations that we have witnessed in our own lifetimes, as the 2016 “State of Nature” report clearly sets out.

In many cases, EU agricultural policy has been the driver for those wildlife declines, with the loss of mixed farming—grass is so important to that, as it was on the farm where I grew up—less rotation, fewer hedgerows and increased pesticide use. The increased use of pesticides has reduced the quantity of plants on which foraging insects rely; indeed, we rely on those insects to pollinate our crops. The Bill offers an opportunity for new schemes that emphasise the protection of biodiversity and help to redress those losses. Habitat creation schemes such as the one run on West Sedgemoor by the RSPB, which is producing tasty beef, creating summer water meadows and bringing back the snipe—I am proud to be the RSPB snipe champion—are really working. The Bill offers the opportunity to build on such schemes, which I welcome.

There is, however, one thing that I must ask the Minister. If farmers and environmental groups are already involved in environmental stewardship schemes, will those schemes still operate following the implementation of the Bill? Will they be allowed to run their course, or will they end with those groups then having to apply for new schemes?

The Minister will not be at all surprised to learn that I am now going to mention soil, because I have bent his ear on the subject many times. Half the soils in the east of the country are likely to become unproductive within a decade. That was highlighted in our Environmental Audit Committee report—and I see that the Committee’s Chairperson, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), is in the Chamber. Soil erosion is a very serious issue, as is the fact that soil has been treated as a growing medium rather than a living habitat for far too long. I therefore welcome the priority that the Bill gives to soil health, and I was pleased that the Minister came to the launch of the Sustainable Soil Alliance in the House. I hope that the work that it is doing to advise on how we could monitor soil erosion or set targets to address it might influence the way in which payments are made.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The hon. Lady is a true soil evangelist, but the Government have already signed up to a target in the Paris agreement to increase soil carbon content by four parts per 1,000 every year in

order to sequester more carbon into our soil. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is a public good that should be funded and subsidised through the Bill?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Lady raises an important point. As she knows, I am passionate about this issue. We need to have a conversation about all our climate change targets, including the potential net zero target that some people are talking about. The question of targets is very important: how can we pay unless we know what we are paying for? The targets that we set for the climate change commitments have worked well, and a similar model might chime with the 25-year plan and the forthcoming environment Act. I believe that many of the details will go into that Bill rather than this framework Agriculture Bill.

Payments relating to our natural heritage and culture are very welcome. My constituency contains two areas of natural beauty where people are pleading that landscape, and landscape beauty, be included in the Bill.

The Government’s commitment to funding until 2022 and for the transition period demonstrates our ongoing support for the countryside. That is obviously important, given that two thirds of farm incomes in the south-west are currently derived from basic payments. I know the Minister understands that. However, I would like to see a further commitment to future funding. God forbid that we ever change Government, but the production of beef or horticultural crops cannot be switched on like a light bulb, and farmers would like some long-term commitment.

Although the Bill does not directly list food as a public good, it does much to enable the efficient production of food. My local farmers welcome the data-gathering elements in the Bill, although, for the purpose of transparency, they would like supermarkets to be included, as well as the manufacturers and producers along the line—not just the raw-material producers. However, I welcome the data collection, and I stand by the Secretary of State’s commitment to maintaining our high food standards. That is crucial to the future. I look forward to the creation of an overarching environmental standards body—in, I believe, the environment Bill—which will hold people to account.

Let me say penultimately that, much as we love our Welsh farming colleagues—indeed, many of them come to Somerset to trade at our markets, especially Sedgemoor market, and they are very welcome—no one wants an internal competitive market to develop as a result of the flexibility offered to Welsh farmers. I am sure the Minister understands what I mean by that.

In conclusion—and thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak—let me say that the Bill heralds the most significant change in our land use for decades, with the finances to underpin it. It is the Conservatives who are leading the way in that regard, for farming and for the environment. I am confident that issues relating to the environment, farming and everything to do with our rural communities will dovetail in the Bill. It is absolutely the right way forward for a sustainable and healthy future. Not one of those elements can survive without the others, and on that note, I give the Bill, and all those who have worked so hard on it, my full support.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. After the next speech, the time limit will be reduced to seven minutes, but that does not apply to Mr David Simpson.

3.5 pm

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Now we come to the easiest part of the United Kingdom to resolve when it comes to agri-food. I dare not tread into the issue of Brexit. Reference was made earlier to a red line in the Irish Sea, but I assure Members that that will never happen as far as the Democratic Unionist party is concerned. We are part of the United Kingdom, and that is how it will remain.

I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have been involved in the agri-food sector for about 43 years—I know that that is hard to believe—from working as a primary producer to working in retail and production and processing.

I think that we are about to experience dramatic changes throughout the industry. These are exciting times. When I speak to farmers and industry representatives, they acknowledge that. They know that there will probably be some trying times, but they are excited by the opportunities that we will have after we have left the European Union.

I welcome the opportunity to debate a Bill that will have an impact on every farmer and farm business throughout the United Kingdom, whether it keeps sheep on the Antrim hills or grows wheat in East Anglia. Given that the UK is leaving the EU and the common agricultural policy, it is vital that a new domestic British agricultural policy is introduced. I welcome the regional flexibilities that are proposed for the different regions of the UK. I believe that there should be a variation in the new policy for each of those regions, provided that those variations do not produce competition in the internal market.

I note the name of the Bill, and I hope that agriculture will remain the central theme in any future policy. The Prime Minister is on record as saying—on three occasions, I think—when I put questions to her that agriculture would not be a poor cousin or the sacrificial lamb in any negotiations with Europe. We will hold the Prime Minister's feet to the fire, along with those of the Secretary of State and the farming Minister. Agriculture must remain at the top of the agenda.

In Northern Ireland, we employ some 120,000 or 125,000 people in the agri-food sector. There is huge concern in the industry, and of course in the farming community, about EU casual workers. We need to address that during the Bill's Committee stage, or perhaps it can be dealt with by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. There is a massive shortage of workers in the agri-food sector. A few weeks ago, along with the Chairman of the Committee, I met representatives of the industry, who emphasised that they were reaching crisis point, because the sector did not have enough workers to deal with production. The Government need to deal with that issue.

Food production that involves sustainable but profitable farming is essential. As has already been mentioned, those who are in the black at the bank can do many things. Given the changes that are coming, we must

encourage farm production. It has already been mentioned that the Bill needs to give more emphasis to the incentive for farmers to grow and produce food. The incentive is there, but it needs to be made clearer that farmers will be encouraged to produce good food.

In Northern Ireland we have for many years had the Albert Heijn supermarkets in Holland insisting on coming to buy their meat in Northern Ireland because of how it is reared and because husbandry and animal welfare is maintained. That applies right across the whole of the United Kingdom. Across the whole UK, we produce the best food produce to be found anywhere in the European Union. That is a fact, and our standards and our animal welfare must be maintained. It is vital that we do that.

I have talked about opportunities. I believe there are opportunities, but the Government must take the issue of the workforce in the agri-food sector more seriously. Some companies in Northern Ireland are 60% dependent on people from other countries. We must get that situation right in some shape or form, and hopefully we will resolve it.

I want the Bill to allow for a UK-wide approach on matters that affect the whole UK. My party believes there should be an overarching policy across the UK to deal with such issues as marketing standards and crisis fund management. It is important that we do such things collectively.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of this Bill will depend on the trade policy that is implemented. Let us be clear: trade legislation or a Pacific trade deal that views agriculture as a sacrificial lamb for the importation of lower quality and standards than those in UK production will not be accepted. The British public will not accept that. We have a standard and a reputation not just across the whole European Union, but further afield, such as in South Africa and in those other countries that buy our chicken product because we cannot market it anywhere else. Our standard must be maintained. I am sure the farming Minister is aware of that—he has been told about it often enough when he has given evidence to the EFRA Committee.

Mary Creagh: As the granddaughter of a Fermanagh cattle farmer, I agree with the hon. Gentleman wholeheartedly about the fantastic standards and great tradition of farming in Northern Ireland. Does he agree that it is imperative for the future of farming and agriculture across the UK that the Government avoid a no-deal Brexit, which would put World Trade Organisation tariffs of 30% on our lamb and beef and drive most of the beef and cattle and lamb producers in this country out of business? That must be avoided at all costs.

David Simpson: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but the Prime Minister has said that we have to get the right deal—that is important. I do not think that anyone here wants to go towards WTO, but we must get the right deal. I spoke to the lamb industry a few weeks ago, and, if we go to WTO for that industry—the Minister will know this because he has been told often enough—and tariffs of 14% or 15% are introduced, that would decimate the Northern Ireland lamb industry overnight, given that we export 90% of our lamb. Having said that, we need to get the right deal. Unfortunately, however, the EU keeps sticking in

[David Simpson]

its heels at present, which is nonsense, especially in terms of the border of Northern Ireland, the movement of cattle and so forth, free trade within Northern Ireland, and the soft or hard border. That is all nonsense, because the situation will remain as it is and has been for many years. There is no reason to change that. No one wants to see us going towards WTO, but we must get the right deal. If the right deal is not there, we will have major problems with our industry and employment, and the sector will be decimated. We therefore have to get the right deal and I know the Minister is well aware of that.

3.14 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson), and it is always a great pleasure to hear his wise and knowledgeable words in any agricultural debate in this House. I congratulate the Secretary of State and his ministerial team on bringing forward this Bill and delivering the principle of support for agriculture in this House for the first time in over 40 years.

Many aspects of the CAP were of course very unpopular, but it did provide a vital lifeline for farm businesses and farming families in my constituency and many upland constituencies right across the country. However, change needs to come, and thank goodness the Government have worked long and hard on this and change is going in the right direction.

We need to reduce the administrative burden on farmers. This is a very overburdened industry, and we have a great opportunity to reduce the burden. I know the Minister in particular is keen to see this happen and has great ideas that will come forward in future statutory instruments.

We must also think about how the payments are going to be made. Many of my constituents are concerned about the Rural Payments Agency, as in the past it has not exactly covered itself in glory. If it is to be in charge of our new scheme, there must be tighter control, and greater regulation must be placed on it by DEFRA. I hope Ministers will take that request back to the Department with them.

I am pleased that the Welsh Government have decided to couple themselves with the Bill and the British Government, and I am very disappointed that the Scottish Government are not following suit. That is a massive disappointment to the people of Scotland, and the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), who serves as my vice-chair on the Back-Bench DEFRA committee, works particularly hard for farmers in Scotland, as do all the other Scottish Conservative Members, so I am very disappointed at what we have heard from the Scottish National Benches today.

Dr Whitford: If the hon. Gentleman would bother to consult the NFU Scotland, he would find that its primary concern is of farming being run from here in Westminster, not only with a centralising agenda but by a Parliament that took £160 million of EU money from Scottish farmers. [Interruption]

Chris Davies: I do not agree with the hon. Lady and it is clear that other Conservative Members also disagree.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): In fact the briefing states very clearly that the biggest concern that the NFUS has is the politicisation of the process by the SNP, which is governing Scotland not in the national interest but in the nationalist interest.

Chris Davies: I would go further: I would be interested to know if DEFRA would consider ring-fencing the agricultural budget to all devolved nations as time goes on, because certainly in Wales we are concerned that the money will not be spent on agriculture. We hope that Scotland will spend its money on agriculture, but time will tell.

Importantly, the NFU right around the country is keen to see a national framework. All the countries in the UK need to work under a national framework; otherwise, farming will become fragmented, with Scottish farmers competing against Welsh farmers and English against Northern Irish and so on, which will be to the detriment of the whole farming industry in the UK. It is therefore important that we have a national framework.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Does the hon. Gentleman not share my concern that DEFRA here in London has been listening to, and had the ear of, English farming lobbyists for the last 19 years? That raises the question of how the Government will best represent the interests of farming in Wales and Scotland.

Chris Davies: I do not share the hon. Lady's concern. My constituency lies on the border, and there are of course border farmers between Scotland and England as well as between Wales and England, and we are concerned that we might see different processes taking place on either side of the border, causing great problems for cross-border farmers. I am afraid the hon. Lady, the leader of Plaid Cymru in Westminster, does not share that concern with Welsh farmers on the Welsh side of the border.

Farmers are also conservationists. They have a dual role; there is no difference—there is no difference at all. The Secretary of State visited a farm in my constituency just before the summer recess, and met farmers there—family farmers and Young Farmers' Club members.

The Painscastle valley is a typical farming valley in Wales. It has a river at the bottom and well fenced and hedged green fields leading up to the commons above. This was not designed by a young civil servant with an environmental degree sitting in Westminster, Cardiff or Scotland, or by a bearded, sandal-wearing lifetime environmental campaigner, or even by a fashionable environmentalist who writes a blog and has thousands of Twitter followers. That scene, that valley and that countryside were designed and managed by generations of farmers over 300 years and more. Farmers really are the best people to take the environment and farming forward, and livestock farmers should be right to the fore in this brave new world of farming. They should be looking after our payments, guiding our policies and ensuring that they are there to provide the true knowledge of agriculture.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on forestry, I should like to touch briefly on the subject of forestry. It has not been touched on a great deal in the debate so far. The Bill focuses on agriculture, as has my speech so far, but it is important to consider tree planting

in this country. Brecon and Radnorshire is a large constituency in which forestry and timber production support many rural livelihoods. We have the largest sawmill in Wales, based in Newbridge-on-Wye and employing nearly 200 people. It is important that we support tree planting, and I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State giving a firm commitment during our conference a week or so ago to planting 11 million trees during this Parliament. I hope that he will be able to achieve that aim, because it is vital to maintain the timber processing industry, whether for flood prevention and mitigation or purely for products for the future, to enable it to thrive and prosper.

Sir Hugo Swire: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is intensely regrettable that the current Mayor of London has not continued to plant as many trees in London as his predecessors did?

Chris Davies: I fully agree with my right hon. Friend. It is important that we plant trees in this country, wherever they might be: in the countryside, in the streets or in the middle of dual carriageways. The public want that to happen, and I hope that DEFRA will ensure that it does.

We might not all be farmers or foresters, and we might not all be cheese makers or honey producers, but whatever we do and wherever we reside, it is important that we live in a clean and healthy environment. And of course, we all need to eat. Unlike some Members who might sit on the Opposition Front Bench, we cannot all live on avocados from Mexico or mung beans from India. We need to feed ourselves on great British products, and it is important that we support our farming industry. We clearly produce the best products in the world, including livestock in the form of beef and sheep, and fruit and vegetables. Here in Britain, we have the best welfare standards in the world and our products are of the best quality. Through this Agriculture Bill, we need to support that and support our farmers.

3.22 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): No matter what our views on Brexit are, there is near-universal consensus that the common agricultural policy is in dire need of reform. I want a farming system that is both economically viable and environmentally sustainable, with the highest possible animal welfare standards. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on agro-ecology for sustainable food and farming, and we have long called for more support for organic farming, agroforestry, pasture-based livestock systems, integrated pest management and low-input mixed farming—mixed farming is very important—as well as for a move away from unsustainable intensification and an over-reliance on agrochemicals and cheap fossil fuels.

We want to see whole-farm systems that support nature-friendly farming. I believe that the Bill, with its emphasis on public money for public goods, could provide an ideal opportunity to support that sort of farming, through rewarding farmers for what they do as custodians of the land for future generations, and not simply on the basis of how much land they own. Public money should be used not to subsidise market failure but to reward behaviour, which the market does not do. That means farming in a way that addresses the serious

environmental challenges facing us, such as biodiversity loss, habitat destruction, disappearing pollinators, soil degradation, polluted rivers, water run-off and much more. It is vital that we get this right.

There are fundamental weaknesses in the Bill, however, including the uncertainty around funding beyond 2022, the emphasis on powers rather than duties, and the absence of any information on how the money will be split between productivity payments and environmental payments. The Bill needs to set a multiannual budgetary framework under clause 33 to provide more certainty for farmers. I would endorse Greener UK's recommendation for a duty on Ministers to introduce an environmental land management scheme by a set date, and its call for targets and benchmarks for public goods. We also need clarity that the public goods listed in clause 1 are the priority for funding, and that any payments for productivity must contribute to their delivery.

I am concerned that there is no regulatory baseline in the Bill. The Minister will no doubt tell us that this will be determined by Dame Glenys Stacey's review, which is due to report by the end of December, and that it might then be included in the environment Bill, but that would be the wrong place for it. Cross-compliance is a fundamental part of the common agricultural policy. It underpins taxpayer investment, and this Bill is setting out a replacement for the CAP. Can the Minister therefore assure us that the Government will introduce amendments to this legislation, most likely by the time it is in the other place, on the basis of Dame Glenys Stacey's review?

It is also time that we looked far more seriously at reducing farming's carbon footprint. This has already been mentioned, and all I will say at this point is that I would like to see a goal in the Bill for agricultural emissions to reach net zero by 2050, in line with the Paris agreement. That is absolutely necessary following Monday's report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The Bill is also missing an opportunity to link farm payments to public health goals. It is predicted that diet-related ill health will overtake smoking as the biggest cause of preventable death before too long. We spend more on the treatment of obesity and diabetes than we spend on the police, the fire service and the judicial system combined. I am quite excited by what I have heard so far about DEFRA's future food strategy. It sounds promising, but we need to see measures in the Bill to increase the availability, affordability and accessibility of healthy food, including UK-grown fruit, vegetables and pulses. Also, as the Chair of the Health Committee said, we urgently need to act to address the public health crisis of growing antimicrobial resistance, and the associated rise in superbugs, by eliminating the overuse of antibiotics in farming and rewarding good animal husbandry. As I said to the Secretary of State earlier, I will be keen to hear where the bar for animal welfare will be set when it is defined in 2020. At the moment, we are too complacent about animal welfare standards in this country, and I would like to see far more ambitious targets and a more ambitious definition.

There have been calls to amend the Bill to include food production as a public good—this is basically about maintaining direct payments under another name—but we are talking about a limited pot of public money. Food production is ultimately rewarded by the market,

[Kerry McCarthy]

or it certainly should be. We need to ensure that the market is fair and that farmers get what the president of the Country Land and Business Association, Tim Breitmeyer, describes as

“a fairer share of the food pound”,

along with the security that comes from a longer-term funding settlement.

The Government clearly accept, with the new fair dealing measures in the Bill, that they were wrong not to extend the remit of the Groceries Code Adjudicator to cover indirect suppliers, but they need to go further to ensure the fair treatment of all those who produce our food, along the whole supply chain. I have just been told that I have a Back-Bench business debate next Thursday on ending modern slavery, human rights abuses and the exploitation of workers in the supermarket food supply chain, and I urge as many Members as possible to come along to support it. Cheap food in our supermarkets often comes at the cost of worker exploitation. The fair dealing measures in clause 25 must apply to all sectors and to all stages of the supply chain. I gather that dairy will be the priority because the existing voluntary code of practice is not deemed to have worked well, but fruit and veg farmers need protection, too.

The Bill alone will not be enough to safeguard farming in this country. The real battle and the real danger come from the global Britain Brexiteers and their enthusiasm for cheap food imports and the scrapping of standards post-Brexit. The US Secretary of Commerce, Wilbur Ross, made it clear that any post-Brexit trade deal will hinge on the UK ditching its higher, EU-derived food safety laws, which currently prohibit chlorinated chicken, hormone-pumped beef, ractopamine growth promoters in pork and much more. The implications of that would be huge for UK food and farming. It would drive out higher-welfare and smaller-scale UK farmers, who would be unable to compete on price, and make it more difficult for us to export to the EU.

There are also food safety issues. One in seven people in the US contracts a food-borne illness every year, compared with just over one in 70 in the UK, which must have something to do with US food production system standards. The Secretary of State has repeatedly said he has no intention of reducing standards, and I think he is entirely sincere, but I am not convinced that all his colleagues agree. We often hear them say that there will be no drop in British standards, but that does not mean that goods produced to a lower standard in other countries will not make it into this country under a trade deal, and I want reassurance about that. Without such a commitment, even the most generous and sensitively structured support that emerges from the legislation could be fatally undermined.

3.30 pm

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I start by drawing the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. This is a historic moment for British agriculture, and I warmly welcome certainty and clarity for the sector regarding the shape of future agreements that the Bill provides. Certainty is as vital for agriculture as it is for any other business sector. That is highlighted by the proposals for a seven-year transition

period, beginning in 2021, between CAP and the new policy, which will provide farmers with much-needed time to refashion their business models and plan for the future. The transition period is longer than predicted, which must be welcomed, and demonstrates the Government's commitment to the progressive evolution of the sector rather than the cliff-edge revolution that was once discussed.

I also welcome the phasing out and delinking of basic payments, including lump-sum payments, to assist farmers in diversification or exiting the market, including through funding retirement, thereby supporting new entrants to the sector. Proposals to encourage new blood into agriculture should be promoted enthusiastically.

Mary Creagh: While we may welcome payments that enable farmers to exit farming, does the hon. Gentleman agree that there should be protections for the taxpayer in the statutory instruments that flow from this Bill? We cannot have a farmer taking seven years' payments up front to retire and then signing the farm over to his son or daughter the next day, thereby double claiming on the same land for the next seven years.

Julian Sturdy: I accept that fair point, but my reading is that land belonging to those who take their retirement money up front and leave the sector—land that we hope would go to a new entrant—would not be entitled to any payments. However, the devil will be in the detail.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that financiers from the City, rather than new entrants, may purchase that land? That is an issue that I see in East Sussex, where the possibility is that we may lose farming altogether.

Julian Sturdy: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but is that not more about our tax system than this Agriculture Bill? Perhaps that is something to consider going forward.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture, I support the principle of shifting state funding for the sector towards supporting innovation and productivity gains, alongside public money for public goods. Leading technologies of the fourth industrial revolution, such as robotics, data science, autonomous vehicles and biotechnology, have the potential to transform agriculture, so it is wise to concentrate support on facilitating the growth and efficiency gains of tomorrow. To that end, a commitment from Ministers to a certain level of funding for productivity and innovation after the “same cash total to 2022” guarantee expires would be most useful in this area.

I note that, as some Members have already said, soil health is not specifically mentioned in the text of the Bill as a public good that deserves financial assistance. There are, though, very encouraging references to it in the Department's policy statement; that is important given the importance of soil for flood prevention, for the preservation of fertility and for productivity for future generations. I hope that Ministers can give greater prominence to soil health as the Bill progresses.

I broadly support the transition to a system of public money for public goods, but I urge the Government not to lose sight of the fact that the main activity of most farmers will and should remain the production of food.

Moreover, food production and environmental stewardship are already two sides of the same coin, as several Members have said. A resilient and profitable agricultural sector is nature's best friend. If we remember that, we can have a good environmental policy.

The supposedly natural landscapes and countryside of today have been shaped by centuries of agriculture, from the clearing of the forests that once covered virtually all our islands to the first planting of cereals. Policy making in this subject area will therefore benefit from the constant understanding that farming is not some imposition on or extraction from the country, but a positive evolutionary force that has shaped the green and pleasant land that we all seek to protect.

I am glad to see that food security is covered in DEFRA's accompanying policy statement, but it is not specifically mentioned in the Bill. The National Farmers Union recently estimated that if the UK tried to live solely off locally produced food for a whole year, starting in January, we would run out by 6 August. Global population growth means that humanity will have to produce sustainably 70% more food by 2050. That represents 1 billion more tonnes of rice, wheat or other cereals alone. Such figures illustrate the question to which any comprehensive farming and environmental policy will have to stand up. I know that Ministers are deeply aware of this policy aspect, but it would be reassuring to hear further detail on the Government's vision for food security as it relates to domestic food production.

The Government need to make sure that the move towards supporting public goods does not have unintended negative consequences. I have spoken to the Minister about this issue in the past. The classic example of the unintended consequences of the CAP is the renowned three-crop rule. Although it might have been put in place for the right environmental reasons, it has had huge negative impacts, certainly throughout the UK. The Secretary of State rightly emphasised that the CAP currently incentivises farmers to put every possible acre into food production, so less public funding is available for natural capital assets such as wetlands and forests. Equally, I am sure that he does not want to see a situation in which policy incentivises farmers to take as many acres as possible out of food production, or to cease farming altogether, lay off workers and just collect payments for managing land to provide public goods. Balance is needed, and we have to find that balance for the policy and in the Bill.

Similarly, in designing the policy, Ministers must take care to ensure that funding for the sector is not substantially transferred to people who just own land and are not actually farmers. That might best be done by putting in place clear commitments on future funding to support innovation and productivity increases on farms.

I applaud the measures in the Bill that will allow the Secretary of State to introduce regulations to ensure fair dealing with agricultural producers and to facilitate that through the collection of data, which is mentioned in the Bill a lot. It is important that Ministers make clear as soon as possible how they intend to use the powers and how they can be made as comprehensive and effective as possible, with real teeth, ultimately. There are many positive aspects to the Bill that I support, but the devil will always be in the detail, and that is what I will scrutinise as the Bill progresses through Parliament.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Many Members want to speak, so can we try to shave some time off speeches? If Members do not do that, I will have to take the limit down, or we will not get everybody in. I call Pete Wishart.

3.40 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am grateful to you for calling me so early in the debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. MP4 will forever be grateful to you for enabling us to go and make the video we are supposed to be doing today.

Let me say to the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) that it might be a bit tiresome to hear another Member from the Scottish National party speak, but we have every right to speak in this Parliament. We will make our points and continue to do so.

Of all the matters we need to consider in the fallout from Brexit, our agricultural policy and the needs of our rural economy are probably the most acute, with farming the sector hardest hit by the no deal, hard deal Brexit. Probably for the first time since the war, we are faced with searching questions about the nation's food security. We know that astronomical tariffs might be placed on British agricultural products, driving many farmers out of business and leading to an almost unprecedented reinvention of rural Britain. Agricultural goods are perishable, yet they could be sitting in a giant car park in south-east England, waiting to get to market. Those are the type of issues we will be facing, but in the face of the incoming storm, we have this Agriculture Bill—this modest Government response to a Brexit that could decimate the productivity of our agriculture and our countryside. It is an Agriculture Bill without agriculture; a Bill for farming that pays scant regard to food production; a sort of “let them eat environmental strategies” approach; an aspirational land management Bill for a countryside that does not really exist and probably never will come to be.

The vision in the Bill is of a countryside that is better managed for the environment, but not as a location for thriving small businesses providing the healthy, diverse foods we need. We are asked to believe that the Government's newfound enthusiasm for greening is real—a Government who would probably prefer to frack the countryside than farm it. Many farmers in my constituency take great exception to the suggestion implicit in the Bill that they are doing nothing to improve the environment and their land. Every day, they are doing everything to manage the land for the benefit of us all, and the suggestion that they need incentives to do that is doubly insulting. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) made a good point: this is a seven-year phasing out of direct payments to farmers. For many of them, it will be nothing other than an opportunity to quit farming once and for all.

The UK Government kindly invited the Scottish Government to be covered by the Bill's provisions. My colleagues in Edinburgh, quite rightly, have declined. Scotland has a very different rural economy from that in the rest of the United Kingdom, requiring an altogether different approach. As has been said a couple of times now, some 80% of the land in Scotland is made up of

[Pete Wishart]

less favoured areas. We depend more on support. Our food and drinks sector depends on excellence, and in particular on protected geographical indication status, which is threatened by Brexit.

I have in my constituency half the berry farmers in Scotland. There is nothing in the Bill about immigration. Apparently, we have a pilot seasonal workers scheme, which will provide 2,500 workers—2,500 workers, when in a response to a written question from me, DEFRA said 64,500 workers were required. What are we supposed to do with 2,500—one or two per farm? Is that the Minister's plan to try to save the many berry farms in my constituency? Agriculture is fully devolved to Scotland, and we will not compromise on anything that threatens our Government's ability to serve Scottish farming.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Pete Wishart: I will give way to the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), as I have not heard from him for a while.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The hon. Gentleman speaks in apocalyptic tones. Can he explain why the Scottish Government do not have a schedule to the Bill? Their refusal of any offers from the UK Government will leave us in a position where, in 2020, Scottish farmers will have no mechanism to enable them to receive their support payments.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because I was just coming on to that. I thought that he would perhaps lead me on to the key of this agenda—and the objections and screams from the Scottish Conservatives. We will not agree to a schedule to this Bill for as long as this Parliament and this Government fail to respect the devolution settlement and indulge in this grotesque grab of powers that should rightly belong in the Scottish Parliament. That is what has happened. As long as it continues to happen, and as long as the Secretary of State refuses to respect devolution, there will not be a legislative consent motion from the Scottish Parliament. We are happy to have common frameworks across the United Kingdom, as we have said again and again, but they have to be agreed and negotiated; they cannot be imposed. As long as he continues to approach devolution as something that he can control and manipulate, this is not going to happen. The sooner he gets beyond that mindset, the better things will be.

The key dispute, where I ask the Secretary of State to respond, is about the World Trade Organisation regulations in the Bill. In his view, everything to do with the WTO is reserved. Does he not accept that the administration of WTO terms is a matter for the Scottish Parliament? We do not have to take the Scottish Government's word for that, because in a piece of very useful legal advice from NFU Scotland yesterday we learned that it is indeed the case. The advice says that

“Scottish Ministers will not have total freedom to apply domestic support as they see fit if the Secretary of State makes regulations setting limits in relation to WTO classifications.”

It also says that

“it would not be a legitimate use of regulation-making power to prescribe within the limits how Scottish Ministers would be able to exercise the powers to apply support.”

NFU Scotland agrees with us that WTO rules administration is a matter for the Scottish Parliament. [Interruption.] If the Secretary of State does not agree, what is his basis for not agreeing with the legal opinion of NFU Scotland?

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): How many farmers did the hon. Gentleman speak to in his constituency prior to writing his speech? As he knows, my constituency borders his, and farmers in Angus are calling out for clarity from the SNP Government in Edinburgh. They want them to put the national interest before the nationalist interest. They want to ensure that farming has a prosperous future. They want to ensure that the SNP puts its country before party. Can he tell me when—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I must say to hon. Members that interventions are meant to be short, not speeches. I am very concerned about the number of Members who wish to get in. I am going to drop the time limit after this to six minutes, but Members should not be surprised if shortly after I have to drop it again.

Pete Wishart: I am sincerely grateful to the hon. Lady because the other key point we have been hearing from Conservative Members today is that, apparently, there is no plan or policy from the Scottish Government. Of course we will have a Government Bill. But let me tell Conservative Members that this Bill presented by the Secretary of State is nothing other than an aspirational wish list. What we are doing is consulting with the sector. We will be hearing from our rural champions. Once we have heard back, a clear agricultural policy Bill will be secured to ensure that Scottish agricultural interests are properly looked after—it will not be this aspirational nonsense that we are hearing from this Government. We need an agricultural approach that acknowledges the full horror of a hard deal Brexit and the absolute disaster of a no deal if it comes along.

The Scottish Government's “Stability and Simplicity” paper sets out a detailed five-year plan to minimise the potential disruption of this Tory Brexit to our rural communities. Our plan will give farmers and crofters stability during a period of unprecedented change not of Scotland's making. We have always to remember that Scotland wanted nothing to do with this disastrous Brexit policy, and it is up to us to try to clear up this mess to ensure that our farmers are properly protected and that they will be able to do their business. When that consultation is concluded, the Scottish Government will set out their plans, taking into account recommendations from our own agricultural champions and the National Council of Rural Advisers. That is how to frame legislation: speak to the sector involved, ask it what it wants and what it would like to see in the Bill, and then legislate.

Michael Gove: Can the hon. Gentleman explain why there are more Scottish Conservative MPs in this debate than Scottish nationalist MPs?

Pete Wishart: I will just finish my point given that it is about the Secretary of State, and then, if I have time, I will respond to the question.

I particularly enjoyed the Secretary of State's histrionics when challenged on convergence funding. I have never seen him so rattled. The question back to him is this: when will he do the right thing by Scottish farmers and give back the money that is due to them as soon as possible?

Bill Wiggin: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I believe that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) inadvertently misled the House. He can look at the record and see that I definitely said that the SNP should be heard, and to say otherwise is obviously wrong. I hope that he will check that and put what he said right.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): It is open to any Member to check. Let us crash on now. David Warburton has six minutes.

3.50 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): Some months ago, in this House, I reminded the Prime Minister of the fact that my constituency contains more cows than any other. I have that on firm authority, although the exact source has slipped my mind, and as far as I know Somerton and Frome's bovine supremacy is under no immediate threat.

Those cows, and our entire farming industry, face an enormous opportunity in the shape of the Bill: although perhaps not a giant leap, it is certainly not a small step. It is more a confident stride towards a confident future in which it is this country that decides how to frame our own agriculture policy in the interests of our own countryside, our own farmers and our own producers. After almost 50 years of having policy levers pulled by the hands of others—although, I am quite sure, with our best interests at heart—our hands are now back on the controls for a healthier environment, a cleaner environment, better soil health, better animal welfare standards, better public access to the countryside and, rather importantly for Somerset, better flooding control.

Let us not forget food production. Land management and food production must work hand in hand not only to provide the greatest environmental benefits, but to feed the country. With that in mind, I am delighted to welcome the Bill and, in particular, the financial powers in part 1, in which we at last depart from the area-based system of direct payments and arrive at a system of assistance based on providing environmental outcomes and, crucially, on improving productivity—be that to an agricultural, horticultural or a forestry business.

The focus really needs to be on how, by virtue of the best practice in improving productivity, we can deliver those environmental benefits. The two aims must run together. It is, after all, the Somerset grass that feeds the Somerset cow and gives forth our glorious Somerset milk and cheese.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. Friend will know, because his constituency neighbours mine, that Arla, one of the biggest producers of dairy products, is in my constituency. In welcoming this Bill, as both he and I clearly do, does he nevertheless share the concerns of Arla as a first purchaser that clause 25 in particular might cause difficulties for it, while also trying to eschew the bad behaviour of rogue producers?

David Warburton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have also spoken to Arla and I understand that there are concerns around that issue. I suspect that, during the passage of this Bill, there will be much scope for tweaks and additions. Our food security must come from targeting support for domestic agriculture so that we achieve not only the stability of food supply, but the environmental outcomes that pave the way to a sustainable countryside.

Agriculture in the west country, as elsewhere, needs help with both competitiveness and resilience. It needs to manage risk, market fluctuations and changeable conditions on a daily basis. The financial provisions in part 1 will be vital in helping farmers improve productivity, thereby shoring them up against adverse conditions.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Will my hon. Friend also draw attention to clause 25, which deals with the outrage that dares not speak its name in the countryside, namely the treatment of primary and secondary producers by monolithic, all-powerful supermarkets? For a long time, as he will recognise, the supermarkets have ridden roughshod over good commercial practice and it is time that this wise and insightful Secretary of State took action and rebalanced the food chain in the interests of farmers and growers.

David Warburton: I add my voice to that of my right hon. Friend in hoping that Ministers are fully aware of the misbehaviours of supermarkets and are prepared to push them in the right direction, but farmers also need to know what to expect.

My constituency is ornamented with innumerable orchards and fruit farms, from which pour the juices that make the finest—sometimes dangerously fine—cider. Clause 10 allows the Government to modify and discontinue the EU fruit and vegetable scheme, as the Secretary of State alluded to. I understand that existing programmes will continue to completion and a successor scheme is planned, but I ask Ministers exactly how that scheme will be framed. Any details would be enormously valuable.

Equally, it would be useful to know from the Minister a little more of the details of the Government's intentions around the reduction of direct payments in the first year and beyond of the agricultural transition described in clause 7. Although it is desirable to move away from the current system, it is important that this is done in a phased and controlled way; and although it is also important to move towards the environmental land management system, it is also possible that the coming years may prove challenging for farming. In these circumstances there needs to be sufficient scope for the Government to make the necessary interventions to ease pressure.

We can set out clear objectives for improving soil and water quality, improving access to the countryside, protecting habitats and the environment, and flood mitigation. These are all worthy and essential elements of policy, but the Government understand well that food production is the key to unlocking our golden environmental heritage. Managing the financial and policy framework for our growers and livestock farmers will allow them to hold that key and use it effectively.

While I am on the subject of risk, I must mention my private Member's Bill, the Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill, which is due to have its Second Reading

[David Warburton]

later this month. It would give the Secretary of State the power to put rivers authorities such as the Somerset Rivers Authority on a statutory basis, raise the precept and allow them to plan effectively. Should my Bill fall at this fence, perhaps the Minister would like to take those ideas forward; there may be room in this Bill.

As we face continued uncertainty—tempered, of course, with optimism and confidence—about the outcome of negotiations in Brussels, we must ensure that agricultural policy is not only firm, but flexible enough to accommodate the shifting sands between us. I am quite sure that the Government's will is very much in that direction. While admiring the confident stride of the Bill, I look forward to our next steps with great anticipation, as do the innumerable cows scattered across the Somerset fields.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I will have to bring the time limit down to five minutes; I did ask Members to help, but they did not wish to.

3.57 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton). I agree that we need more certainty, but not that this is an excellent Bill without that lack of certainty. Without any certainty, I cannot see that it is a particularly valuable Bill.

I think that the Secretary of State would readily acknowledge that this is essentially an enabling Bill. It enables him to make regulations: to protect our environment, or not to protect our environment; to support some farmers financially, but not necessarily to tell them beforehand whether they would get that support, or what they would get it for; to support the public access to the countryside, or not; and even to create offences without Parliament knowing what they will be before agreeing to give him those powers.

What the Bill does not do is lay out a duty, a process, a funding mechanism or any other indication of how the Secretary of State will ensure that farmers in this country will produce food that is healthy, environmentally friendly, animal welfare friendly—or, indeed, any food at all. What on earth is the point of our giving the Secretary of State vague and plenipotentiary powers to encourage and enforce the highest possible environmental, health and animal welfare standards in English agriculture if we end up buying all our food from non-European countries where we have no influence whatever over the environmental impact of their agriculture and cannot be certain of the animal welfare regimes or employment regimes under which that food is produced? If the Government are serious about promoting healthy food, why is there no food and farming framework? Why are they not willing to use any future funding regime to promote the production of healthy foods?

Some mention has been made of mung beans. I am actually very fond of broad beans. I would eat far more broad beans if more were available in the shops, but I hardly ever find them. Why, among all the various powers that the Secretary of State is taking, does he not wish to take any to encourage the production of healthy food that I always thought agriculture was meant to be about?

4 pm

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. May I begin by endorsing what the Secretary of State said about my hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who is widely respected and has overseen this subject during our five years in government? I realise that for him and for the Secretary of State, withdrawal from the European community will give them the power so importantly contained in the Bill, which frees us from the common agricultural policy. Although I personally thought that we should remain in the European Union, I well understand the desire in the agricultural industry to put the Bill on the statute book and to see how the future will be laid out.

It is worth bearing in mind the reason why our countryside is so attractive and visited by many people, particularly in my constituency and the Peak district: it has been farmed and looked after by our farmers for generations. I hope that the Minister of State can speak in his winding-up speech about the importance that we place on food production. Some of the less favoured areas in my constituency cannot be easily farmed without some form of support. That is very important indeed, and I wonder why we have not copied what is available in schedule 3 to Wales so that it is available to England.

Replacing the current system, which pays farmers according to the total land farmed, rather than a specific public benefit, is very important indeed. At the present moment in time, the top 10% of recipients receive almost 50% of payments, while the bottom 20% receive just 2%, which does not reflect the farming or agricultural good provided by many smallholdings and small farms in the uplands. I very much want that to be encouraged.

A lot has changed in agriculture over the past few years. I remember thinking that the foot-and-mouth crisis would be a big problem for me, as I had a large agricultural constituency. In fact, it was the tourism industry, which is important in the Derbyshire dales, that suffered the most. A third of total farm business comes from farm diversification. Rural tourism provides £90 billion a year to the UK economy. There are opportunities, and we need to support our farms.

The Bill has been welcomed by a number of organisations, but I hope that we do not somehow replace a Brussels bureaucracy with a bureaucracy that is even more constraining for farmers and the way they farm. I am pretty sure that the Secretary of State would not want that. However, I fear that some of the bodies that he works with and some of the Government bodies responsible for countryside issues may take a different view, so I look forward to his ensuring that there is an iron rod to tackle how regulations are imposed on agriculture, so that we let British farmers get on with farming.

4.4 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Agriculture's economic contribution to rural areas has already been emphasised this afternoon. It applies to Wales, and in particular Ceredigion, just as much as the other countries of the UK.

The structure of the Welsh agricultural industry is, at least for the time being, rooted in the family farm. In Wales, the average size of holdings is 48 hectares, which

is significantly less than that in the UK, and the industry's share of total employment in Wales is three times the UK average. It is important to note that, as a result, agriculture is of not only economic importance, but cultural importance, sustaining the Welsh language and the fabric of rural life.

I do not intend to go into detail about what a new agricultural policy for Wales should look like or how it should work, for such matters are rightly beyond the scope of the Bill and will be determined in the Senedd in Cardiff. While policy decisions relating to the future of Welsh agriculture are devolved, their funding ultimately is not, so I wish to concentrate my remarks on that.

Much has been said in this debate about the importance of direct payments, and in particular ensuring the viability of the agricultural sector. The industry in Wales is heavily dependent on the support it receives through the CAP. In 2017, for example, payments represented 107% of the total income from farming, compared with 68% in Northern Ireland and 52% in England. Any changes to the overall level of funding for UK agriculture will therefore have a particular impact in Wales, and as farmers manage around 80% of land in Wales, ensuring their viability is essential if other outcomes of agricultural policy are to be realised.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am sure that my hon. Friend agrees that it is not enough for Ministers to wax lyrical about farmers being the stewards of the uplands. They must also recognise that, in Wales, a living countryside as we know it is dependent on farmers' ability to be certain of a living wage in the future.

Ben Lake: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, with which I wholeheartedly agree.

On that point, the UK Government have committed to guarantee current levels of funding until 2022, but it is unclear how future levels will be decided or how funding will be allocated across the four countries of the UK. The farming Minister may recall a discussion at a session of the Welsh Affairs Committee some months ago about the fact that these are questions of not only how the cake will be shared, but how big the cake will be in the first place.

Giving as much clarity and stability as possible to the industry must be a priority, and any future funding framework should be based on a seven-year cycle. Ministers have suggested that decisions about future funding will be taken by the UK Government, subject to the Treasury's budgetary cycle and comprehensive spending review. That would not afford the industry the same certainty as under the present multi-annual financial framework. I appreciate that Ministers are hesitant to make unilateral funding decisions that would bind successive Governments, but if they were to make such a framework subject to the consent of all four countries of the UK—perhaps by means of a dedicated intergovernmental body—they would be at greater liberty to make such commitments to maintain funding for agriculture in the UK and to deliver the support and stability that the industry deserves.

Such an approach would also assist with the inevitable headaches that will emerge about how any funding is allocated across the UK. In fairness, both the Secretary of State and the farming Minister have confirmed that the Barnett formula will not be used to determine allocations. That is to be welcomed, particularly in Wales,

but a question remains about how the allocations will be decided. The Secretary of State referred earlier to an imminent review of this process.

John Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ben Lake: I will not as time is against me.

What role will the devolved Governments play in the process? How will future disputes be resolved? Only if financial frameworks are developed jointly by all four countries will they be sustainable and reflective of the needs of each. The Welsh and UK Governments believe that policy areas can be managed through non-legislative intergovernmental co-ordination, but I fear that that approach is unrealistic for questions of funding.

I would argue that an intergovernmental body is necessary to address any market distortions that may arise from policy divergence, which is not unlikely when we consider that on direct payments, for example, divergence looks possible between Scotland and Northern Ireland on the one hand, and between England and Wales on the other. Each nation should decide its own agricultural policy, but an intergovernmental body is required to address any issues that cause an imbalance in the market or unfairly disadvantage one country over another. The existing structures are not fit for that purpose.

I conclude by reiterating the need for any future financial frameworks to be agreed, built and maintained in co-operation between the four nations. When the Minister responds to the debate, perhaps he could assure farmers that such decisions will be made on the basis of shared governance and that the unique characteristics of the industries in each country will be supported accordingly. I am afraid to say that, at present, such an assurance is lacking.

4.9 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I have met some farmers and local NFU branch representatives in my constituency—yes, the meeting took place literally in the middle of a field—and they raised specific concerns. They talked about the need for the Government to ensure that UK farmers are treated equally and that they will not be at a disadvantage compared with those in the devolved countries, Europe and the rest of the world. They would therefore welcome a universal framework that applies to the whole United Kingdom.

Some farmers in South East Cornwall have supported public money for public goods as a good principle, but there is some concern about the ability of individual farmers to access schemes to replace the average Cornwall payment of £16,000 under the basic payment scheme through increased productivity. Tenants are concerned about how they will have access to environmental payments when landlords are seeking to retain them, even though the majority of the public good is delivered by the occupier—soil, water and carbon.

There is a general feeling that the level of regulation and inspection from Government and retailers is becoming too great, and that the administrative burden needs to be significantly reduced so that farmers can concentrate on what they do best: producing food. The power given to Ministers was acknowledged, but there needs to be increased scrutiny of contracts, risk-based assessments or inspections, and earned recognition so that the costs in time and money of needless and duplicated visits

[Mrs Sheryll Murray]

are eradicated. One farmer gave an example of a recent visit by trading standards to check the harvest interval of his onions, in case someone ate them raw.

Some farmers mentioned the need for sustainable and profitable farm businesses to deliver public goods, and the fact that these factors seem to have been left out of the Bill. They also raised the impact of last winter's cold weather, with the snow, and the very dry summer. Those environmental factors have had a detrimental impact on businesses and on the security of food supply. Indeed, concern was expressed that the Bill does not acknowledge a secure food supply as a public good, which is difficult to understand in view of the climate and trade challenges. The question of the farmer's position in the supply chain is always to the fore, and farmers want to know how the Bill will help.

I acknowledge that the Bill will improve matters, but more support is needed for producer organisations, including a wider exemption from competition law and further financial support to engender collaboration. The need for high environmental and animal welfare standards is acknowledged, but it will be impossible for farmers to deliver if their businesses are not profitable.

I welcome the Bill, despite these concerns. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will address some of my farmers' concerns and sensible suggestions when the Bill is in Committee. I have every confidence that he will be supporting the farmers, and I will support the Bill tonight.

4.13 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): The Bill gives the UK a huge opportunity to revitalise the countryside in a way that meets the needs of people, farming, food and the environment for generations to come. I welcome the Bill's broad thrust of shifting financial assistance to help farmers to restore and improve our natural environment, and public money for public goods. I also welcome the Secretary of State outlining the provision in the Bill to allow the Welsh Labour Government to set their own targets.

Crucially, however, the Bill fails in many areas. It fails to safeguard our food supply or to tackle health inequalities. It falls well short on properly protecting our natural environment. Depleting soils, losing pollinators, and polluting waters do nothing for farm productivity. At a time when we face huge environmental challenges, with the ecological challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss, we also need a Bill that delivers on outcomes, with clear targets.

The key weakness is the failure to secure long-term future funding for the agricultural sector, or to place a duty on Ministers to set budgets that reflect the scale of financial need and to specify timeframes for the longevity of those budgets. There is no doubt that the Secretary of State has excellent oratory skills, but does he have the negotiating skills to argue for the appropriate budget from the Treasury and to specify where and how it is to be spent? Can he also confirm by how much the DEFRA budget will be cut in future? The Bill must also ensure fair distribution across the four countries of the UK. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State say that funding will not be Barnettised, but how will it be decided and assessed, and exactly how much will it be? That is crucial.

As it stands, the Bill fails properly to address unresolved issues between the Welsh Government and Whitehall, particularly around the red meat levy, which must be properly distributed. Change is required to underpin mechanisms for a fairer and more representative distribution of the levy, but the Bill fails to recognise that. This issue has been debated over many years—I took part in the debate many years ago—and it is disappointing that it is not addressed in the Bill. Lesley Griffiths, the Welsh Cabinet Secretary, has also expressed her disappointment that the Bill does not contain provisions to improve the functioning of the red meat levy.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that he will fight to save our 14 food products in Wales that have been granted protected name status? Foods such as Anglesey sea salt, Welsh lamb, Welsh cider and Caerphilly cheese, to name just a few, are all products that enjoy protected status but are under threat. I would like to him confirm that he will do so and say whether he will make provision in the Bill.

My final point is about trade. This Bill is utterly dependent on Brexit and the disastrous negotiations that are currently taking place. We know what World Trade Organisation rules would mean for our farmers, our agriculture and our land, let alone our environmental safeguards and protections. They would mean the end of farmers, businesses, food production and safeguards—the end of British agriculture as we know it. We need confirmation that this will be taken into account, and we need that assurance not only from the Secretary of State, but from the Government.

We need an agriculture Bill that delivers outcomes, delivers on food security, delivers on environmental protections, keeps farmers on our land, addresses the huge challenges that we face and sustains a thriving British farming, food and drink sector. I think that this Bill falls short.

4.18 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorris). I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am the chairman of the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association, which promotes grass-fed as an alternative to grain-fed in our meat supply chain. I also keep a small herd of grain-free Hereford cattle at my home in Herefordshire.

The Agriculture Bill is a hugely important piece of legislation that will directly affect the majority of businesses in my constituency. There are over 2,000 businesses in Herefordshire in the agricultural sector, and 84% of the land in Herefordshire is devoted to agriculture. Farmers in Herefordshire welcome the reassurances that funding systems for farming subsidies will be slowly phased out over seven years, starting in 2020. That enables them to be sure of what lies ahead in the medium term and gives them the opportunity to have some input into how the system should work after the seven-year transition. There are issues with land values and the importance of subsidies over that period, but they can be dealt with.

The philosophy of public money for public goods is the right approach to take as long as we remember that the most important public good is health. That can be improved through the production of high quality, high welfare food for the British market. I am also supportive of increased environmental protections and higher animal

welfare standards. I am, however, nervous of a system in which food production itself is not the main goal of agriculture.

There is a way to support agriculture that solves the productivity dilemma. As chairman of the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association, I have visited some of our members' farms. I believe they provide an excellent model for how British livestock, or beef and lamb farming, should look in the future. The 100% pasture-fed model is one which is: better for the environment, through carbon sequestration; better for animals, coming top, according to Compassion for World Farming, of all welfare systems; better for the consumer, because of the high omega-3 fatty acids; better for the climate and our health; and, crucially, more profitable for the farmer.

In 2016, the PFLA produced a document called "It Can Be Done". It demonstrates that the economic case for pasture-fed compares very favourably with more intensive farming models. A survey earlier this year showed that it is better for animals. Some 53% of PFLA farmers reported a reduction in the use of antibiotics, 51% a reduction in vet bills and 66% noticed an overall improvement in the health of their stock. It is better for the environment. Some 81% of members have made significant changes to their grazing management, with over 50% achieving a longer grazing season and 25% seeing a movement towards that. Some 32% have reduced their synthetic fertiliser use and 64% have reported an increased diversity in their grass swards and bird life on their farms. Some 55% saw an increase in mammal and insect life. In animal welfare and environmental criteria, nobody reported a single negative outcome. That is good for the consumer, who will get that high omega-3 fatty acid which leads to the manufacture of conjugated linoleic acid, the only substance in one's body that can fight tumours. This is a really good way of helping not just the richest but the poorest sectors in our society.

There is one thing we need to do to make this work: we need to change the definition of pasture-fed. At the moment, it means that 51% of an animal's life must be on grass. It needs to mean 100%. We on the Conservative Benches have been campaigning for honesty in labelling for a long time. Brexit offers us a wonderful opportunity to deliver it. I want grass-fed to mean 100% grass fed. I want to see the benefits for the people farming: putting less in and getting a better product out. That is the way for a better future for our agricultural sector.

4.23 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate, because my constituency includes Teesdale, which is part of the north Pennines area of outstanding natural beauty, and I represent 400 sheep farmers. The area has a very rich environment, with 17 sites of special scientific interest. Not unconnected with that, a large part of the land is in the commons. A high proportion of farmers are tenants and incomes are low, last year averaging about £14,000.

Clause 1, which provides financial assistance for public goods, improving the environment, restoring the natural heritage and supporting public access, should be welcome in such an area. However, the total lack of detail in the Bill means that it is not at all reassuring. The implementation of clause 1 could be very arbitrary. As the Secretary of State explained in his description of public goods, they are non-rival and non-excludable. That means there is

no market price, so how will DEFRA Ministers put a value on public goods when they decide on payments to farmers?

Over the summer, I talked to a large number of farmers who stressed the uncertainty they face, which the Bill does very little to allay. It is, like the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, simply proposing a bundle of delegated legislation and Henry VIII powers, and DEFRA Ministers are not even showing us them in draft, even though clause 3(2)(h) creates criminal offences.

In the Bill the Minister is taking the power to write regulations and giving himself the power to make payments, but we do not know what the criteria will be, to whom the payments will be made and what the amounts of the payments will be. There is a seven-year transition, which is not like the general 21-month transition under the Prime Minister's Brexit proposals. In fact, it is not really a transition at all, because the current payments will not continue beyond 2022 and on any day in the following five years the Minister can make changes to those payments. That might be a series of steps down, or a cliff edge.

This is the ultimate in what it is now fashionable to call a blind Brexit. We need to see the draft statutory instruments before Third Reading and we need a proper agreed scrutiny process—the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs should be able to undertake that, or we need an explanation of whether the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) will be covering it in his Bill.

Let us be clear: farming cannot be environmentally sustainable if it is not financially sustainable. Farmers in the uplands have low profit margins and face considerable volatility, and Ministers must guarantee that the new payments will be equal in value to the basic payment and rural development schemes. They should consider making income support and stabilisation purposes for which payments can be made. Clause 18 is drafted to provide short-term market support, but it needs to cover chronic disruption in the event of changes to trade regimes that damage domestic farm incomes.

There is a real risk of a disorderly or no deal Brexit, and Ministers must be able to deal with that. Clause 26 gives the Secretary of State powers to comply with WTO obligations, but all the future trading arrangements remain a mystery. They will have a massive impact on farmers, whether we are talking about access to the EU—personally, I believe we should stay in the customs union and it seems that the Prime Minister is coming round to that—or the regime for imports.

The Bill should contain provisions to require all food imported to the UK to be produced to at least equivalent standards as they relate to animal welfare, environmental protection and labour. I have asked DEFRA Ministers 39 times whether they will guarantee that they will not have imports of cheap lamb from New Zealand, Australia, Canada and America. They have a 40th chance tonight to answer the question.

4.28 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I very much look forward to supporting the Bill later this evening. It is important and long overdue, regardless of Brexit, although, of course, Brexit will impact on trade deals and our ability to export and strike bilateral trade deals.

[Sir Hugo Swire]

Farmers, like all industries, need as much certainty as they can get at the present time. I therefore think it is entirely regrettable that the Scottish National party has chosen to put politics above certainty for farmers in Scotland. Farmers in Scotland deserve better.

The challenge for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—and he is a friend of mine—is to strike a balance between environmental stewardship and the production of food. There will always be those on all sides who argue that he is erring on one side or the other, but what he must take away from this debate is the fact that it is not just about managing land but about the production of food. We all have these balances in our own lives and our own constituencies. In my beautiful constituency we have to balance the area of outstanding natural beauty status against farming, which is a constant challenge. There is also the issue of access to the countryside, which I will come to in a minute.

My right hon. Friend can further champion the industry by doing more than the Bill stipulates. He can talk more about, and do more to support, our land-based colleges. In my constituency I have Bicton College, which he visited in a previous incarnation as Education Secretary in May 2012 to open the earth centre. We should do more to get young people into farming and show them the industry. The number of county farms has shrunk, and it is more difficult for young farmers to get in. At the other end is the work of charitable trusts such as the Addington Fund, which looks after farmers when they have to vacate their residences at the end of their farming careers. We need to show young people that there is a future in farming. Frankly, there is a demographic problem in farming and we need to encourage more young people into it.

My right hon. Friend has a real chance to be a champion in food production. I alluded to food labelling in an intervention. For too long, we have put up with misleading food labelling and country of origin labelling. The consumer deserves better and needs to know the country of origin. We need to know what is purely British—what has been reared, produced and packaged in Britain—and what has been imported into Britain, repackaged and sold in a misleading way. He can go much further in that respect.

Another issue of great concern around the Chamber is that of livestock transportation. We can ensure that we have the toughest possible regimes for our livestock exports, which I hope will increase after Brexit.

My right hon. Friend has done a lot regarding our slaughterhouses and abattoirs. I have written to him in respect of one of my small abattoirs, which does very little business. I think we have to have a light touch to secure the best possible practice. One abattoir in my constituency has CCTV as well as someone sitting there, even though it slaughters animals only once or twice a week. The requirements are very onerous for such a small business, and I hope my right hon. Friend will look at those issues when they arise. We should not shy away from the fact that the practices of some communities—for example, halal butchery and orthodox Jewish butchery—are simply not acceptable in animal husbandry terms.

I said earlier that we have a chance to introduce a “buy British” policy, and somebody from the Opposition said that we could not do that under WTO rules. We do

not know the rules yet, but we should put buying British products for our schools, hospitals and armed forces at the forefront of everything we do once we are out of the EU.

On land access, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want to encourage people to make more use of the countryside as part of the anti-obesity campaign, but there is a quid pro quo. The landscape looks as it does because it is farmed. It is man-made. Stone-walling, ditch-digging and hedge-laying are all done at farmers’ expense, so farmers are due some compensation. Simply to open up land irrespective of that, without acknowledging that it is private land that people are paying to maintain, is entirely wrong. I think there is a wonderful opportunity to review the whole question of footpaths, which are way out of date, and perhaps to look at compensation for farms that are covered in footpaths. We need to look at bridleways and the use of off-road vehicles. We can do so many of these things now that we are coming out of the EU.

This country should be able to feed itself; that is the duty of the Government. I think that the Opposition amendment is unnecessary and, frankly, unintelligible. I believe that the country should be able to feed itself, and I hope that the Bill will bring that goal one step closer.

4.33 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Over the past 50 years, through the intensification of agriculture, we have lost much of our nature and wildlife. I pay real tribute to Chris Packham and the wonderful march for nature that he organised a few weeks ago in London, where thousands of people marched through the city to demand that we change how we manage the land to protect the species with which we are fortunate enough to share the planet.

Let us take as one example the amazing bird that is the swift. One bird can fly a million miles, yet we have lost 50% of our swift population over the past 20 years alone, as a direct result of the way in which we manage the land. Our wild spaces, flowers and animals that give our landscape such magic and beauty have been devastated by the impact of our farming and land management, and it is now acknowledged that that must change.

That understanding needs to be at the heart of the Bill. We must use it as an opportunity to transform how we live with and in our countryside and rebalance our relationship not only with nature, but with how we produce and consume food. Sadly, despite some positive steps, the Bill fails to engage meaningfully with the endeavour to restore and protect the natural world. I want to talk about a few of the areas in which it does so.

The first failure, about which others have spoken, is that while the Bill provides powers for the Secretary of State, it does not place duties on the Government to act. That must change if it is to have a real impact. There needs to be a clear framework for the establishment of environmental land management schemes and the date by which they must be up and running. Given that more than 70% of UK land is used for agricultural purposes, now is the time to place a legally binding responsibility on Ministers to ensure that it is managed and farmed in a way that restores the natural world. Without such a guarantee, this—like so much of the Government’s green agenda—will remain a Bill with too many words and not enough substance.

Secondly—others have raised this issue as well—we need to have guarantees of longer-term funding, rather than leaving the Bill vulnerable to wavering political priorities. We need a clearer indication that long-term funding will continue well beyond 2022.

Thirdly, it is important to adopt a new definition of agricultural productivity. I fear that unless that happens, there will be a real risk that the Bill could undermine the policies that flow from other parts of clause 1, on assistance for the restoration and protection of the natural environment and animal welfare. DEFRA's guidance on food chain productivity clearly states that the measure of productivity that is currently being used

"does not incorporate external effects on society and the environment."

We must have a definition of productivity that captures those wider external effects if we are to be sure that the Bill will be successful.

In my first intervention on the Secretary of State, I mentioned public health. It should be at the front and centre of the Bill, and this should have been an opportunity to ensure that it is at the heart of our farming system. The Secretary of State has said:

"Food production is ultimately about health."

If it is—and I agree that it is—why is health not firmly included in clause 1 as a clearly stated outcome of the Bill?

The Bill needs to do an awful lot more on climate change. In 2016, agricultural emissions accounted for 10% of UK greenhouse gas emissions, and according to the Committee on Climate Change, there has been virtually no progress at all in reducing them since 2008. The Bill should therefore contain a clear commitment to reaching net zero emissions in the agricultural sector by 2050. Ministers must, as a matter of urgency, get serious about what climate change means for farming and land use, get serious about helping farmers to harness the potential of land to capture carbon through trees and soil, and embrace ecologically sensitive farming techniques.

There is also the issue of biodiversity. The Bill should be more explicit in its ambition to protect and restore the natural world. In the UK, almost 60% of species are in long-term decline, and one in five mammals are at risk of extinction. The ambitions in clause 1 should be much higher. There should be a clear provision for reversing biodiversity decline, which should be linked to the 25-year environment plan, should be based on the latest science and should connect with the UK's obligations under the convention on biological diversity. We need to channel a significant proportion of the finance provided in clauses 1 and 2 towards farmers who adopt agro-ecological and organic farming methods. We know that organic farms use far fewer antibiotics. They also have, on average, 50% more wildlife than conventional farms and deliver healthier soils, with nearly 50% more humic acid, the component of the soil that stores carbon over the long term.

Finally, let me say something about trade. We absolutely must have a provision that says, loudly and clearly, that we will not reduce our standards: we will not allow food of a lower standard to enter the country and threaten our food, our farming and our animal welfare standards.

4.38 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): There has been a big decline in our self-sufficiency as food producers during the 46 years in which we have been in the

common agricultural policy. As a result, we are now net importers from the continent of Europe, to the tune of £20 billion a year—a very large part of our balance of payments deficit—of food, including processed food, that we could rear or grow for ourselves, or process for ourselves if we wished. I hope that, as the Secretary of State works away at the Bill during its passage through the House, he will take on board what is being said by all of us who are urging him to make good production—high-quality food production, and local food production—a central part of his mission and what he is trying to achieve in conjunction with our agricultural businesses and our farmers, because much more can be achieved.

One of my colleagues has already pointed out that we could have new procurement rules that would allow us competitive procurement that also takes into account food miles. A really good green policy is to get the food miles down. We do not need ships and trucks carrying around bulky and quite heavy items of not huge value, when we could be growing them for ourselves and the farmer could be making a profit because transport costs would be lower, so can we please do that?

Will the Secretary of State understand that perhaps the most important thing farmers need to know, from 30 March next year if we leave without an agreement or from 2020 if we leave with an agreement, is what our schedule of tariffs will look like, because Brexit is not a great threat or problem? It is a massive opportunity. Here is an industry that has been wrecked and damaged and pillaged for 46 years, almost as badly as the fishing industry in some cases, which was probably the worst hit, and we have the opportunity to take it back in hand and encourage those who work on our behalf in the industry and to bring a bit of sunshine to the operation to show that there is a huge market opportunity out there.

The great joy is that this Bill rightly takes powers so that the Secretary of State and the Government can do what they need to do with the WTO, which will be running our trade framework whatever we do by way of agreement or no agreement. The WTO also has a pretty important role in this today, but of course we cannot influence it directly because the EU handles the account, and very badly it does so from the UK point of view.

If we look at our tariff schedule, we see at the moment that we have eye-wateringly high tariffs on temperate foods that we can grow or produce for ourselves from outside the EU, but zero tariffs on temperate products we could rear or grow for ourselves from inside the EU, and that competitive onslaught from some of the intense, and often subsidised and highly capitalised, farming on the continent has done enormous damage to our market share and undermined the businesses of many of our farmers over the 46 years we have been in the EU.

The Government should set out urgently for consultation what our tariff schedule will look like if we are leaving on 30 March 2019, because I assume the tariffs will be above zero for the EU as they have got to be the same as for the rest of the world, but I assume that we would want lower overall tariffs than the EU imposes on the rest of the world, and I assume that we would want to flex the tariffs down more on the things we cannot grow and rear for ourselves and would also want to make sure there is protection in there, in the spirit of our current regime, which is heavily protected against non-EU products.

[John Redwood]

I am not sure what the right balance is; that is something I am sure my right hon. Friend and the International Trade Secretary have either worked out or will work out quite soon, but the sooner we consult on it, the more hope we will give the farming industry. It must feel part of this process, because these will be its tariffs and they offer us this great opportunity to get access to some cheaper food where we are not competing and have uniform protection at a sensible level for both the EU and the non-EU, because it is the EU that is causing the main threat.

May I remind my right hon. Friend that he is our English Agriculture Minister and we want him to speak for England? Who in this Government does speak for England? I come into the Chamber and hear debates about the Scottish problem and the Irish border, but we must not forget England, our home base for most of us on this side of the House. England expects; England wants better; England wants to be able to compete; England wants a policy designed to promote English farms. I find that a really good English farm, with really good farming, looks beautiful and deals with the environment as well as food production.

4.43 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), who outlined his vision of a socialist protectionist England in the future, which certainly surprised me.

This has been billed as an historic Agriculture Bill, the first since 1947, but the truth is that it feels like a missed opportunity. I realise that it is an enabling Bill, but there is not enough clarity on other matters, particularly future funding and common UK frameworks. The farming unions across the nations have made it clear that there is insufficient reference to agricultural activity and how it will be supported and incentivised going forward.

I realise that only clauses 22 to 26 cover Scotland, and there is no doubt that policy decisions taken for England can have funding implications for the devolved nations. It is therefore critical that we get to know what the arrangements will be for agreeing future funding settlements. I say to Scottish Tory MPs that the NFUS wants the budgets to be devolved to Scotland to get the clarity that it seeks—the clarity that the Tory MPs say that they are demanding.

We know that Scottish farmers are not getting the £160 million convergence uplift money that they should have received, but Scottish Tory MPs have stood by and achieved nothing on that. How is that deficit going to be addressed? The NFUS has also highlighted the red meat levy, which is costing Scottish farmers £1.5 million a year. How is that going to be addressed? These precedents confirm why we and the Scottish Government are concerned about the direction of policy and funding, yet we are supposed to be relaxed about the power grab and the UK Government's ability to legislate for Scotland.

One example that could affect farmers is trade and trade resolution. The UK Government have refused to allow devolved representation on the Trade Remedies Board. During the Bill Committee, the then Trade Minister stated that devolved representatives would not necessarily be impartial. He was effectively saying that the UK Government did not trust our representation

and that we should just let them get on with it and deal with this for us. Other recent indicators include the early pulling of the renewables subsidy, the broken promises of amendments to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the fact that the UK Government are taking the Scottish Government to court.

Then there was the 2014 campaign, in which we were told that the only way to stay in Europe was to vote no. Well, we know how that has worked out. Scotland voted to remain within the EU, but the referendum result is now having an impact on the fruit and vegetable sector as well as on the food processing sector. The response from the UK Government has been completely inadequate. It was stated earlier that the seasonal agricultural workers scheme is pathetically shy of what is required. Let us bear in mind that the current Secretary of State was the one offering Scotland powers over immigration as a supposed Brexit dividend. What has happened to those powers? It is quite clear that the Tories cannot be trusted. It is therefore imperative that we see what a UK framework for funding will look like, and we need guarantees that it will not be imposed on the devolved Administrations. The NFUS has sought a legal opinion on part 7 of the WTO clauses, and it completely backs up our concerns.

Going back to the UK-wide frameworks, the Farming Minister talks of protecting the UK internal market, yet during questions in the same Committee he intimated that existing funding levels were such that the Scottish Government could not actually skew the internal market. So what is the concern? Why the reluctance? Let us work with the Scottish Government to get the UK frameworks agreed. Some of the more laudable aims of the Bill include the provision of payment for the greater good and environmental improvements. This is logical, although further clarity is required on what the funding arrangements will be and how the different measures will be prioritised.

Positive change can happen. A farmer in my constituency, Bryce Cunningham, farms at the historic Mossiel farm, which was previously home to Rabbie Burns. He has managed to turn his farm into a fully organic dairy farm in just a few years. He started producing and selling his own milk from the farm as a financial cash-flow necessity during the milk price crisis. Since then, he has undergone the full organic conversion. He has now gone plastic free, and his product is in demand all over Scotland. His is a great story, and Scotland has a great story when it comes to the quality of food and produce that we make and supply. That is why we want to protect and grow those sectors further, and why we want the levers of power to be retained at Holyrood and not to be interfered with by Westminster. At the same time, we are happy to work with the UK Government to agree on frameworks that are in the best interests of the nations.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Richard Drax.

4.48 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Heavens! You caught me by surprise there, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was not ready for that at all. Anyway, thank you very much for calling me to speak. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Yes, I did vote for Brexit and yes, I am a turkey voting for Christmas because the subsidies that my farm receives will be considerably reduced, putting my business plan if not at risk then certainly into review. I do not object to that: I voted to leave the EU because I believe that that is best for our country. I believe that this is a wonderful opportunity. The Agriculture Bill sets out provisions for farming in this country to be reviewed to a huge degree and to be controlled from this place. As we have heard, that has not happened for decades.

I thank the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who continually comes down to South Dorset to speak to my farmers—even at short notice. He has been incredibly kind and generous with his time, for which I am most grateful, and I am delighted that he is still in place. I am also delighted that the new Secretary of State has taken up this responsible position and that agriculture will be added to environment, food and rural affairs, giving it a far higher priority than has been the case over the past 10, 20 or 30 years. Now that we will have control of our farming, the Secretary of State's role will be crucial.

I take great pride in representing South Dorset and its many farmers. My constituency is the most beautiful in the country—[*Interruption.*] It is true, and I would welcome anyone who wants to come down to see it. Every quarter since I was first elected I meet my farmers to discuss their concerns. Those concerns are then passed to the Minister of State, who kindly passes his responses back down, and the system has worked extremely well. I do all that because I felt that local farmers were not really represented in the past. Getting back control through this Agriculture Bill will be a chance for us to help our farmers to produce the food that this country needs.

There was talk earlier on of educating children, about which I feel strongly. Ten or 11 years ago, I started offering visits to my farm to local schools, and we now welcome between 150 and 200 students every year. They spend the day going around the farm learning how it works and what goes into the food that they eat. At the last visit in June, I was talking to some children and asked them where milk comes from. Sensibly, one boy put his hand up and said, "From the cow," and I said, "That's extremely good. Well done!" I then said, "Do you know why the milk comes from the cow?" and there was a bit of a pause before one of them said, "Because the cow has a calf," and I said, "Absolutely spot on!" Interestingly, as the group was leaving, one of the adults said, "Richard, thank you so much. I have been educated today, because I did not know that a cow had to have a calf to produce milk." My point is that we need to educate not only our children, but clearly our teachers and everybody else about the significance of agriculture, which I hope we will now be able to do.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) went through the statistics about agriculture's significance. I will not bother the House with them again, but they are significant. We also heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) that Brexit will offer huge opportunities to the agriculture industry. I do not agree with the doomsayers from the SNP and other Opposition Members who say that we are all going to hell in a handcart. We will have huge opportunities for agricultural business, and I shall be shouting from the rooftops when that day comes.

It is worth noting that it is the farmer who creates the environment that so many of us have talked about. It is our farmers whose standards are, on the whole, way higher than those of our European friends and partners. Let us not forget that, for all intents and purposes, we are the gold standard for farming around the world. Yes, there is room for improvement but, by gum, we set good examples and a very high bar. Down on the farm, those who love the land—and they do—continue to battle legislation, red tape, quangos, politicians and the weather. I ask the Front-Bench team to help with three of those issues: can we remove the red tape and the quangos and prevent too much political interference?

4.53 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): The United Nations estimates that over 8 million people in the United Kingdom suffer food insecurity—over 8 million people who are unable to afford to eat or who worry where their next meal will come from. I am astounded that we have been presented with an Agriculture Bill, which should have food at its heart, that contains nothing to address the growing levels of desperate hunger in the UK on this Government's watch.

Any Bill concerning agricultural markets and our food chain should also address the end of the food supply chain: consumers and, more importantly, the impact of food insecurity on them. Globally, there have been predictions that we are heading for a serious food shortage as early as 2027. As populations rise, conflicts spread and more extreme weather affects food supplies, it is clear that food insecurity will become an even more important issue.

The all-party parliamentary group on hunger, of which I am a member, has taken a deep look at the growing issue of UK hunger. Over recent years, we have found that austerity, punitive welfare reforms, benefit cuts, and inaction on low pay and insecure work, as well as the widening gulf between incomes and the cost of living, are the main drivers of UK hunger. We also found that 3 million children are at risk of hunger during the school holidays and that 1.3 million malnourished older people were

"withering away in their own homes".

I have received answers to parliamentary questions showing that rising levels of hospital admissions for adults and children because of malnutrition are costing the NHS £12 billion per year. We now have approximately 2,000 food banks—that we know of—and evidence has shown time and again that food-bank use alone is an indication of last resort. There are legions of hidden hungry who do not go to food banks and do not ask for help, either out of shame or embarrassment, or because they do not know where to go.

Each time that I have raised the issue of hunger in the House, various Secretaries of State and Ministers have denigrated statistics from charities, researchers, food banks and colleagues, claiming that the figures are not robust enough, or that the information is not reliable enough to inform Government policy. Denying the accuracy of the data or simply turning a blind eye allows them to pretend that the problem does not exist, but it does.

This is where my Food Insecurity Bill comes in. All I am asking is for the Government to replace redundant questions in an existing UK-wide representative survey—such as the living costs and food survey that they

[Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck]

already conduct—with questions pertaining to hunger, and place the results before the House on an annual basis. The Bill is therefore cost-neutral and will give a true, robust and reliable measurement of UK hunger. It is backed by more than 150 MPs from all parties, dozens of peers, 30 organisations and 77% of the public. The cross-party all-party parliamentary group on hunger and the cross-party Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee have also advocated such a measurement.

Despite all that support and repeated correspondence with the Minister of State, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, the Government remain dogged in their determination not to implement my Bill. I hope that today the Secretary of State will see the merit in adding the asks of my Bill into this Bill. In a country as rich as ours, no one at all should go to bed hungry and wake up hungry. The fact that so many people do is an abject failure of this Government.

4.57 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

As a rural Northumbrian for more than 20 years, I have been closely involved with the trials and tribulations of the local farmers and land managers, whose livelihood is determined by the health of our rural economy. It is a physically hard life, and the Northumbrian weather—perhaps even more dramatic than that in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax)—is a constant companion, with financial rewards sometimes feeling scarce.

The understanding of taxpayer support for farming is a fundamental underpinning of our food supply system, and it is a support that taxpayers buy into, as long as it reaches its intended target and meets its stated aims. The EU's common agricultural policy did not do that. The voice of UK farmers has too often been drowned out by the demands of French or Spanish farmers. We have been stuck in a system not aimed at investing in the best land use in Northumberland or anywhere else across our islands.

With our departure from the EU and this Bill, we can stop the EU CAP funding bias against our own farming communities and put our own more effective and targeted land-management choices first. This reflects the optimistic outlook that Brexit brings—despite the depression on the Opposition Benches that has positively brought me down to earth—about the fact that we can and should determine our own land-management policy.

At a local level, my caseworker Jen spends a great deal of her time dealing with concerned farmers who have yet to receive last year's payment, or are wondering whether this year's will ever materialise. Mapping disagreements, disputes over hedge lines, common land use and cross-border issues with the Scots—not helped by the SNP's current position—are just some of the challenges that the EU-based system, and perhaps historically our own delivery teams in Whitehall, have thrown up, causing months of financial and emotional challenges for Northumbrian farmers.

In addition to the funding disparity with other EU nations, years of working with our upland farmers in Northumberland has brought to my attention too many

stories of wasted time and energy that could be better directed. One of the biggest gripes, as the Minister well knows, is the multiple visits by officials to ensure that EU rules are being followed, each visit adding stress and taking time, when one visit could cover all the issues—like an Ofsted visit, perhaps. Farmers would face one short window of pain, but would then be trusted, left alone to get on with their job. The vast majority of our farmers want to look after the land they are stewarding.

The undue pressures placed on our rural communities have always worried me. Farmers have been asking for help to ease the burden for years, but until now there was nothing we could do. That is why the Bill is so exciting: we will at last be able to create management and financial incentives to suit our needs and this Government's long-term commitment to looking after our whole environment. We will be designing a system that does not funnel funds to our farmers' foreign competitors, but frees up our land stewards to innovate; a system that supports a holistic perspective of land management, which puts long-term soil health, food production and water basin management with tree planting; and a system that incentivises long-term investment for public and economic good—the two are not mutually exclusive. Most important, public good is not an empty phrase: it means that we can join up long-term urban and rural health and security needs with the way we use our land—for everyone.

The Bill is based on inherent fairness, whereby farmers are rewarded for what they do and produce, rather than for the size of their landholding. Crucially, it offers rewards for those already working hard to improve the environment and to ensure that their methods of production are sustainable. That will begin to drive change for good across the countryside.

As the MP for one of the most sparsely populated constituencies—albeit the most beautiful, and I will take on anyone who wants to fight me on that—I am pleased that is not just farmers who grow food who will benefit from the new system. I have spoken many times about trees, and this debate offers an opportunity to do so again. As the Minister is aware, I believe we need to be planting at least one tree for every citizen, not one for every five, but the target of 11 million needs at least to be met to allow the long-term thinking we need for land management and water basin stabilisation, to support the timber industry's needs and to reduce long-term reliance on imports for biomass, for housing frames and for furniture. We must aim to be able to become self-sustaining in timber.

Deidre Brock: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Trevelyan: I will not. Timber absorbs carbon dioxide as it grows and then holds that carbon a second time as wood products. I ask the Minister to consider, as part of the Borderlands initiative, planting a borderlands forest as part of our meeting our tree-planting targets—not so much a wall dividing us from our Scottish colleagues, but a biodiverse habitat that the English and the Scots can nurture together.

5.2 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Were the Minister in his place, I would remind him that many of us have been attending agricultural shows and sheepdog trials for many years, and not just in our role as MPs. Our farms

and our farming communities are part of our way of life in areas such as the Peak district. It is important to remember that when we examine the Bill. Promoting agriculture and the proper management of our land is important not only to tourists and visitors, but to those of us who live in rural areas and want our communities to be maintained.

Farming is important not only to our economy but to ensuring that we can continue the rural way of life. I am talking not just about upland farmers, but lowland farmers—in the Peak district, we have both the hills and the dales—sheep farmers, dairy farmers, beef farmers and smallholders. Most farming families have been farming for generations. They understand animal welfare, looking after the land, and how to put together a dry stone wall—a skill that takes years of dedication to acquire.

The rural way of life needs to be sustainable for future generations. The Bill is being introduced at a time when the average age of a UK farmer is 59, 30% are over 65 and only 3% are under 35. The Bill needs to be able to give the new generation the certainty to carry on in farming. At the moment, it is hard for them to see a way forward. The number of farmers in the UK has dropped from 141,000 in 2011 to 126,000 now: a drop of 11% in just seven years. The average income is about £20,000 a year—for lowland sheep grazing, it is about £16,000—and that is for all the hours farmers put in. They work 24/7 in many cases, particularly during the sort of weather we have had this year. Farmers have been out in the freezing weather and out taking water to the uplands when the water pressure has dropped and the supply has not been able to continue. Farming is a way of life and farmers want to be able to continue living it, but they are very concerned that the proposals in the Bill may mean—we have not seen any figures yet—that that is impossible.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), who set out clearly the problems that lots of farmers are having with the Rural Payments Agency and the bureaucracy involved in trying to claim a lot of the agri-environment payments on offer at the moment. The thought that their whole income has to be derived from those sorts of projects—the filling out of huge forms, all the bureaucracy, taking photos, reporting everything online and having multiple visits—does not fill them with confidence for the future. One of my local farmers reported that the RPA had asked him whether he was measuring his dry stone wall in metres or acres, and that was when he started to worry that RPA staff really do not know about farming and are far too remote from the farms and what is actually going on.

At the moment, farms are supported with nearly £3 billion via the CAP. Fortunately, we are going to see that continue, but direct payments make up 78% of that amount, so they are incredibly important to grazing animal farms, which actually make a loss. The direct payments are a source of sustained income on which they can rely when they are looking to invest. We need to make sure we have a system that recognises different types of farms, as has been said by Members from across the House. It may well be that we can have different systems of payment for different types of farm, and that that will take away the problems that farmers have having, but the Government need to make sure they set that out clearly for farmers for the future.

5.7 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I welcome the Bill. When the coalition Government were formed in 2010, I recall that the Government's chief scientific officer spoke to us about the possible perfect storm of shortages of food, energy and water all at the same time. Farmers are in the lucky position of being able to provide all three, and the medium to long-term opportunities for agriculture in this country are very good. I hope that the Bill will set us on a path to farmers being able to achieve that in a way that is connected to the market as much as is possible, rather than requiring recourse to the taxpayer.

Let me start by talking about clause 1. Many hon. Members have made the good point that it contains no mention of food production as a public good, but I urge a bit of caution there, as the argument of agriculture can be weakened in terms of other parts of the food industry and other sectors in the economy. It is much more important to talk about food security, and the public good of producing healthy food with high animal welfare and environmental standards. That is much more connected to the aspirations of the public than talking about just the production of food.

The Government should take credit for the 25-year environment plan, which is an excellent document. I want to see its themes running right through this Bill as we get into its detail and the statutory instruments that flow from it. I am also extremely proud of the natural environment White Paper, which was produced in 2011. It did a number of things, including hard-wiring the concept of natural capital into our thinking right across government. Natural capital is not only something that should appeal to the environmentalists among us, but good business. As a farmer, I am carrying out a natural capital audit of the land for which I am responsible not just because I want to know what I am doing well and whether there are improvements to make, but because I want to use it as a baseline from which I can show the public that I am making the improvements that they need.

That brings me on to one of the most important factors: the concept of "water first". DEFRA asked me to chair the UK Water Partnership, which we are taking forward. Basically, if we are doing the right thing for water, everything else environmentally and for those businesses that depend on the environment falls very quickly into place. I commend the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), the Chair of the Environment Audit Committee, for mentioning the four parts per 1,000 initiative. If we are doing the right things for water, we are doing the right things for soil. That means that soil is locking up carbon and being retained for future generations. That is good business as well as good environmental management.

In the short time that I have left, I want to refer to a very important theme in the Bill. When we talk about agriculture, we need to remind ourselves that the second part of that word is "culture", and culture is all about the human element of farming. We have heard eloquent speeches today about the beauty of the landscape. Many billions of pounds are made by industries such as tourism on the basis of human interventions in our countryside that go back centuries. That is apparent even in our wildlife. Barn owls, corn buntings and field

[Richard Benyon]

mice are species that developed because the landscape was managed. We need to encourage the next generation of farmers to be the great land managers of the future.

I hope that I have read the Bill correctly and that it includes an element that will allow those who have come to the end of their farming career to make way for the new generation. I am hugely impressed by the young generation of farmers I meet. The people whom I met at the south of England show last Sunday were getting awards for really innovative thinking. They are the ones I want to see managing the land in the future. It is unkind to call farmers “bed blockers”, but there are some who want to retire and to be given the incentives to do so. If I have read this Bill correctly—I hope the Minister will give us some assurances—it implements mechanisms that will allow long-term farmers to retire with dignity, making way for a new breed of entrepreneurial land managers who can cope with the difficult environmental problems of the future and make a contribution to agriculture in our country.

5.12 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the thoughtful speeches of the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and my hon. Friends the Members for High Peak (Ruth George) and for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck). We have heard quite a lot in general about the sunlit uplands of Brexit, and about a rosy bucolic Brexit Britain, but much of the debate has missed out the red meat—questions such as what the quantum of funding will be, what powers the Secretary of State will have, and what outcomes we are seeking to achieve.

Two years ago, the Environmental Audit Committee warned that UK farmers faced a triple whammy from Brexit: first, the loss of subsidies; secondly, the potential for tariffs on exports; and, thirdly, the threat of being undercut by cheap imports from countries with lower standards in food safety, animal welfare and environmental standards. Today, I want to talk about my two concerns with this Bill. First, it gives Ministers the power to spend taxpayers’ money with no accountability. I can think of no other area of public policy where we would be discussing the expenditure of £20 billion to £25 billion of public money without demanding some very detailed answers. The second area of concern is the lack of ambitious targets for the restoration and recovery of nature, which need to be linked to those payments.

We know that the CAP has shaped and underpinned British farming for the past 40 years. Each of us is only one or two generations from people who grew up and managed land. Basic payments from the CAP make up between a third and a half of the average farmer’s income, and 60% of profits for average farms and 90% of profits for grazing livestock farms. They are a very, very important part of the farm business.

The CAP currently has a seven-year budget cycle, which provides farmers with the long-term certainty that they need about what they will receive, and allows them to plan and invest. We have heard from Ministers that they will match current levels of EU funding until 2022, but farmers are asking, “What next?” and the Bill provides very few answers. It fails to say how much

funding there will be, whether funding security will be guaranteed and who will administer the money. Its vague list of purposes risks policy inconsistency.

My Committee has called for an agricultural policy with clear goals, but the Bill says that payments can be made for anything from

“mitigating or adapting to climate change”,

which is obviously very welcome, to restoring or enhancing “cultural heritage or natural heritage”—

I am not entirely sure what that means or how we measure it—through to

“improving the productivity of...an agricultural...activity”.

That leaves open the possibility of taxpayers incentivising intensive farming, and incentivising and paying for activities that harm the environment. We must not get into a policy pickle with the Bill.

Budgets could also be subject to the dead hand of the Treasury coming in halfway through, as we have seen with the abolition of various other environmental initiatives in other parts of the economy, so where is the Government’s accountability to farmers, the public and this place?

I am concerned that there is no obligation for people in receipt of so-called delinked payments to continue farming. Clause 7 gives the Secretary of State powers to make a lump-sum payment. As I said in an intervention, it would be possible for a farmer to quit farming and pass their farm on to their children, and for their children then to receive financial assistance under the new scheme. This sort of double accounting must not be allowed.

Clause 2 states:

“Financial assistance may be given by way of grant, loan, guarantee or in any other form.”

What “any other form” are we talking about? If we cannot define it on the face of the Bill, what are we signing up to? This is the beginning of an administrative nightmare. We know that problems at the Rural Payments Agency have brought down fines under both the Labour Government and this Government. Subject to conditions, as the Secretary of State considers appropriate, we need to ensure that this money is spent responsibly and well.

I will conclude by mentioning the lack of environmental targets. We need to stop and reverse the decline in species and soil health, which we will hear a lot about in the new environment Bill. That Bill will contain the targets; this Bill contains the money. Having two Bills risks policy incoherence, so we should start with the targets and design an agricultural policy around them, if we are to meet our international obligations on soil carbon content and reversing species loss in this country.

5.18 pm

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): When the last Agriculture Bill went through this place in 1947, we were genuinely concerned about our ability to feed ourselves. In the year that potatoes hit the ration list, food security was the core component of the legislation. Times have now changed and so have our priorities. I welcome the fact that the environment is now such an important part of this Agriculture Bill and that the public so overwhelmingly support that principle. However, food security must continue to be a factor.

Last year, the UK produced only 60% of what it needs to feed itself, compared with 74% 30 years ago. In 1947 there were 13,000 farms in Somerset. Today, just a fraction remain, but agriculture continues to be a hugely

important part of Somerset's economy. Seventy-one years on, Brexit gives us the opportunity to reinvigorate our relationship with the UK's farmers, and to restate the importance of the food security that they provide and their role in caring for our natural environment.

I very much welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to articulate his vision for a green Brexit in the Bill. There is much to applaud in the way in which environmental concerns have been brought to the fore in the drafting of the Bill, and the Secretary of State and his team at DEFRA have rightly won plaudits from the green lobby for their evangelism on the environment. We have to be careful, however, that we do not superimpose a London-based, non-governmental organisation definition of environmentalism on to the country beyond. I am sure that that is not the Secretary of State's intent, but there is a danger that we cast farmers and farming as detrimental to the environment when actually so much of the good that happens in our countryside is the work of our farmers.

It should not need to be said, but farming is a good thing—so much of the rural idyll that people picture in their minds is the product of farming—and we should not be sniffy about intensive farming, provided that the right animal welfare and environmental standards are maintained. When farmers seek to deliver quality products at low prices through economies of scale, it is surely a good thing. Mega-farms might exist elsewhere in the UK, but farms labelled as “intensive” in Somerset probably consist of a few hundred cows being milked by two or three robots. We must not talk down those important and innovative rural businesses.

Last week, when I met farmers across my constituency to discuss the Bill, they were passionate about the landscape in their care and talked enthusiastically about the amount of wildlife on their land. Some of them farm sites of special scientific interest, where the habitats are particularly sensitive, and they do so with real love for the land in their care. It was clear, however, that how they defined what was of environmental value differed from farm to farm. For some farms in my constituency, an environmental good might be flood alleviation; for others, it might be planting woodland; and for others, it might even be rewilding. Those are undoubtedly good environmental things to do, but they would mostly happen instead of farming rather than alongside it. We must make it absolutely clear that for all the good environmental intentions, we can never judge an agriculture Bill to be successful if it reduces food production.

At the end of the day, it comes down to how we define the public good. I would argue strongly that while good stewardship and a focus on the environmental aspect is clearly a public good, so too is our sovereign capacity to feed ourselves. The key part of the Bill is the connection between subsidy and environmental good practice. While subsidy per acre is a pretty universal measure, if we are to subsidise environmental good, it will be much harder to say what is worthy of subsidy in different parts of the country. Some farms are more productive than others, so there is leeway to do things in a more environmentally focused way. Many farms in my constituency are on poorer-quality land, and margins are very tight indeed. This summer's weather affected grass growth badly, so feed costs will be higher this winter. Our subsidy regime, while prioritising the environmental aspect, must have the flexibility and agricultural nous to respond to such pressures.

Decarbonisation grabs the headlines, but methane is a far more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, so any farming that includes livestock contributes to climate change. We must look carefully at how we help the farming industry with research and development costs to develop livestock farming methods that produce less methane. There is a drive towards veganism, but that change in consumer habits will put my constituents out of business. Surely there is a way of supporting agriculture and our environment without casting them as being at odds with each other.

5.23 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I should like to begin by putting on record my thanks to all those who have worked incredibly hard to develop the Bill. For almost 50 years, this country has been bound by the common agricultural policy, with its legislative roots in the treaty of Rome. Policy has been dictated to us by the bureaucrats in Brussels for too long. All the farmers I speak to welcome the opportunity for change and also the security of farm payments until 2022.

The Bill is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to form our own bespoke agricultural policy, allowing us to cater not to the needs of the maize growers of Poland and the citrus growers of Catalonia, but to the farmers of Cumbria, Caithness and Cornwall. I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State refer, not once but twice, to the Cumbrian Lake district in his opening speech, recognising the importance of lowland and upland farmers. This is our chance to tailor legislation to the needs of British farmers and maximise their businesses. It is key that we ensure that our agriculture sector is agile, diverse and efficient in an ever more globalised economy.

It is important to note that one key feature of the Bill is securing a new system based on paying public money for public goods. That new system will undoubtedly give one of the largest boosts to food production, environmental protection, rural public access and flood reduction that we have seen in this Parliament. Farmers transfer their knowledge and experience from generation to generation—more so than in any other industry. Farmers know their land best. Environmental protections play a crucial role in ensuring a sustainable agricultural sector. Ultimately, it is nature that underpins our farming system, with insect pollination worth £690 million to UK farming. It is vital that we give our farmers the environmental protections they need to create an economically and environmentally sustainable food production industry.

Another critical issue related to the Bill is flood reduction measures. I am sure many Members remember the devastation caused by Storm Desmond in December 2015. While I commend the Government for investing millions of pounds in flood defences, we must not forget that one of the most effective ways of reducing a storm's impact is to work with our farmers and riparian owners on methods such as planting riverside woodlands and increasing surface infiltration, which will also support the benefits to wildlife and their habitat. In particular, I would like to see added protection for our native species, such as the iconic red squirrel, whose habitat is being destroyed by the Forestry Commission and others.

The Bill is not limited to attaining public goods for public money, however; it also opens our eyes to the world of opportunities available to our agricultural sector.

[Trudy Harrison]

The provision set out by the Secretary of State that allows the collection of supply chain data could unlock a huge boost in productivity, which our economy sorely needs, and allow the minimising of risk, waste and environmental harm—three things that are key for a sustainable industry.

I am so pleased that this Government recognise the value of school visits. I commend farmers in my Copeland constituency, such as farmer Kevin Holliday, who has welcomed hundreds of schoolchildren and gave me my first experience of lambing a ewe during the spring while on my roadshow of farm visits.

With Brexit on the horizon, it is time to make this significant investment in agriculture. It is time to ensure that young farmers understand the terms and conditions for their future and to enable better productivity, and it is time to back British farming.

5.27 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): This Bill is about how we continue farming after Brexit and the CAP, and farmers in my constituency welcome it.

The most beautiful constituency has been mentioned a few times, but I do not even need to pitch for it, because any MP who has been down to West Cornwall or even on Scilly has already decided that St Ives is the most beautiful constituency, so there is no need to persist. That is important to this debate, because if we go to the start of my constituency on the Helford river and follow the coast all the way around to Land's End, and then right around St Ives to Hayle, in the constituency of the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, we not only find a huge length of coast and the Isles of Scilly, but we see that every farm is a small farm.

I ask three things of the Bill: that it protect small farms, access to labour and protected status, which is important for us. As I said, my constituency has lots of small farms, and access to those farms is not conducive to the huge machinery that we have seen an enormous growth of in recent years. However we go forward after leaving the common agricultural policy, we must understand that because of the pressure on keeping food prices low and the difficulties in finding people who see a small farm as a viable future, we have seen many farmers come to the end of their working life with no option but to simply rent their land out to large contractors.

It is quite clear—this is not a criticism—that looking after the environment, the natural habitats and how these farms are organised is nowhere near as high a priority for a large contractor that needs to get a decent crop and get in and out quickly as it is for a farmer who lovingly looks after the quality of the soil, the habitat and the wildlife that lives in it. It is very important that, as we move forward, we understand the contribution that small farms make to our rural communities, our countryside and our food supply, and to the protection of our natural habitats. This is a great opportunity to get that right.

I also want to talk about protecting access to labour. In a rural constituency such as mine, which takes ages to get to, accessing labour is a real challenge. The truth is that food production in West Cornwall and on the Isles of Scilly requires foreign workers to be employed permanently, not just in seasonal jobs. I was nervous and concerned after announcements last week about

how our approach to skilled labour will go forward. I have met these farmers many times since being elected, as has the Minister, and it is clear that they are keen to secure a foreign workforce not just on a seasonal basis, but to provide the labour they need. In Cornwall, where unemployment is low, it is very difficult to get the seasonal workers we need.

Finally, we need to protect our protected status. In Cornwall we have the pasty—a fantastic part of a balanced diet, I hasten to add. On Saturday I organised the great western dog walk for the third year in a row. We walked across the beach with the dogs in aid of brain tumour research and support, and we ended it with a cup of tea and a pasty, which is perfect on a blustery day. It is very important that Cornwall maintains the protected status of the pasty, alongside many other foods produced in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly that are rightly protected. That is part of how we will maintain a good agricultural and economic policy and look after our natural environment.

5.31 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). He started his speech with a very controversial statement, with which I think no Member of the House agreed, but I think that everybody will agree with me when I say that British food is the best in the world, and I think that our constituents would be pleased to agree that our prices are among the lowest in Europe. Although I have no financial interest in farming, I should declare that I am a hobby farmer—a continual irritant to the many generations of my family who farm properly for money. I therefore do not have an interest to declare in the register, but I do have the soil of Oxfordshire under my fingernails.

I feel extremely strongly that we must get this right. On the day after the referendum, my first worry was for the environment. In fact, as the previous Prime Minister was resigning, apparently I was muttering something about hedgerows. Whatever else we might think of our friends in Europe, we must admit that their farming lobbies have always been extremely strong.

I am a big fan of the Secretary of State, and of course of the Farming Minister—anyone who farms South Devon must be a great farmer. The Department has certainly got the environmental message, and I have confidence in its ability to make good decisions on the future of subsidies, but I urge both Ministers to make these decisions quickly. Stability and long-term planning are really important to farmers. Farms are not just businesses; they are somewhere to live, and they often provide work for the next generation. We need as much notice as possible of the direction of travel.

Other Members have spoken about the importance of workforce planning.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Given that I represent many of my hon. Friend's relatives who work in fruit picking in the Vale of Evesham, I had better be careful about what I say. On workforce planning, does she agree that seasonal workers play a pivotal role? Are they receiving sufficient attention?

Victoria Prentis: I will always give way to the representative of my many relations who grow soft fruit and vegetables in the Vale of Evesham—our family

history is called “Not only cabbages”. I agree that workforce planning is critical. That is one issue about which I hope to learn much more in the coming months. We need 95,000 seasonal workers. We grow asparagus in Oxfordshire as well, and this issue is important to many of our farmers, although not all.

To keep prices low and the food supply secure, we need to focus on food production as well as the environment. We are proud of our local housing record in my constituency. That is important, but it is literally true that we are losing productive ground to housing—apparently the national equivalent of about the Isle of Wight every year. It is important when we make all these decisions that we look at real evidence. For example, the ban on neonics was widely welcomed. I keep bees on my hobby farm and I know how fragile they are and how important they are to my cider and perry orchards—my cider is definitely the best in the country. The ban on neonics may well be right for them, but the flip side is that some local farmers have sprayed their oilseed rape seven times this year with alternatives to neonics and killed far more of the surrounding eco-structure as a result. Very little rape will be grown in my constituency next year, and of course we all need fields of wheat to continue in Oxfordshire. It would be ludicrous if the new system allowed crops sprayed with neonics to be imported without restriction. If an environmental restriction is right for us, it is right for the produce that we import from around the world. We must assess the evidence rather than be swept up by environmental campaigners.

I would also urge caution around rewilding. It sounds sexy and is gaining ground and celebrity endorsement, but the object is to remove all human impact on the environment. It comes with environmental risk, including species loss, and would completely alter significant national assets such as the Lake district and the North Yorkshire Moors, where nature and farmers have worked together for thousands of years.

I should end by focusing on the corn bunting, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) mentioned earlier. I am proud to be the species champion, but the corn bunting is in peril, with numbers dropping by over a third since 1995. These are farmland birds, which breed mainly in cereal crops and depend on farmers helping them by providing cereal grain over the winter, given that they do not migrate. Tailored agri-environment schemes, such as mid-field double-drilled strips in winter cereals, are perfect for them. We can get it right, but in order to do so, food production must be considered every bit as important as environmental protection. Food may grow on trees, but trees grow better with care and attention. We must listen to the voices of the countryside when making this new policy.

5.37 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I welcome—patiently—the Bill, which puts in place the necessary changes as we leave the EU. I am truly delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). She may represent a beautiful county, but of course I represent the most beautiful constituency. I draw hon. Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am a conventional farmer—an organic farmer—I am a producer and I receive the single farm payment. This gives me an intimate knowledge of the industry.

The Bill focuses mainly on public money for public goods, and we are evolving from a common market. The Bill and future legislation will create a framework and support specific to the UK and the devolved Administrations. I welcome that. Like other Members, I want to see food production and farming in the Bill. Financial assistance for environmental purposes is laudable, but I believe that productive agriculture and the environment are mutually inclusive.

We have moved past the grubbing up of hedges and updated our pesticide and chemicals usage. In 30 years in agriculture—yes, it is hard to believe—I have seen leaps and bounds. I do not recognise some hon. Members’ characterisation of what farming is. We have moved a long way in 30 years. Farmers are the guardians of the land and the countryside. The longevity of that land is so important, and family farming, on whatever scale, looks to hand it on in a better state than it was received in. Upland farming must be protected by the Bill.

Part 1 of the Bill focuses on public money for public goods, encompassing the importance to rural and urban populations. I recognise that. I also take comfort from the Secretary of State’s words on food security and access to wholesome, well-produced and affordable food. I hope to see the Bill evolve.

On that point, I would like to mention schedule 3. It is very important that two SNP MPs, fellow Scottish MPs, are here. Schedule 3 is a very important provision, which relates to Wales. I hope that the Scottish Government see sense and follow Wales by being included in the Bill. There is scope to provide flexibility. Carping about a power grab fools no one: they are neglecting farmers and crofters in Scotland. They are compounding the rural payment disaster that sees Scottish farmers totally confused about payments. They still have not received their 2015 money. The Scottish Government should embrace the Bill, make provision for payments—if they do not do that here, they cannot do it in Holyrood—and work with DEFRA to add a Scotland schedule.

Deidre Brock: Specifically on the payments point, the hon. Gentleman may not have seen the press release today, which clarifies that, under proposals in the Scottish continuity Bill and the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, existing European law will be rolled over, ensuring that the Scottish Government retain the legal ability to make the farm payments beyond March 2019. To suggest otherwise is inaccurate.

Colin Clark: There is the contrast: the Welsh Administration are trying to work for their farmers and the Scottish Government are politicising the deal.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Does my hon. Friend think that, once the Bill has gone through its parliamentary stages, the Scottish Government will complain that they do not have the powers they need?

Colin Clark: I truly hope that if SNP MPs are listening to the industry, they will introduce a schedule to the Bill as it progresses.

The north-east of Scotland is a traditional area of agriculture, with high organic matter. Leaving the EU is a massive change, but it is also a huge opportunity. I welcome the fact that the Bill addresses retiring farmers, something I am not planning to do for a long time. It is

[Colin Clark]

disappointing that the Scottish Government's right to buy has undermined the rented market in Scotland and young entrants are not getting in because there is no access. Yet again, the Scottish Government are neglecting the farming community. I hope that the Bill will encourage new entrants. I applaud my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who is no longer in his place, for his recognition of young farmers.

I would like to highlight the 2016 ADAS consultation on public money for public goods. It raised a few issues of which we have to be very conscious. It recognised that Brexit is an opportunity to address these issues. It defined public goods as consumed by society as a whole, not necessarily by individual consumers. It draws a contrast between food and energy as private goods. If we create a differential, an environmental or standards cost, ADAS recognised that this could risk the competitiveness of UK producers. I would therefore like clarity from the Minister on who compensates or buys the public good when we set higher standards. It is not that I want to drop standards; I just want to understand who compensates farmers.

ADAS was very clear that moving to public money for public goods would be radical and would need testing. I welcome the fact that there is a transition period, because we have to check its efficacy during adoption. Modern productive agriculture does not have to undermine the environment; it goes hand-in-hand with the environment. Many Members have reminded us that every acre of this island and this Union has been created and shaped by agriculture in some way.

The good farmers of Gordon stand ready, with the opportunity of Brexit when we negotiate our free trade deals, to grow more malting barley for export to the rest of the world. The Bill must accommodate productive farming. I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). We need access to labour for our factories, our abattoirs, our fish processing factories and our food factories. That is very important. I want to see the back of one-size-fits-all EU interference. I want to see the UK internal market protected. Most of all, I want to see a Scottish schedule in the Bill.

5.44 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Let us move from north of the border to North Devon, where, I can assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, my constituents are watching the progress of the Bill very carefully indeed. Farming is an incredibly important part of our local economy. More than 11% of workers are employed directly in the industry and, of course, that figure increases markedly when we look at all the small businesses and sole traders whose livelihoods rely directly on farming.

Let me be clear that, for us in North Devon, this is about more than just economics. Nearly three quarters of the entire land area of North Devon is farmed. To put it simply, the landscape looks as beautiful as it does because it is managed so expertly by our farmers. They are the stewards of our environment, particularly in an area such as mine with its diverse landscape, as the Secretary of State, who is not in his place, will know because he visited Exmoor over the summer to see the fantastic work being done by the Exmoor Hill Farming

Network, which, under challenging circumstances, not only farms productively but looks after that national park environment.

Farming is incredibly important in North Devon, and to underline that I met more than a dozen farmers last Thursday. We had very useful and wide-ranging discussion about the Bill, and I want to thank the NFU in the south-west for arranging it. In that meeting, a series of reasoned and reasonable suggestions was put to me on how the Bill might be improved. I want to run through some of them now, but in doing so I want to make it clear that I will support the Government on Second Reading. I will not be supporting the Opposition's amendment because, frankly, to decline to give this Bill a Second Reading would be entirely counterproductive and far more about politics than helping our farmers.

One of the main arguments made to me by the farming industry in North Devon is that the Bill needs to focus more on the fundamental purpose of farming, which is the production of food. This is an Agriculture Bill and its greatest impact will be on the industry that feeds our nation, so we must make clear that financial assistance is explicitly linked to agricultural activity. The Bill rewards farmers for public goods to deliver a cleaner and healthier environment, which is to be applauded, but the point made to me is that insufficient significance is placed on the greatest public good, which has to be the production of food in a safe way.

The reality is that financial support is absolutely critical to the survival of many of our farms. Without it, more than four in 10 of all British farms would probably make a financial loss or become economically unviable. Subsidies are crucial, and of course, historically, they have come from the EU under the common agricultural policy.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend is my constituency neighbour, and the interesting thing about many parts of Devon, and North Devon in particular, is that it is mainly permanent pasture and grassland, so farming in the sheep trade and beef trade will keep that environment and the good tourist attraction in the area. Those things are all linked.

Peter Heaton-Jones: That is absolutely the case and that pasture is vital. I think that 51% of the farmed area of Devon is livestock grazing. It makes the county look how it does, and without financial subsidies, the farmers would not be able to undertake their important stewardship of that landscape.

The system of financial support that will replace the common agricultural policy will shape our rural economy for, frankly, generations to come, so it must be introduced cautiously, which is why I welcome the seven-year transition period and the powers in the Bill to extend it if necessary. I also welcome the fact that the Government have guaranteed the overall current level of subsidy spending until 2022—some £46 billion—but let us get the administration of the system right. There is a great deal of frustration among by farmers about the Rural Payments Agency, Natural England and the others who manage the system of payments. The system is not quite working as it should at the moment, and that is an understatement, so, please, in the new system under this Bill, let us get that right for farmers.

Public good is an integral part of the Bill and how payments will be managed. Domestic food production is in itself a public good. Importing food from other

countries is environmentally damaging, because of the distances involved. British farmers have—it says here “some of the highest”, but I am going to change that—the highest welfare and quality standards in the world. I am in favour of the move to a system of payments based on the production of public goods, the productivity of our farms and the resilience of our agricultural sector.

I have a great deal of faith in my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, in the Minister and in the ministerial team, and I want them to give themselves more powers than the Bill provides. I want my right hon. Friend to have the same powers as the Bill gives to the Welsh Farming Minister in schedule 3, which has been talked about a great deal, and I ask that that be reviewed at a later stage.

We are leaving the EU—that decision has been made—so there is uncertainty ahead for our farmers. It is incumbent on us to end that uncertainty, and this Bill is an historic opportunity to do so. We must get the transition right. The Bill makes a good start, but I say in a supportive and helpful way that there is room for improvement. I will oppose the amendment and support the Bill on Second Reading to ensure that as proceedings on it continue, we make it the best Bill possible for North Devon farmers.

5.50 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I am a farmer's wife and I represent Sleaford and North Hykeham, a beautiful area of rural Lincolnshire for which this Agriculture Bill is particularly important. Farmers care about the environment. They do so because they derive income from the land to support their family, and they will need to care for the land if they are to continue to work on it successfully. More than that, however, farmers love their land, they love wildlife and they love producing food. Some 96% of farms are family farms, in which one generation is merely the custodian of land that many hope future generations of their family will enjoy.

I welcome the direction of travel in the Bill, which will fairly reward the public good that farmers do, not just to mitigate any loss of revenue but in recognition of the benefits that we all derive from their care of the land. Those benefits include clean air and water, high-quality soil, a biodiverse habitat, a beautiful rural environment and much more.

I welcome the contractual nature of the new schemes and the Secretary of State's assurance that they will be of a longer duration—five to 10 years—which will give certainty of income to farmers and duration of benefit to all. I have met the Secretary of State to discuss this in recent months, and I also welcome the widening of the GCA's remit to include more areas of the farming sector.

The number and variety of public goods that the Secretary of State has identified is great, and I know that my constituents will look forward to benefiting from them all. However, even if the schemes are, as been said, simpler, with number and variety comes complexity for the farmer. Which scheme should they choose? For the larger farmer, who has an office full of specialists to weigh the pros and cons of each scheme, the decision will be straightforward, but for the parent and child combinations who run so many of our country's farms, it will not be so easy. It will also be easier for a larger farmer to add a new footpath without it going past their

kitchen window. It will be easier for them to identify areas of poor or marginal land to turn over to environmental schemes. I therefore ask the Secretary of State what will be done to guide farmers about which schemes they should use and what assessment he has made of how the money is likely to be distributed between large and small farms.

The transition period from the CAP to the new scheme has been set at seven years, and it will start in 2021, giving farmers nine years to adjust. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has listened to farmers' concerns about the pace of change at a time of uncertainty caused by Brexit.

Finally, as a paediatrician, I am concerned about our diet and the health of our nation. Some 22% of five-year-olds and more than a third of 11-year-olds are overweight or obese. Food production is part of the definition of agriculture, and although I welcome the definition of productivity as a public good, I would be grateful if the Minister elaborated on how the Bill will secure the availability of high-quality food for my constituents. If that is to happen, food production must be profitable. How does the Minister intend to ensure that when farmers have the choice to use a given parcel of land for an environmental scheme, there is enough incentive for them to do so—but not so much that there is no longer any incentive to farm, reducing the availability of home-grown produce?

Overall, I welcome the Bill. I look forward to supporting its Second Reading this evening and further scrutinising the detail in Committee.

5.54 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I have listened to much of the debate, and have heard a great many contributions from Members on both sides of the House—but particularly on this side—who are farmers or farmers' wives, and who have a history of farming in this country. Unfortunately, I have none of those qualifications. What I do have, though, are some constituents who are farmers and who care deeply about the countryside and the environment. They have spent much time with me talking about the issues that they face and about the Bill, particularly over the last couple of weeks. Let me take this opportunity to mention a few of them: Ed Phillips, Tom Williams, Will Dickinson, Stuart Roberts, Jamie Burrows, Richard Pleydell-Bouverie, Paul Cherry and Ian Piggott. They, among many others, have helped me to understand how the good things in the Bill will help them in their lives as farmers over the years to come.

As I see it, there are two major aspects of the Bill for farmers and for farming in the countryside. The first is the way in which we farm, and, in particular, how we manage our land environmentally so that it continues for our children, our grandchildren, and our grandchildren's children. We must remember that we need to enable our farmers to compete better in a domestic and international market. They have struggled at times, and continue to do so. The Bill does a lot in both those respects.

Clause 1(2) makes clear that the Government will be able to improve the productivity of individual farmers by allowing them to invest in equipment so that they can farm as effectively as possible. The Bill will also facilitate better, more efficient and more transparent supply chains, and that too will help our farmers to engage in the market. Moreover—I do not think that

[*Bim Afolami*]

this has been mentioned so far, but perhaps I missed it—the Bill will encourage collaboration among growers, to ensure that we are not subject to certain competition-law restrictions to which we are currently subject under the common agricultural policy. It will help farmers to have a stronger voice in the market, and will help to deal with the problems and distortions in the market that are generated by supermarkets and others.

We have heard a great deal in the debate so far about the way in which we farm and manage our land. That, as well as ensuring that our farmers can compete, is the thrust of the Bill. We often hear about hard Brexit, soft Brexit, Chequers, “chuck Chequers” and a no-deal Brexit, but the Bill gives us a green Brexit. That is a fundamental move that constitutes a real, positive change of direction. Not only farmers or inhabitants of the countryside in my constituency or anywhere else, but everyone in the country can be proud of that, and I commend the Minister and the Secretary of State for their work. The Bill rewards farmers for improving air and water quality, soil health, animal welfare standards and flood prevention. There are all sorts of respects in which it, and public money, will improve how we manage our land, and I think we can all commend that.

However, I urge the Minister and the Secretary of State also to keep in mind that, once the Bill is—hopefully—passed and we proceed to secondary legislation, our farmers will want to know that the Government care deeply about food production. I hope that they will continue to make clear the ways in which we care about it. I know that everyone in the House cares about it, but we need to ensure that our farmers understand that, and help them to understand how the Bill will aid their production. I also urge the Government to explain further their strategic objectives for the national security of food and water, and also to bear in mind that our farmers need to compete with producers throughout the world, often in places without our commitment to high environmental standards.

Overall, this is a good Bill. It will lead to a green Brexit, and we will have great British farms and countryside for generations to come.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. To accommodate all Members wishing to speak, after the next speech I will reduce the time limit to four minutes.

6 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I will give you that fiver later.

The outcome of the referendum presented us with the opportunity to sculpt for the first time in many decades our own bespoke agricultural policy, and the Department has been absolutely right to build a consensus of interest, ranging from farmers and landowners to environmental groups and other non-governmental organisations; that is absolutely pivotal. I do want to echo, however, a theme that has run through many speeches by Members on my side of the House: there is an anxiety among many farmers—particularly in my constituency, which was aptly named by Thomas Hardy as “the vale of the little dairies”, covering quite a lot of

the Blackmore vale in north Dorset—that in an attempt to bring the environmental groups onside, some of the key, principal purposes of UK agriculture have been slightly underplayed.

There is an anxiety that sitting somewhere within this Bill is an idea to create, through some form of environmental public good subsidy, effectively our largest open air non-working museum, where redundant farmers will wear pastiche smocks, lean over gates, chew wheat stalks and talk to people while sipping on a glass of cider, fitting in some form of agricultural production in the few acres that we allow them after they have done all these mad rewilding schemes and other bits and bobs.

As others have mentioned, we also need to educate about the importance of agriculture and what it does to our economy, water, air quality and tourism. We live in an increasingly urbanised country with a very urban-centric media, and we should be trying to find ways through to a new agricultural support scheme of rewarding farmers who open their gates and bring people in, teaching schools and others about the importance of farming.

We must have up front and centre at the heart of the Bill food production and security; I make no apology to the Minister for repeating that. I am inclined to think that in the Secretary of State’s Oxford conference speech of January he thought food production was such an obvious aspect of agriculture that he did not mention it and instead talked about all the other environmental things. I view that as an oversight, but our farmers need to be reassured at every step and turn that food production is important. It is important for all the good things it does, and for the contribution it makes to our economy.

To those who say that food production does not matter and that we can make up the gap in domestic production through cheaper imports, which could be some sort of domestic Brexit dividend, let me point out this: those cheaper imports, potentially raised at lower standards, will only be cheap while there is a viable domestic production sector that introduces market competition. If we kill that off, then—hey presto!—the prices will go up, and will be likely to go up higher to compensate for the greater discount introduced to kill off the domestic production.

Food production is absolutely imperative, and there is no disconnect between food production and environmental farming; the two are now intensely interwoven. In all of my meetings with my farmers and the NFU, I have yet to find one—irrespective of age, I say with respect to my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon)—who wants to go back to some pre-European system where we could grub up the hedgerows and put slurry in the watercourses and so forth.

Let me close by saying to the Minister that the mechanism for financial support to agriculture, whatever that system is, needs to be clear, simple, speedy and robust. Moreover, it needs to be regional and bespoke to address the varying types of agriculture that we have in this country. It should also provide stability, to allow investment and to put it beyond political tinkering as and when there is a change of Government. Our agricultural farmers need the certainty that the regime in place is beyond political tinkering. I note that I have the support of the shadow junior Minister, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), on that, which I welcome.

6.5 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare). The concerns that he has expressed on behalf of his farmers about productivity and food production are echoed in my constituency. Eddisbury's highly productive lowland farming land is responsible for producing about 3% of the UK's dairy products, and the chances are that hon. Members will have used milk from Eddisbury in their coffee at some point this year. Indeed, they might well have woken up to a breakfast glass of milk from Eddisbury.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) talked about a green Brexit, but I would argue that that underplays the role of past Ministers and Secretaries of State. The UK has had a strong influence on previous common agricultural policies, and we have seen the EU moving towards a greater focus on the delivery of environmental goods and services—sometimes called ecosystem services. It is good to see the UK Government continuing in that direction of travel, but not at the cost of productivity and hopefully not at the cost of innovation in the farming sector.

What concerns my farmers, particularly after this summer's experience, is market volatility and market failure. We had some of the toughest weather conditions, with a sustained period of drought. This meant that my farmers were having to feed their winter fodder to their cattle during the summer. It took a long time, but I am grateful to the Secretary of State for negotiating a derogation with the European Union in relation to field-side margins. I ask the Minister to ensure that we use the fact that we have left the common agricultural policy to ensure that we have that flexibility and fleetness of foot when there is market failure or volatility—particularly when it is caused by extreme weather events, which we are likely to see more and more due to climate change. For example, my local farmers have suggested that the hay and wild flowers growing on field-side margins that have been designated as set-aside land could be cut and used or sold for forage, thereby reducing some of the real pressures that farmers in my constituency have felt.

The second thing that farmers in Eddisbury are concerned about is fair prices. We have all heard about mineral water in supermarkets being more expensive than a pint of milk. British farmers make fantastic produce, but they want to be paid a fair price for it. I welcome the proposals in the Bill for an obligation to promote a fair contractual relationship between farmers and the first purchasers of their products. That is a really important matter for my constituents. Finally, others have mentioned workforce planning: it is really important that we have a workforce that can help to manage those farms and take their success into the future.

6.9 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am delighted to speak in the debate, and I broadly welcome the Bill. The sheer number of Members who have participated means that there will be a lot of scrutiny, which is of course a good thing. As an Essex MP, I have the privilege of representing a part of the country with some brilliant food producers and farmers, and some fine landscapes and environmental features. The Secretary of State will recall from his visit to Tiptree just last month, where he was hosted by Wilkin & Sons, the finest producer of jams and preserves

in the world—I think he enjoyed some when he was there—that farmers across the country will judge the success of this legislation on how it enables the right kind of stewardship, not just for food and farming, but for agricultural policy going forward.

One of the biggest advantages of leaving the EU should be that we will have the freedom to establish our own regulatory frameworks for agriculture, food and farming. This is an enabling Bill, with much legislation to follow, but I welcome the Government's commitment to ensure that every possible approach, regulation and detail both supports and promotes our farmers as well as UK agriculture, food and produce. We have the benefit of enjoying much of that produce domestically, but we also know that our farmers and those who work in the agricultural sector want to do much more to export globally and showcase their products internationally. We now have a fantastic opportunity to demonstrate that we are great producers and are ambitious to export more, so I would welcome a commitment from Ministers that there will be a strong focus on exporting and that we will do everything possible through this Bill to back exporters.

Farmers in my constituency often find themselves dealing with the costs of rearing animals to welfare standards that are higher than those in the rest of the European Union. As we have heard today, our EU membership has prevented us from blocking imports when they fail to meet our high standards, but we can now address such concerns. For example, while pig farmers in my constituency adhere to the ban on sow stalls, they know that producers in other EU countries are flouting the rules. We should get on the side of our pig farmers and bat for them on the challenges that they face. Farmers want assurances that our post-Brexit agricultural policy will not place them at a competitive disadvantage when there are lower standards across the EU.

I welcome this important Bill for so many reasons, and we now have the chance to back our farmers and to support them on animal health, welfare standards, high-quality food production and the all-important public goods that we have heard about in today's great debate. The Bill is vital, just as it is vital, while the negotiations with the EU are ongoing, that the Government protect our agricultural sector, our farmers and our producers. We need to challenge some of the controls from Brussels that the Secretary of State mentioned earlier on.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for concluding her outstanding oration.

6.12 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Several right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned that this is the first time in over 40 years that our UK Parliament has discussed and debated UK agricultural policy. For us younger Members, it is the first time in our lifetime that this Parliament has been able to discuss such matters, which I welcome greatly. As someone who, from leaving agricultural college to being elected, had not just a job in farming but a passion for farming, this legislation is important to me.

That passion has continued in my time as the Member of Parliament for Moray, which is a rich agricultural community. Farmers from Glenlivet to Garmouth, and

[*Douglas Ross*]

from Keith to Kintessack, are extremely positive about several of the Bill's elements, because there is a great deal to be positive about. However, what we have unfortunately heard from SNP Members throughout the debate has been doom and gloom. We heard from the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for 20 minutes, and I would have liked her to have spoken for longer, because we heard absolutely nothing about a SNP vision for Scottish agriculture—[*Interruption.*] I will come to their holding up of bits of paper in a moment.

All we got from the hon. Lady was petty political point scoring and absolutely no answers for Scottish farmers, who are looking for Scottish MPs to come down to Westminster to stand up for farming. I believe that they are getting that from Scottish Conservative Members, and I think they got that from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) in his earlier intervention, but from SNP Members they got nothing but criticism. The SNP highlighted the omissions from the Bill and the failures regarding briefings, but there was nothing about what the SNP would do for agriculture in Scotland.

I really do wish that the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith had spoken for a bit longer, because that would have given us more than just her holding up documents, saying that the Scottish Government are consulting. In reality, there is a vacuum in policy from this tired SNP Scottish Government. They do not have the answers. Our Scottish farmers and my Moray farmers deserve better.

I urge the SNP Members here—all three of them—to join us and start working together to set things right. Give Scottish farmers the guarantee of inclusion in the Bill while Nicola Sturgeon and her Ministers work on their own long-overdue proposals. The NFUS made it clear in its briefing for the debate that another schedule should be inserted in the Bill. Local farmers in Moray and farmers across Scotland are greatly disappointed that the SNP would rather play party politics than get around the table, work with Ministers and accept the offer that was accepted by the Welsh Government.

It is becoming more and more evident to Scottish farmers and rural Scotland in general that it is the Scottish Conservatives, not the Scottish National party, who are truly standing up for their interests. That has been clear in today's debate. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith thinks that farming is a matter for her to laugh at. It is a serious matter for our constituents, and that is why so many of us are here today, trying to ensure that this important Bill is passed. I am sure it will be improved as it goes through Parliament. It is unfortunate that, time after time, the SNP simply wants to talk down what we do in Westminster, rather than talking it up and working for our farmers, who deserve more than they are getting from the SNP.

6.16 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome the introduction of the Bill by the UK Government, as do many farmers in my constituency, as well as NFU Scotland and Scottish Land & Estates, to name just a couple of organisations. As we come to

the final stages of leaving the EU, the Bill offers security and a framework alongside guaranteed continued payments until 2022. I also welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to, and action on, ensuring that the United Kingdom maintains the highest possible food and livestock welfare standards, as well as his commitments to public money for public goods, and financial assistance for

“the purpose of starting, or improving the productivity of, an agricultural, horticultural or forestry activity.”

The opportunities contained in the Bill are the reason why it has been so warmly welcomed in my constituency and throughout the United Kingdom, with both Wales and Northern Ireland—unencumbered by nationalist Administrations—accepting the Government's offer to be included. Scotland can only rely on the SNP Administration in Edinburgh to be strong for nationalism, with not one single provision for agriculture included in their recent programme for government.

To be fair, the SNP has launched a consultation on the matter—the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) held it up earlier—and I have read it. Almost all of it is just a restatement of current EU policy, with no new policy recommended, but if one reads between the lines and follows the pointed questions, one finds a lot in the consultation that agrees with the Bill. Look at some of the sections on greening, for example—questions 5, 6 and 7 talk about more productive farming, tackling climate change and improving the greening of agriculture in Scotland. Much of that is included in the Bill. I also agree with some of the consultation points—again, these are included in the Bill—about specific support for rural communities and economies. Both the consultation and the Bill are about establishing frameworks.

The briefing from the NFUS is clear: it wants Scotland included in the Bill. It wants a schedule similar to the one for Wales, with associated provisions that protect devolved Ministers' powers to adjust for devolved policy areas while preserving the UK market. The NFUS is not alone: Scottish Land & Estates, the SRUC Scotland's Rural College, the Countryside Alliance and many of my local farmers share that view. All afternoon, we have heard from Members from England, Wales and Scotland about how their upland farmers face challenges and how they have less favoured areas, just as we do. So we should be working together in this House to find the areas that we have in common, work on common policy and have a Bill that works for the entire UK. I think we can do it if we just try.

Finally, I also want to talk about young farmers and what we are doing to encourage young people into the agricultural sector. The Bill includes measures to support farmers who are planning to leave or retire from the industry, and I hope that it will also help with the transition to a new generation of farmers, through supportive grants and loans for younger people to come into farming. That should be included in the final draft of the Bill. As well as the financial incentives for younger people, there should also be incentives to encourage investment in new equipment and in innovation in agriculture.

Deidre Brock: Does the hon. Gentleman realise that until very recently Scotland was the only part of the UK that had a scheme, under the CAP, to support new or young entrants? We have supported more than 1,000 new

and young entrants since 2015, which surely shows why we need to keep our powers over funding and policy in Scotland.

Luke Graham: That shows the gross misunderstanding here. I am not saying anything against that; I am saying that in this Bill we should encourage young farmers and work together. Why have SNP Members not put this forward? Why have they not put a schedule forward? It is because they do not believe in the United Kingdom and in Scottish farming. They just believe in nationalism and the break-up of the United Kingdom. The different parts of the UK do face different challenges in agriculture, but there are also many, many similarities. As the Bill progresses, I hope that Members from across the UK can focus on the commonalities between the different parts of the UK so that we produce a Bill that delivers for our farmers and our rural communities.

6.21 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), who made a spirited and punchy speech that I enjoyed listening to. It is also a great honour to speak in this debate, because the last time this House considered an agriculture Bill was in 1947, when Albert Stubbs, my great grandfather, who was the Cambridgeshire Member, spoke on Third Reading. He would entirely agree with the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) in saying that that Bill was very good. He was much respected, and is to this day, for the work he did for the agricultural workers of Cambridgeshire.

Much has changed since that day—the House of Commons is no longer sitting in the other place—but some things have not changed. The value of farming to the UK most certainly has not. It provides national self-sufficiency, a safe supply of domestic food and jobs. It also provides a high standard of welfare and environmental protection—much more so now because of the progress we have made. Much will change in the years ahead, and there are many benefits from our leaving the CAP. As is made clear from talking to the farmers of West Oxfordshire, the policy is wasteful, inefficient and environmentally damaging. It is also economically damaging, given the artificial increases in the price of food that it causes. The policy favours large landowners over small ones, and the large companies over the families, with the top 10% of recipients receiving almost 50% of CAP payments and the bottom 20% receiving just 2%. So there is a great deal to be gained from the Bill, which I warmly welcome. I am glad the Government have introduced it.

I have met my local farmers and my local NFU branch. They have raised some concerns, which I know Ministers are listening to. There are concerns about the amount of burdensome regulation and red tape, and about fair pricing and the powers of supermarkets. Above all, they would like a feeling that their high standards and the quality products they are producing are valued and respected by the Government and by Britain as a whole. I reassure them that that is very much the case, and I am sure that Ministers will do so in due course, too. My local farmers do ask that there is a focus on linking all the public goods we are discussing in connection with the Bill to agricultural products and food production, and that that is seen as a good in its own right.

I warmly recognise and welcome many of the public goods set out in the Bill. I am particularly enthusiastic about the fundamental change whereby instead of pricing and subsidy being granted simply on the basis of the size of land, a public good is attached. EU subsidies currently encourage poor land management. Under the CAP, for example, farmers lose direct payments if they plant trees on their land, because it means that they are taking land out of agricultural production, so environmental factors are not given the pre-eminence that I, and we, would like.

It is quite right that only viable farms will be able to devote the necessary time and resource for this. As the Secretary of State said, farmers will be able to go green only if they are not in the red. I would very much like to see West Oxfordshire farmers who are light years ahead of the rest of the country in terms of combining food production and environmental protection having a system that means that those goods are recommended and valued, with small farms able to succeed in the same way as large ones.

There are many more things that I would like to say but, at this stage, I will just warmly welcome the Bill. This is our first major domestic policy on agriculture for well over half a century. It gives us a challenge to set forward a bold and ambitious vision, which I warmly welcome.

6.25 pm

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the fantastic speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) and to have the opportunity to pay tribute to the farmers of South Suffolk who produce such good quality food and who are responsible for the stewardship of our beautiful countryside, which is the key to the quality of life in my constituency and which is shared by my constituents and those who visit from other parts of the country.

In supporting this Bill, I want to stress two key principles. The first and most important is simply this: for all the faults of the current system, our farmers are still able to produce great food and they produce it under that system. Ever since the debate started on how we should follow the CAP once we leave the European Union, I have said that whatever system comes into place, it should not come into place until it is ready and until it is better. I very much welcome a long transition; it is common sense and very much welcomed by our farmers—certainly the ones to whom I have spoken.

There is another key principle. Like many of my colleagues, I favour schemes that support public goods and environmental schemes, but they must not be at the expense of food production or food security. That point has been made by many of my colleagues.

For the rest of my speech, I want to follow in the footsteps of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) who went off to the Swiss alps to discuss the model in use there. Switzerland is very important in all of this, because it has moved towards a system based on public goods. There are two particular points that I want to stress here. Earlier in the debate, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) intervened on the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) who speaks for the Opposition and asked why she thought that food imports had risen. She declined to answer, so I then intervened and suggested that it may be related to changing consumer taste. It is

[James Cartlidge]

interesting to note that on 23 September the Swiss held a national referendum on food sovereignty. The proposal was to adopt new, highly interventionist measures to restrict imports and so encourage more local food. In the end, against expectations, 60% voted no. That was because they were scared of higher prices and less choice.

After I made that intervention, I had a tweet from Jeremy Squirrell, a farmer in my constituency, who farms in Wattisham. He said, “Should we expect advocados all year round?” [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) says, “No”. There is a debate to be had about air miles and so on, but the fact is our consumers do expect that choice, so we have to balance that against farm support.

The most important point in relation to Switzerland is on the issue on which I have had the most correspondence from constituents, which is, of course, trade deals. I have had many emails urging me not to support cutting our standards to get a trade deal. The Secretary of State said at the start of this debate that that will certainly be our position, but the key thing is that we do not need to speculate. When people say that if we accept the common rulebook we will not be able to get good trade deals, we do not need to speculate. Switzerland is effectively in the common rulebook on agri-food and goods and outside the customs union, and all the evidence shows that it negotiates very effective trade deals. In an email, I said to George Baur, assistant Secretary General of EFTA, “Do those rules limit the ability to get good fair trade deals, given that they are maintaining the standards for their farmers?” There is no evidence that they do. In fact, the most recent deal with Mexico increased trade with Switzerland by 37%. I simply say that when we seek to increase the competitiveness of our farmers, it must be on quality, not on low cost. We must produce the best food from the best farmers to the highest standards. That is the future for British farming and that is the one that I support today.

6.29 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): No Government want any Bill to become a Christmas tree on which Back Benchers hang their hobby-horses, but if any Bill should have something to do with trees or horses, it is the Agriculture Bill. With that in mind, I will talk about three public goods that are currently part of the Bill, but not key parts.

The first matter that I want to discuss is flooding. My constituency is the most likely to flood in the country, according to the Association of British Insurers. It is also home to some of the most fertile land in the country, precisely because that land is reclaimed from the sea. Boston and Skegness is the breadbasket of Britain, and when this Bill talks of public good we should bear it in mind that the greatest public good performed by agriculture in my constituency is flood defence. By maintaining defences, farmers operate businesses that provide livelihoods for thousands and food—genuinely in the case of my constituency—for millions. They should be rewarded for that, and the Environment Agency, the internal drainage boards and Natural England should be encouraged through this Bill to work in ever closer union, to coin a phrase, with the interests of farmers and farming so that flood defences can be secured. By the way, I hope this Bill can be used as a

vehicle to bring the Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) to the statute book.

As we leave the EU, we should seize the opportunity to adopt new standards that allow farmers to behave in a way that is even better for productivity, wildlife and jobs. For example, in a constituency such as mine there is great discussion about borrow pits and drainage. We are not currently able even to consider what that means for local farming because of EU law. Leaving the EU allows us to have that conversation in a new way. This is not an argument for lowering the standards; it is an argument for seeing whether there are better and equivalent ways of doing things.

The second matter is productivity. My constituency, working with the nearby University of Lincoln, is home to some of the most advanced experiments in the automation of farming in the world. Silicon Valley has come to Lincolnshire to ask how it should be done. What greater public good is there than fast-forwarding that process? Innovation will allow more of my constituents to move into higher-skilled work and it should be encouraged through the Bill. There is a public good in flood defence and in fostering innovation.

Thirdly and finally, I want to mention the workforce. The Migration Advisory Committee has said that we should have a seasonal workers scheme, and I applaud that. Seasonal workers have made a profound difference to Boston and Skegness in both good and less good ways. I applaud the proposed introduction of a new scheme in a new immigration policy, partly because it is vital to the local economy. However, in that context, the public good is also in ensuring that workers who come to this country temporarily are properly housed and integrated into local communities. The Bill and its relationship with immigration and seasonal work can play a part in that, and I encourage the Secretary of State to look at that suggestion.

I thoroughly support the Bill, and I hope that the Government will show that it is an opportunity to back farmers and farming very publicly, but also to back flood defence, a responsible migration policy and innovation—in short, to seize every opportunity associated with agriculture, as well as agriculture itself.

6.33 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I welcome and support Second Reading of this important Bill. As someone who comes from a long line of people who worked on the land—mainly ploughmen—I am very grateful to witness and be part of this historic and significant moment as, for the first time in decades, the House of Commons legislates in this vital area. I congratulate and thank the farmers of the United Kingdom for the excellent produce that they provide for us on our dinner tables, and for the social good that was described by my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) from which we resultantly benefit.

In my short remarks, I will focus on things that are missing from the Bill. The first thing that is missing is a schedule relating to Scotland. I am afraid that that is down to the intransigence and the wrecking tendency of the SNP. There is no way of escaping that conclusion. While the SNP protests its concern for Scotland's farmers, what we have in Scotland is a policy vacuum on agriculture. Witness the spectacle of the past few days in Glasgow at

the SNP conference—not one mention of agriculture in the speech by the leader of the party and, by the way, no mention of an agriculture Bill in the SNP Government's programme for government, which has produced very little legislation.

What we get from the SNP are carefully constructed, artificial areas for conflict so that it can progress the only agenda that matters to it—the break-up of the United Kingdom. What we see in that intransigence is simply another tactic in its campaign to bring about the tearing up of this wonderful, 300-year-old-plus, successful Union between England and Scotland.

I shall mention the other things that are missing from the Bill very quickly, as time is running out. First, I would ask the Secretary of State to include in the Bill—my friends and I will seek to include it somehow—the issue of the red-meat levy. Members will be aware that quite often the levy is imposed at the point of slaughter of cattle, sheep and pigs. It is a devolved matter, with revenues collected by Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. To cut a long story short, a lot of the cattle, sheep and pigs that are raised in Scotland are shipped across the border to England where they are slaughtered, so there is a sum of money that should go back to Scottish industry for the promotion of Scotch beef and lamb. I urge the Secretary of State to make provision for that simple change in the Bill, as it would require primary legislation. It is worth about £1.5 million for the promotion of Scotch beef and lamb.

The other thing that is missing at the moment are detailed terms of reference for the promised review of convergence payments. My friends and I wish those terms of reference to become known. Perhaps the Secretary of State can make that clear, so that we understand the pathway on timelines and so on. The result of such a review would set a baseline for the allocation of resources to Scottish farming. As my hon. Friends have said, we absolutely believe in and are defending the principle of devolution in the path that we are taking. Finally, there is a crying need for UK frameworks. That is what the industry wants, and that is what we should get on with delivering.

6.37 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be the last to bring in the harvest of contributions on the Bill.

I wish to put on record my interest in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group for bees and pollinators. I have an interest not only in the production of food but in enhancing and sustaining the built environment around us and in habitat protection. I, too, wish to associate myself with calls for more references to food production and food security in the Bill. Of course, I encourage financial assistance for environmental good, but I am concerned that there is not enough reference to food production in the Bill.

The amount of food that the UK produces has fallen from 100% to about 60% in the past 50 years. We should encourage farmers to produce even more food to ensure that we have food security in an uncertain world. I am proud to represent an area of East Sussex covering 200 square miles, 75% of which is an area of outstanding natural beauty, much of which is managed by the High Weald AONB. The average farm in my constituency covers about 120 acres. It is grazing pastureland with a

low yield. Those farmers rely greatly on the basic payment that they receive. Without it, their income will be reduced by 30%. I am concerned that if we do not reward those farmers for the food that they produce we will not see the same number of livestock in our AONB, which helps with the management of the AONB.

I also have great concern with regard to the very worthy element of clause 7(7), which seeks to allow new entrants into the market. Of course I encourage new entrants and the Bill's nod towards improved productivity, but the difficulty in my part of the UK is that our pastureland tends to be purchased by investment bankers from London who are seeking their own piece of tranquillity. Any further incentives on sale, particularly in the event that food production is not at the heart of the Bill, will mean that there is not as much incentive to farm, and those who purchase the land will not use the land for farming. I have great concern, because our landscape is already being changed by those who are not farming. We know that legislation can throw up the law of unintended consequences. If we are to have this worthy clause in the Bill, I ask that measures are taken to ensure that there is some form of disincentivising to purchase the land for those who will not farm. Otherwise, there could be an impact on my landscape.

I welcome the Bill, including the measures to reduce the administrative burden on farming. In the event that there are not more protections for food security, I ask that we go further in that regard. The farmers I speak to find it incredibly difficult that they are rewarded not on the basis of yield, but on the basis of the number of inspections they tend to have. I refer back to the 100% production post war. We did not reach that production by forced inspections of our farms. Those farmers did that because they knew how to farm. If we let farmers get on with their job they will deliver the goods, and they will also deliver the environment. Overall, I very much support the Bill.

6.41 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to sum up on behalf of the Opposition. I have eight minutes, so I hope Members will not mind if I do not take interventions. I have sat through every minute of this Second Reading debate, so I am well aware of the many opinions on both sides of the House. We have had contributions from 31 Conservative Back Benchers, seven Labour Members and another six Members. It has been a commendable debate.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see why Labour states in its reasoned amendment that there should have been some element of prelegislative scrutiny. There are all sorts of reasons why the Bill will need to be improved, and we will make no apologies for playing our part constructively in the Public Bill Committee and subsequently to ensure that the Bill is worthy of the 1947 Act. That Act was the third great reforming bit of legislation after the NHS and the welfare state, which we are very proud of. For 50 years, the Act set what happened to British agriculture. It was all about security of supply and how we would have a system of tribunals and a Land Commission, but it was also about tenant farming. The one thing that has not really been talked about in enough detail is why British farming is different. It is different because we have a strong tradition of tenant farming, and Labour will maintain that. In fact, we would like to go further.

[Dr David Drew]

We would like to see embedded in the Bill the Tenancy Reform Industry Group reforms, about which the Minister spent a lot of time talking to various farming organisations. Like him, I support county farm estates. We would like to see younger farmers have the opportunity to be able to farm, and county farms were one way, if not the main way, in which they could do that.

In many respects, this Bill is about a funny stage, in the sense that the money—we always say “Follow the money”—is only guaranteed until 2022, or whenever this Parliament may fall. Given that the transition period starts in 2021 and will go on for seven years, it is very important that we get cross-party support, and Labour will offer its support. We will also look at the territorial issues, which are crucial. We cannot have four different systems of agriculture. That is a worry. We will do that through our links with the Welsh Government, but obviously the SNP must do what it does in Scotland, and Northern Ireland must do what it does in its own way. We must have some coherence in the way we bring forward our agriculture.

The key point, as has been said, is that the Bill is very strong on style. The Secretary of State is very strong on style, in his own way, but not so much on substance. We will table amendments to give the Bill the substance it needs.

Much has been said about the environment, but less has been said about food. We will seek to amend the Bill, with the Government's support we hope, to make food central to the Bill. This is also about health. Despite the fact that the White Paper was entitled “Health and Harmony”, health seems to have disappeared from the agenda. We must ensure that health is brought back in, for all the reasons my hon. Friends and others have set out. “Multifunctionality” is a term that people were very keen on in the noughties, but it is crucial to the way British agriculture must now develop. We make no apology for making the link between the environment, food and the health of our nation.

We are concerned about a number of other areas. The Bill sets out many powers but very few duties. We will therefore seek to tie the Secretary of State's hands, and the hands of subsequent Secretaries of State, so that they will have a duty to deliver an effective agricultural policy. We will look at all the details—for example, in relation to organic production. We cannot ignore Brexit, because obviously half the EU's budget goes on the CAP, so it is a crucial part of how we consider the post-Brexit situation. We want the role of science and technology to be hardened up in the Bill, to ensure that there is a commitment to see how the future generation of agriculture can be developed.

Finally, the crucial test will be what trade deals, if any, we sign up to. The Opposition will not agree to anything that dilutes welfare standards, environmental protection or labour standards. We will be looking to see whether we can put back the Agricultural Wages Board—the Government might not agree to that—because we want to protect the quality of labour. The Secretary of State has said that he has got a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme, but it is very weak and we want to strengthen it. We want to see how we can have cross-fertilisation of labour, to ensure that we have the right people in the right places so that British agriculture

can flourish. That is what we wanted in 1947 and what we achieved, heralding a whole new era of strength in British farming. We would like to work with the Government, but we also want to improve the Bill and we make no apology for saying so.

6.48 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): It is a real pleasure to close this debate, in part because, as the Secretary of State set out at the start, I worked in the farming industry for 10 years and my family have farmed in Cornwall for six generations, and in part because that time spent farming and my five years as Farming Minister have shown me that the common agricultural policy is dysfunctional, frankly, and that we can do far better. The Bill creates the framework to do things better and to set a more coherent course for our policy.

As power returns to Parliament as we leave the European Union, it has been genuinely encouraging this afternoon to hear so many hon. Members take part in the debate. It shows that Parliament is ready for the task. We have heard many powerful speeches from Members with farming experience, including my hon. Friends the Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), for South Dorset (Richard Drax) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark)—apologies to any Members I have missed out. We have also heard many other passionate speeches from hon. Members in rural constituencies who work in close partnership with farmers in their constituencies and who have championed their interests today.

The shadow Secretary of State and many others said that they did not believe that there was enough about agriculture and food in the Bill. I want to address that point. Let us start from the top. The Bill is called the Agriculture Bill. The long title says that it is a Bill to

“Authorise new expenditure for certain agricultural and other purposes...to make provision about the acquisition and use of information connected with food supply chains; to confer power to respond to exceptional market conditions affecting agricultural markets,”

and

“to make provision for the recognition of associations of agricultural producers”.

I therefore do not agree that there is nothing about food or agriculture in the Bill. What is true is that part 1 is predominantly about delivering environmental goods, but parts 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are predominantly about other issues that will assist farmers in their key task of producing food for the nation.

What the Bill does not envisage, however—this is true—is a long-term place for old-style subsidies of the sort that we have seen in recent decades. There are a number of key points to recognise here. First, our current area-based system is not about food production either, but is an arbitrary area payment paid to farmers regardless of what they produce. Decoupling took place some 50 years ago. The current system is not about food production. We should also recognise that some of our most successful and vibrant food-producing sectors of agriculture have never been subsidised. Look at the poultry industry, the pig industry, the horticulture industry or fruit and veg producers. They have never had subsidies.

Our approach has therefore been to say that we should look at the underlying causes of why some farmers are dependent on the single farm payment and a subsidy. If there is a lack of fairness and transparency in the supply chain, let us bring forward provisions to address that, so that farmers can get a fair share in the value chain. If we need farmers to invest to become more competitive and reduce some of their costs, let us make available the powers to give them grants and financial support to invest in the future and in technology. If we should help new entrants into the industry and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) pointed out, assist others who should retire to do so with dignity, let us make provision for that in the Bill, and we do.

There has been a lively discussion about the uplands. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) both spoke about the precariousness of the uplands and raised questions about their financial viability. However, organisations such as the Uplands Alliance are telling us that they believe that they can create a viable and successful model based on the delivery of public goods and that if we are serious about what we say—that we want to reward farmers based on what they do for the environment—the uplands can help with flood mitigation, water quality, carbon sequestration, public access and tourism. They believe that they can do a great deal by way of public goods.

We have had a number of lively exchanges about provisions for Scotland and some powerful contributions from Scottish Conservative Members. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) is in a slightly difficult position, because her colleagues in the Scottish Government currently have no plan. We are setting out a plan for England in this Bill. Wales has a plan, set out in schedule 3, and Northern Ireland has a plan, set out in schedule 4, and it does not even have an Administration. Scotland is alone in not having a plan. We have been clear with the Scottish Government that we will reserve a place in the Bill to add a schedule, should they want us to on their behalf, but if they do not want to do that, they must make time in their own Parliament to introduce their own legislation.

The shadow Secretary of State raised the issue of climate change. This is explicitly provided for in clause 1(1)(d), which recognises climate change as a purpose. She also complained that this was too much of a framework Bill and that there was not enough detail, but she went on to praise the Agriculture Act 1947. The 1947 Act was also a framework Bill, which made lots of provision for new orders. If she reads it, she will see that its sections are peppered with the words “the relevant Minister may”. I believe there is no difference. This is a framework Bill in much the same way as the 1947 Act was.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), who was the very first Secretary of State I had the pleasure of working with in the Department, raised two important issues. First, we agree on the need to invest in technology and agri-tech. Clause 1(2) provides for that to happen. Secondly, he raised the importance of soil. The very first purpose of managing land and water in a way that protects and improves the environment is intended to cover soil. I can also tell him that the policy statement we published alongside the Bill explicitly states that soil health is one of our key objectives. I would like to commend the great work my hon. Friend

the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) has done in this area. We are working with a number of academic institutions, including Cranfield University, Rothamsted and others, to develop a soil health index. I believe that paying greater attention to soil health, as we design future policy, will be very important.

A number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies), my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) and my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), highlighted the difficulties of regulation. Some pointed out the current frustrations we have with the administration of existing EU schemes. Some perhaps pointed the finger at the Rural Payments Agency and Natural England. I would say to hon. Members that our agencies can only deal with the legislation they are given currently by the European Union. It is very dysfunctional. It is very onerous. We have an opportunity to sort it out, as this House takes back control. Clause 6 will provide a very clear power to give us the ability to modify retained EU law, knock off some of the rough edges and remove some of the unnecessary provisions and unnecessary audit requirements.

Alan Brown: Will the Minister give way?

George Eustice: I am not going to give way, because I am going to try to pick up on a few final points.

My hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) asked a question about clause 10, which is intended to modify the existing fruit and veg regime. The industry has some concerns with the regime. It does not work very well and often ends in litigation. We want to tidy it up and bring some clarity to it. He also asked about clause 7 and the transition. We have published our intention for year one of the transition. Smaller farms receiving under £30,000 a year would have a 5% cut. For larger farms, anything they receive over £150,000 would see a 25% reduction. We believe we have set out an approach that deals with that.

In conclusion, I believe we have had a very comprehensive debate. It has been a pleasure to close it. I am sorry that I have not been able to pick up on all the issues hon. Members have raised, but I am sure there will be opportunities to do so during the Bill's later stages, or indeed before then should they wish to meet me. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 227, Noes 286.

Division No. 240]

[6.57 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie	Brennan, Kevin
Ali, Rushanara	Brown, Lyn
Amesbury, Mike	Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Bryant, Chris
Ashworth, Jonathan	Buck, Ms Karen
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Burden, Richard
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Burgon, Richard
Beckett, rh Margaret	Butler, Dawn
Benn, rh Hilary	Cable, rh Sir Vince
Berger, Luciana	Cadbury, Ruth
Betts, Mr Clive	Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Blomfield, Paul	Carden, Dan
Brabin, Tracy	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Champion, Sarah

Chapman, Jenny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coyle, Neil
 Crausby, Sir David
 Creagh, Mary
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Sir Edward
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Drew, Dr David
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Dame Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Farron, Tim
 Field, rh Frank
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Folvargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Ruth
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin

Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Lee, Karen
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Nandy, Lisa
 Norris, Alex
 O'Mara, Jared
 Onasanya, Fiona
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget

Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sherriff, Paula
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cartlidge, James

Starmer, rh Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Williamson, Chris
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Nic Dakin and
 Thangam Debonnaire

NOES

Cash, Sir William
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Dowden, Oliver
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicky

Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alistair
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian

Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, rh Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee

Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert

Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Amanda Milling and
Rebecca Harris

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
 That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

AGRICULTURE BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Agriculture Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 20 November 2018.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(Craig Whittaker.)

Question agreed to.

AGRICULTURE BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Agriculture Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) sums required by the Secretary of State for—

- (a) giving financial assistance to any person under the Act;
- (b) making delinked payments (in place of direct payments under the basic payment scheme) by virtue of the Act;
- (c) operating the public market intervention and aid for private storage mechanisms under retained direct EU legislation in response to exceptional conditions in agricultural markets;

(2) any administrative expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State by virtue of the Act; and

(3) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided by virtue of any other Act.—(*Craig Whittaker.*)

Question agreed to.

Business Without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 5 and 6 together.

Ordered,

That the Environment and Rural Affairs (Miscellaneous Revocations) Order 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 739) be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.

That the Cattle Compensation (England) (Amendment) Order 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 754) be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—(*Craig Whittaker.*)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Tuesday 16 October, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 20 (Time for taking private business), the private business set down by the Chairman of Ways and Means may be entered upon at any hour (whether before, at or after 4.00pm) and may then be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of.—(*Craig Whittaker.*)

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On Friday 5 October, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs issued a press release notifying me and other Members of high levels of nitrogen dioxide in their constituencies. My constituency of Broxbourne has some of the highest levels of airborne pollutants in the country, along the A10 corridor. I am extremely concerned by this because we have a highly contentious planning application for a 350,000 tonne incinerator in the north of my constituency off the A10, which will generate a further 90,000 HGV movements a year. I urge you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to advise me on how best I can bring these concerns to the attention of Ministers, because Hertfordshire County Council and Veolia now need to withdraw this planning application until we have dealt with the pollution problems in my constituency and along the A10.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He has rather successfully raised this issue in the House, and I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what he had to say. Aside from that, there are obviously opportunities where he can raise the issue, such as in future business questions to ask for a debate or in departmental questions, but he has certainly raised the issue tonight.

Youth Violence

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Craig Whittaker.*)

7.17 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I thank those who have joined me for this extremely important debate. Reducing youth violence is an issue that I know we all care about, and even though I am a London MP this is very much a national issue. *[Interruption.]* One of my, very sad, Google alerts is knife crime. *[Interruption.]* I was reading an article where *Birmingham Mail* editor Marc Reeves said on “Newsnight”:

“Whatever the debate around Brexit, people are dying on the streets of Birmingham. They want to see that on the agenda for a change.” *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is an important debate, so may I ask colleagues who are having other conversations to have them outside the Chamber?

Vicky Foxcroft: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I completely agree about the importance of this debate: this should be a No. 1 priority for us. Our young people need to feel safe; they need to know that we believe in them. They are, after all, our future: our future doctors, nurses, engineers, artists, journalists, and even our future politicians. I understand that in the Gallery this evening we have a few would-be future politicians, and I thank them for coming along this evening.

I am chair of the cross-party Youth Violence Commission and we have been examining the root causes of youth violence. In July this year we published our initial policy recommendations, in which we called for the development of a public health model to tackle violence. I am delighted that since then Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London, has announced the establishment of a London violence reduction unit, which will follow a public health approach in the capital, and last week the Home Secretary also stated that we must treat violence as an infectious disease, backing the adoption of a public health approach. But now we must turn those words into action.

Tonight, I am focusing on the important role that youth services play in tackling youth violence and on how these services fit into a successful public health approach. I have met countless organisations up and down the country that do excellent work with young people, but cuts to youth services have left the sector hollowed out, inconsistent and disjointed, and it is young people who are ultimately losing out. Since 2010, at least £387 million has been cut from youth services, and more than 600 youth centres closed between 2012 and 2016. The only programme we see consistently funded is the National Citizen Service. While youth services have suffered real-terms cuts of 54% since 2011, funding for the NCS has increased annually, rising from a three-year allocation of £168 million when it was first set up to £181 million last year alone. The NCS is a two-week programme once a year. Our young people need year-round support. I wonder whether the NCS would pass the stringent criteria that many other charities have to go through when seeking funding.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; I sought her approval earlier to make an intervention. In my constituency, we have a Church-based, faith-based community organisation that has the support of Government bodies and the police. It is called Street Pastors, and it has significantly reduced antisocial misbehaviour and violence in my constituency. May I gently suggest to her that that might be another method of addressing the issue of youth violence and antisocial behaviour? I am more than happy to commend that organisation to her.

Vicky Foxcroft: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is absolutely right. Faith groups play an instrumental role in reducing youth violence. I am thinking of my own organisations, and of a local pastor called Ben Lindsay and the wonderful work that he does in Lewisham. He also gives me wonderful advice on engaging with the faith community. I absolutely agree with everything the hon. Gentleman has said.

Funding challenges have made the sector super-competitive. Local charities with similar aims have little incentive to collaborate because they are all bidding for the same pots of money. Large organisations with professional bid writers are much more likely to get funding than small charities, even if those charities are doing good work on the ground. On top of this, funding is too often allocated for short periods, and core funding is especially difficult to come by. So we are left with an environment that discourages collaboration and reinforces inconsistency.

Now, imagine we have a teenager. He has grown up in a household where he witnesses domestic violence regularly. His mother self-medicates and his father is largely absent, but when he is around he is violent. At school, he is disruptive and as he gets older he is bounced between different services. No one sticks around for particularly long and the services do not communicate with one another or share data. External involvement in this young person's life is disjointed and inconsistent, reinforcing his belief that no one really cares about what happens to him. A young person like this is crying out for just one adult who cares, and who will stick around in their life for as long as it takes to make a difference. Research from Public Health Wales backs this up, showing that access to a trusted adult in childhood could significantly reduce the negative consequences associated with ACEs—adverse childhood experiences.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. As ever, she is making a powerful point, and she is an asset to this House and to all the people she is seeking to help. In Croydon, a review was undertaken of the 60 serious violence cases among young people, and a factor that affected every case was the lack of a trusted adult. Does she agree that not only have youth services been cut, but their professionalism has been massively downgraded? It is difficult to get through to hard-to-reach young people, and we should give what is an incredibly professional sector the attention that it deserves.

Vicky Foxcroft: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, who has been doing excellent work with the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime and has worked closely with the Youth Violence Commission. I know that this issue has been close to her heart ever since she was elected.

[Vicky Foxcroft]

ACEs are traumatic experiences in a young person's life that can have massive repercussions on an individual's life chances. People who have grown up with four or more ACEs—only 9% of the population—are 10 times more likely to be involved in violence by the time they are 18, compared with the 52% of young people who have experienced no ACEs. Sustainable relationships can go some way to reducing the negative consequences of ACEs.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend not only on securing this debate, but on her incredible work since her election in 2015 on pushing this agenda, including the public health aspect. Many people bandy “public health” around and use it to mean lots of different things, but the only way it can be successful is with a truly whole-system approach, meaning that every agency, from the police to schools to youth services, should take adverse childhood experiences into account. Does she agree that that consequently means delivering a trauma-informed approach?

Vicky Foxcroft: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have had discussions about visiting trauma-informed schools, and we need a much bigger focus on trauma-informed approaches to understand both what they mean and the impact on young people who have experienced trauma.

Turning to some people who do understand that experience, the youth workers I have met completely understand the importance of building and maintaining relationships with the young people they work with. They know the positive impact that that can have on a young person's life—especially a young person who may not have other adults in their life that they can rely on. They can be that positive role model. However, instead of investment in long-term sustainable relationships, we see piecemeal interventions—little pots of money invested in short programmes.

What can we do? Well, here are a few things that the Youth Violence Commission has recommended. We should develop a national youth policy framework, which would make the provision of youth work a statutory duty. We should ensure that any adult working with young people is professionally trained, especially in recognising signs of trauma. All youth workers should be trained in the same way as social workers. Policies and practices should be evidence informed and developed, and youth workers should be recognised, supported and respected in their field. We need to build young people's resilience, ensuring that they can cope with and bounce back from adversity. We should provide positive role models and peer mentors to raise low aspirations and self-confidence.

The youth sector is currently an unregulated marketplace. While we want to see innovation, we also want to ensure that we hold youth work to nationally recognised standards. We need a much more consistent approach, with a focus on long-term results, not short-term interventions. Youth centres need to be open access and safe spaces for young people. It should go without saying, but key to youth work is listening to the voices of young people. It should not take a genius to recognise this, but the experiences and views of young people should be at the core of and inform the delivery of youth services. When the Youth

Violence Commission conducted the safer lives survey, we asked young people, “If there was one thing you could change that you think would make young people safer, what would it be?” and the most popular response was the provision of more youth centres, sports clubs and other youth activities in their local areas.

I asked the Home Office to respond to this debate as well, because this is not a matter DCMS can tackle by itself, but I do have some questions I would like the Minister here to answer. Youth workers, teachers and police officers told the commission that the most dangerous time for knife attacks involving young people is between 3 pm and 6 pm—after school finishes and before parents finish work—but the Office for National Statistics, the Met police, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, city hall's London Datastore, London ambulance dispatch data, the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies and the wonderful House of Commons Library were unable to get us data on the times at which knife attacks take place. When professionals in the field are consistently raising concerns about after-school attacks and grooming, why is this data not published? Will the Minister commit to obtaining the data and publishing it? Does she agree that after-school youth work and activities could help to keep young people safe?

I do not believe that we will ever reduce the level of violence without addressing ACEs. I worry that too many people in Parliament do not understand the impact of ACEs, although I am glad that the expertise of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who unfortunately is not present, informed our recommendations. Will the Minister commit to reviewing the impact of ACEs and developing a plan to reduce them? Will the Government commit to reviewing the funding model for the sector to ensure it is more collaborative and less competitive, so that we can deliver a regulated youth service that any young person can access, as and when they need it?

Many young people have said to me that they are treated like they are part of the problem when they should be at the heart of the solution. What consultations have the Government conducted with young people to find out what kind of youth provision they want? Finally, I sent the Minister a copy of the Youth Violence Commission's interim report, and I was glad to hear that she has read our recommendations in detail. Will she commit to or comment on the parts of the report that relate to reforming youth services and the sector?

If the Government are serious about adopting a public health strategy, it is the responsibility of every Department to understand and address the root causes of violence. Youth services play a role in tackling youth violence, as do schools, councils, social workers, hospitals, mental health services, the police and every other service that touches the life of a young person. A genuine public health approach to violence must be cross-departmental and cross-party, so I hope the Minister will raise my concerns with her Department and her counterparts across Government. I look forward to hearing her response to my questions.

7.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I thank the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft)

for bringing this subject to the Floor of the House. I also thank Mr Speaker for granting the debate on a sensitive but important issue.

It might surprise the House to hear this ministerial confession, but I read the interim report of the Youth Violence Commission in preparation for this debate. I can honestly say, as the daughter of a social worker who spent his entire career working with children and families, that it is exactly the kind of commission that, as a Back Bencher, I would have wanted to be a part of. The report is excellent and makes an extremely important contribution to this complex area of policy.

I know that the hon. Lady will understand that, of the recommendations outlined in the report, only those regarding youth services fall within my portfolio, so I apologise to her and to the House for not being able to go into the detail of other departmental policy areas with the same degree of confidence that I do on my own. However, I will make sure that my private office circulates her speech to colleagues who are affected by the subject. I am not sure that I can answer the questions she posed in her peroration, because they do not fall within my brief. For example, although I understand some of the connections between ACEs and youth services, the issue probably falls more squarely within the remit of colleagues at the Department for Education who deal with social services. I am also not entirely sure that the collection of data on knife attacks falls within my Department's remit. However, those are valid and important questions to ask, so I will make sure that colleagues who may be responsible will provide her with answers.

Vicky Foxcroft: I am grateful that the Minister will raise these issues with other Departments, but part of the public health approach is about ensuring that all those different Departments work together on developing the solution.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that. I am now something of an expert on cross-departmental strategies, having been the Minister responsible for the sports strategy, which involves 10 Departments, for the Office for Civil Society strategy, which involves numerous Departments, and for the forthcoming loneliness strategy, which covers nine Departments. I therefore completely appreciate and understand the important point she is making.

Although I might not know all the answers to the hon. Lady's questions, I do know that this Government have no higher priority for young people than to keep them safe, which is why I am pleased to say that we broadly welcome the commission's recommendations, some of which anticipated policy announcements we have since made. There is much that we can agree on: the roots to the problem of youth violence are complex and there are no quick fixes; the solution does not lie with any particular Department or single part of the community; and we need a systematic approach, backed by strong and consistent leadership. I am sure that we can all agree that the Home Secretary's recent announcement on consulting on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to serious violence is welcome. That would mean that police officers, education partners, and local authority and healthcare professionals would have a new legal duty to take action and prevent violent crime. That statutory duty would make tackling

serious violence a top priority for all key partners, ensuring that all agencies are working together to prevent young people being caught in the criminal cycle.

Louise Haigh: When I saw the Home Secretary's announcement, I questioned how the situation would be any different from these people's current responsibilities under crime and disorder reduction partnerships, which were introduced under the last Labour Government. I appreciate that this is not necessarily the Minister's responsibility, but I would be grateful if she could elaborate somehow on how the duty would enhance existing responsibilities, which do require these people to work together to prevent crime.

Tracey Crouch: I would not dream of inadvertently misleading the House by trying to respond to a question for another Department to which I would not know the answer. However, there is a Home Office official in the Box this evening, and they will be able to provide a written response to the hon. Lady's questions. I am sure that Home Office questions are also just around the corner.

An essential part of the approach, as the report notes, will be to address early intervention. The bit of money I am responsible for—the £90 million dormant accounts money that was recently announced—and the £200 million youth endowment fund announced by the Home Secretary will help to address this issue. I am not pretending that they will solve the issues, but both are designed to provide long-term support and learning.

The commission also calls for a reform of youth services. I agree with a number of the points in that section of the report, including the finding that funding and services are fragmented and siloed. The House might have missed it, but in early August I published the civil society strategy, within which I committed to a review of the statutory duty for local authority youth services. If, following that review, the guidance needs to be strengthened, we will do so. However, this is not all about the Government, and that was very much acknowledged in the commission's report. We need the public, private, social and faith sectors to work much more closely at a community level.

It is really important that the House gets to celebrate the positive role that youth work can play in keeping our young people safe. I recognise, as I am sure we all do, the transformational impact that high-quality interventions can have on all young people, but especially on those who are vulnerable to exploitation or at risk of making poor life choices. We value the role that community youth organisations have in building trust between young people and the wider community. They can play an important role in signposting and facilitating access to services and overcoming barriers to engagement. It would be foolish not to acknowledge that there have been cuts to local authority youth services, but there has also been substantial innovation in new forms of delivery—not least in the hon. Lady's home borough, where Youth First, the mutual that delivers youth services in Lewisham, has received direct funding from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to develop its capacity.

It is also worth acknowledging the support that the Home Office is giving to the "For Jimmy" project in three schools in Deptford as part of the Safe Havens

[Tracey Crouch]

programme. A trusted relationship with a responsible adult or peer, a safe space, and finding a “teachable moment” are key parts of the youth work approach and we support them.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The hon. Lady is absolutely right about what she has just said, but I know that she recognises that youth services have had significant reductions in resource, which has led to a hollowing out of youth services across the country. The voluntary and community sector alone cannot fill that gap. Will she use her leadership role, which we all applaud, to make sure not only that the rhetoric is there, but that the resource is there too?

Tracey Crouch: That is the reason for the review of the statutory guidance. This is provided by local authorities, but we do recognise that there is a difference of service delivery across the board, which is why we are having a look at it as part of the civil society strategy.

Jim Shannon: We all recognise the Minister’s intense interest in these matters and we thank her for that. In my intervention on the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), I referred to faith groups. I note that the Minister has referred to them as well. Has she had any chance to speak to some of the street pastors, because these faith groups in the community do great work on a voluntary basis? I am saying not that we should take advantage of their voluntary work, but that they want to do it. Has she had an opportunity to consider that?

Tracey Crouch: I meet regularly with a whole variety of faith groups on a number of different issues, not just as a Minister, but, of course, in my own constituency. I completely recognise and value the work that faith groups do, especially when they work in partnership with many other different organisations.

Let me talk a bit more about the funding that is available. At present, DCMS, together with the Big Lottery Fund, is investing £40 million in the Youth Investment Fund to directly support community youth provision across England, including in London and the west midlands, both of which are areas of concern. There is also a further £40 million investment going into the #iwill fund, which supports young people to take action on the issues that they care about. One of the key points that the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford made in her speech was about making sure that young people themselves are engaged in the delivery of some of those services.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the National Citizen Service, whose central aim—the social mixing of young people from all kinds of backgrounds—is absolutely key. On a recent visit to a NCS programme in another south London borough, I was able to meet many of those youngsters and hear their positive experiences of NCS.

I also believe that it is worth giving some examples of exactly how DCMS funding is having an effect. Redthread, a charity with a 20-year track record in supporting young people through health and education programmes,

is a really good example. Its youth violence intervention work puts key workers in hospital emergency departments so that they can engage with young people at their most vulnerable and help them to put their lives back together when they most need it. The Government are supporting the extension of this work from its London base to Nottingham and Birmingham.

The only effective solutions are proven to be the ones that connect young people to their loved ones, their neighbourhood and the wider society. There are many other recommendations in the report and I feel that my brief response just on youth services does not do them justice. However, there was one other point that was made in the report that I really want to pick up on. In the section on increasing employment opportunities, there is a reference to the shortage of black, Asian and minority ethnic role models involved in schools and youth organisations. I think we can extend that across the board, and I say to the hon. Lady that, with my other hat on—that of Sports Minister—I really share the concern that she and the other commissioners had. I have been working with sporting organisations to see how we can change that. Many youngsters look up to sports stars, whatever the sport, and we quite often use sport as an intervention programme within youth and serious violence services. If young people do not have those role models and do not see someone they can relate to, how can they ever believe that there is something out there for them and that they can achieve further? We need more BME leaders in sport from the grassroots to the top of the elite sporting pyramid. I feel very strongly about that and was pleased to see it included in that section of the report.

We recognise that there have been recent increases in murders, gun crime and knife crime, with those increases accompanied by a shift towards younger victims and perpetrators. However, statistics do not matter for a nanosecond to those caught up in the awful consequences of violence—the victim, their family and friends, and their communities—and the impact of such crimes is devastating. That was why the Government published the serious violence strategy earlier this year. The strategy represents a step change in how we think about and respond to serious violence. In particular, the strategy stresses the importance of early intervention to tackle the root causes of serious violence and provide young people with the skills and resilience to lead productive lives free from violence.

Although the causes and consequences of youth violence are often complex, effective solutions need not be. They can come from partnerships across Government, local councils, the criminal justice system, the voluntary sector and, most importantly, within communities themselves. This is the approach outlined in the interim report, and we all look forward to the commission’s final report. Until then, I shall conclude by thanking not only the hon. Lady, but the other commissioners, the advisory and academic team, the secretariat and, of course, all those who gave evidence to ensure that future policy development on this issue is considered responsibly and consistently throughout central and local government.

Question put and agreed to.

7.46 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 10 October 2018

[MIKE GAPES *in the Chair*]

Nursery Sector: Sustainability

9.30 am

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the sustainability of the nursery sector.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I appreciate the opportunity to have this important debate on the sustainability of the nursery sector. In recent years, I have increasingly seen and heard concerns about the sector, both through the media and through conversations in my constituency. What really brought the issue to a head for me was a meeting with the Federation of Small Businesses and a couple of local nurseries. They raised their current concerns about sustainability, rising costs, and the lack of a level playing field within the sector. Following that, I surveyed all of the nurseries in my constituency and got an incredibly strong response. Most of the nurseries replied, which shows that there is a great deal of interest in improving and reforming this area.

I will first talk about the enormous contribution that nurseries make to children and families in all of our constituencies. Nurseries provide a wonderful start in life for children. They provide opportunities for socialisation for children who are at home during their earliest years, so that they can meet other children in increasingly large age-based groups. When I say “socialisation”, I do not mean socialism; I mean the broader sense of meeting other people in the local community. Nurseries are also valuable for helping children prepare for primary school, as we know that people have concerns about how ready children are to take that step in their lives.

Nurseries are also important for parents, who can get advice about what they are doing as they raise their children, and meet other parents. Sometimes, having young children can feel very isolating for parents, and nurseries provide a good forum for them to meet other parents, get advice, and feel confident that they are doing the right thing—or to seek further advice if, perhaps, they are not. Nurseries provide parents with a very useful break from the children, and increasingly both parents work. The traditional, old-fashioned style of one parent, typically the mother, staying at home to raise the children is not so prevalent these days. Normally, both parents work, and nurseries provide a very important service, enabling both parents to go to work or perhaps re-enter the workforce.

Working in a nursery can be a great deal of fun: it is an enjoyable, rewarding form of work, and a nursery is also a really good business to own and run, because it is an interesting part of a local community. People who work in nurseries can see the children develop over the years, and the importance of the contribution their nursery makes to all those families.

The initial introduction of the universal 15 hours a week of free childcare was followed by a further 15 hours, but since then, there has been concern that funding has

not kept pace, and does not provide all the moneys that nurseries require for the care that they deliver. Funding not keeping pace with costs is a concern, and nurseries have been finding ways of supplementing that income without increasing their hourly rate. For example, some nurseries have been charging additional money for lunch that far exceeds the actual cost of that lunch. Across the country, the average charge is about £10 per day. That is a very significant amount of money for a family to have to contribute on a weekly basis when they believed that the 30 hours of childcare was free. There is a strong narrative that what is offered is 30 hours of free childcare, which leads to problems for families when they are managing their budgets. They may have had a family conversation about whether a parent staying at home should go back to work, and what the household accounts would look like if they did, but if they then get a request from the nursery for more funding, that creates problems for that family. Having to have a conversation right from the off about what looks like a demand for more money also creates a difficult start to the relationship between the family and the nursery.

This support is there to help people; of course, there is an aspect of education for the children, but the support is clearly also there to support people in the workplace. However, it last for only 38 weeks of the year. Most people do not work 38 weeks in the year, so what about the remaining weeks in which the family has to make up the difference? Again, many people have the understanding that what is offered is 30 hours of free childcare a week; they would not think that meant 30 hours of free childcare just during school term time, in essence. Of course, that is a concern for many parents, but especially for parents on very low pay, for whom any surprising additional outgoings will be quite a shock to the system.

Across my constituency, nurseries have raised concerns about business rates. If children are supported for 38 weeks, they will often attend for 38 weeks; the parents will look after the children for the rest of that time, or will perhaps find some mechanism involving their extended family. However, the business rates are set as though the business is being operated for the entire year, so if that nursery is over the threshold to pay business rates, it will in effect be receiving the money for 38 weeks but paying business rates for 52 weeks. If there is not flexibility over that 30 hours of bringing in more money, that creates a challenge.

There is also a concern about VAT. If a nursery is associated with a primary school, that nursery has the ability to reclaim VAT, because it is part of an educational institution. However, a nursery not associated with a primary school does not have the opportunity to claim that money back, which does not demonstrate a level playing field between the two. That is a problem. Councils also take a cut, and I welcome the fact that the Government have driven the expectation that the amount of money going from national Government to the council and then on to the nursery will go up from 93% to 95%. I am pleased that Wigan Council has already achieved that goal of 95% of money going to the nursery, and that Bolton Council is a level ahead, with 97% of its money going from the council to the nursery. It is important that councils are recognised for that commitment to ensure as much money goes to nurseries as possible.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the fact that nurseries are having to look for other ways of raising funding, including charging for meals—I have heard about all sorts of things, such as taking in ironing, or baking and selling cakes—indicates that insufficient funding is coming to nurseries full stop, and that that should be the starting point for dealing with this issue?

Chris Green: I am very sympathetic to that view. Fundraising by nurseries or other organisations does have a positive aspect for those organisations, but I am very sympathetic to the view that councils have been squeezed, and it is challenging for councils to pass on as much of that money as they would like.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is raising some important points about top-up fees and business rates, and their effect on nurseries' finances. I should say that we are fighting to keep five outstanding local authority nurseries open in Salford, not far from Bolton. They have been put at risk because the Government have changed the way they fund early years provision, leaving our cash-strapped Salford council to find £1.5 million this year. He has outlined how he values nurseries, so does he agree that we should not be in the position of losing any outstanding nurseries? I am sure he would not want to lose five nurseries in his constituency. Will he join me in urging the Minister to help Salford and other authorities whose nurseries are now under threat?

Chris Green: The hon. Lady and I share a common position. We ought not to be losing any provision, and certainly not the outstanding provision in her constituency. I welcome the Government's consultation, because it recognises that when new schemes come along, with the pressures on councils, we have to reconsider the ongoing funding and support. The Minister might be able to answer the hon. Lady's question in that regard.

There is also concern about the ratio of children to carers and about when the bands kick in. Some nurseries have mentioned that perhaps there could be adjustments. It is a complicated subject, so I will not go into the details, but I simply raise that as a concern. Will my hon. Friend the Minister also look at best practice across European countries to see what they do and what works there?

There is a sense that perhaps there is not sufficient flexibility within the system beyond the rigid bands that are set out. I will read out one of the responses to my survey to give a slight sense of the feeling:

"I feel that a professional should be able to decide what ratio would be required depending on the children in each room as well as the level of qualification of staff etcetera."

There is a sense that if there are talented, experienced and well qualified staff, the ratio needed for a certain group of children might be different from that for a more challenging group of children with staff who are not as well qualified and not as experienced. A little more flexibility might perhaps be considered.

Sometimes a nursery cannot take a child when the family request it at the last minute, because all the age groups are at their limit. Perhaps one parent does not normally go into the office on a Friday, but there is a big

project at work and they are required to attend, and the nursery has no space or cannot hire a member of staff just for the one additional child for that day. Because of the way the rules are applied, the nursery does not feel that it can say, "Okay, for this one day we will allow a little flexibility." Perhaps that could be recognised and allowed within the system, because at the moment some nurseries say that they cannot take a child in those circumstances which causes a problem for the child, for the parents and for the place of work. Could that be resolved with a little flexibility? It would have to be monitored so there was no abuse of the system, but I think it would help all parties concerned. Of course we want transparency, but sometimes there is a conflict between ticking the boxes and trusting the professionals to run a service. We need a slightly better balance between the two.

I want to make the point that nurseries are not right for all children and all families. We ought to recognise that in families where one parent chooses to stay at home to raise the children, it is a wonderful, positive thing, but sometimes parents feel they are being told they are making the wrong decision because they have only one income and they are taxed to support other people who have two incomes. It is almost as though the state tells them that they are doing the wrong thing and they should have someone else look after their children and go off to work.

I am pleased that the Minister is having a consultation, and I have some points that I wish him to address in his speech later. My first point is on the hourly rate of support within the 30 hours. If the entire cost of childcare is not covered, families and nurseries ought to be clear that the childcare support is not free and should be seen more as a contribution towards childcare. Following the example in Scotland and what will soon be the example in Wales, there should be an exemption from business rates for nurseries and equality between independent nurseries and those associated with schools. They should all pay VAT or all be exempt.

9.45 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Gapes, for such an important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) for opening the debate so concisely and for raising many important issues.

First, I must declare an interest. My sister is an early years specialist and a teacher in a nursery, and she lobbies me every day about the sector, but in positive ways. She talks about how it should be reformed, improved, invested in and supported. There are fantastic examples in Scandinavian countries of the level of investment in early years. We are talking not about running a service on a shoestring, but about investing in young lives and making sure youngsters have the best start in life. That is what this debate is really about: ensuring that we put excellence right at the heart of early years. We need only look at the WAVE Trust's work on "The 1001 Critical Days" to understand the importance of bringing that work into nurseries and then into early years education.

I have been working with the National Day Nurseries Association, and in the summer we met providers in my constituency. That is significant for the Minister because York was the first whole authority pilot for the new

funding formula and the new system around early years. Not only the statutory sector but the voluntary and private sectors in York bring to bear the real-life experience of the impact of the pilot, so I want to reflect on that today. Of course, I am also here to problem-solve, so I trust that, between us, we will be able to find some solutions to the challenges.

We are talking not only about education for youngsters, but about the whole life experience—the holistic experience—for young people. I was reminded of the increasing need around language and communication skills that young people need, not least because children are often more screen-fed these days. We need to make sure that we have holistic services, which is where Sure Start and children's centres came in in early years, and we need to make sure we do not lose that approach. With the Budget coming up and the announcement that austerity is at an end, I am sure the Minister will walk through an open door in making sure that we have the resources we need.

Let me go back to York, the early implementer. Talking to providers right across the spectrum, it is clear that serious financial stress is being placed on nurseries. The dedication of the sector and the creativity of people running businesses make the system work, which is what we would expect of professionals. They want the system to provide good, safe services that benefit children and make sure they have the best start in life. York did a lot of preparation through the pilot to ensure business sustainability, and it put business planning support in place for nurseries, which has helped with sustainability in these challenging times of not having the necessary resources. York has also set up a shared foundation partnership, a model where providers come together to talk about the challenges they face and to try to find solutions between them, often signposting families to providers that perhaps have some spare capacity.

However, right across the board, local authorities, private providers and voluntary sector providers are saying that the money is not enough. I want the Minister to understand that. Between £1 and £2 more per hour is needed. The National Day Nurseries Association says that we are £1.90 an hour short. Obviously we need to listen to that evidence base as we move forward.

Financial viability issues are putting real pressure on the sector. Of course, that has been increased by the national living wage coming in, minimum wage costs and auto-enrolment around pension contributions, particularly for providers that want to provide better pensions. We heard about business rates. A nursery provider in my constituency has two nurseries and has paid an increase in business rates of £11,000. That was just the increase. That in itself spells out the real pressure being put on nurseries, which of course still want to provide the best possible service.

In York we have a real challenge around the high cost of living, which means that recruitment and retention is an issue. Of course, when new staff are recruited, they have to go through mandatory training, and in York we want to provide good continuous professional development for staff as well. Often it is the higher paid, more qualified staff who are leaving the sector because of the pressures being put on, for instance, teachers and other

professionals. The cost of training and upskilling is therefore also having a negative impact on those providing services.

We need to heed what the NDNA is saying regarding resources, and the Treasury Committee has highlighted how the data the Government used to cost affordability—the amount of money going to the programme—was old data. We therefore need to ensure that affordability is calculated in real time, addressing the real issues that nurseries face today.

We heard examples of how nurseries are being creative to get money, because they obviously need to maintain staffing levels and ensure that children have the best engaged education. We are talking often about £15 to £25 being raised per day. We heard the example of people charging over and above for lunches so that additional money can pay for resources, activities and equipment. Some of the money is going just towards basic staffing costs. This is about getting the essentials right and charging parents for it. So the offer is certainly not free—we need to clarify that—but we want it to be, and that is clearly Labour's policy. I trust that the Government will step up to the plate.

Other nurseries are restricting the number of children who can be in receipt of the 30 days, or restricting the number of hours available, to ensure that they can balance the books. They are telling me that they now cannot afford to update things such as equipment that is getting old and tatty or other resources. That has a negative impact on a child's growth and learning. It is important to note that, although we have an excellent education system in York, there is an attainment gap in areas of deprivation. The system is driving greater inequality, and there is concern about that. We are trying to address those issues, and take on board the impact that they are having on young lives.

Nurseries with children who have special educational needs and disabilities wanted me to highlight the impact that the situation is having on them. There is a lack of funding specifically for those children, particularly if they do not have a statement in place. It is also about provision. Often one parent will not work; they will stay at home and be the carer for the child. They therefore do not qualify for the additional hours, because both parents need to work. Alternatively, a single parent could be at home caring for that child, and would therefore be excluded. I ask that that rule is changed as well.

We need to ensure that we are not providing the minimum, but going for the best within the amount of investment we are putting into early years. The costs to the state of getting it wrong are enormous later on in life. We are paying for that now because things have not been put in place right through the education system. Let us put the investment where it really makes a difference.

Barbara Keeley: My hon. Friend has just introduced something that ties in with the situation in Salford that I outlined: the impact that our nurseries have on families of children with special educational needs. She also made a point earlier about language and communication. We are potentially losing £1.5 million out of the £3 million cost of running our five nurseries. However, the key point she raises is about the impact, if we cannot save them, that that will have later on education. Parents

[Barbara Keeley]

have told me just how much those nurseries are doing for families with children who have special educational needs.

Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. We really have to put the right investment in place for children with special educational needs. We need to give those children the start in life that any other child should expect. We also need to support parents. Parents do an amazing job looking after their children. Having the support of a nursery helps them in their work as well. It is vital that they are not excluded from the so-called “free” offer and that a new exemption is introduced by the Minister. I would be really interested to hear him commit to that today.

We mentioned business costs, which are important. We have heard that nurseries in Wales and Scotland are exempt from business rates. We trust that that can be introduced in England. That would make such a difference to nurseries. Nurseries based in schools and childminders and domestic child carers do not pay business rates, so why do nurseries have to? We also heard about VAT, where we need a level playing field.

The Minister has a real opportunity to reform the funding. York is the example to call on. Those working in the sector have shown dedication, but they are really struggling, and the viability of nurseries, as I saw when visiting them across my constituency this summer, is very fragile indeed. There is a real plea, which is the basis of today's debate, for the Minister to go back and get the funding that is required. Otherwise, many nurseries could disappear, and that would jeopardise early years altogether.

9.57 am

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) on introducing this morning's important debate.

My interest in the sector arose as a consequence of an invitation to visit Pathfinders Day Nursery in my constituency, which is based at Crescent School in Rugby, to discuss the challenges faced by the sector with Alison Dyke, the owner of the nursery and the Warwickshire chair of the National Day Nurseries Association. My interest was aroused partly because I know about the importance of providing 30 hours of quality childcare and nursery education to our youngsters to give them a great start in life and to parents, particularly because it enables those parents who want to get back into the workforce to do so.

My interest was also aroused as a businessman. I was a businessman for 25 years, and some of the issues that were drawn to my attention related to the sustainability and viability of a fast-growing small business sector. I wanted to understand the business implications. A great deal of what I learned at my meeting related to funding, which earlier speakers mentioned.

As a fellow Warwickshire MP, the Minister will be aware that there is variation in the amount of funding that different authorities receive. The national headline funding rate is £4.94 per hour, but as the county authority, Warwickshire receives £4.30 an hour. I had assumed

that that meant £4.30 an hour paid to the childcare provider. That, of course, is not the case, because local authorities are entitled to take a deduction. In Warwickshire, that deduction amounts to 5%, which is used by the local authority to fund the early years special educational needs team, to provide some business support and to contribute to the early years provider. That results in a rate of £3.96 being paid to childcare providers in Warwickshire, which Alison tells me is really not enough to provide high-quality childcare or anything more than a bare bones service.

As the Minister will be aware, there is research to support that contention: Ceeda has found that the hourly cost to a provider of each place for a three or four-year-old is £5.08, whereas the average Government funding is £4.34 an hour and Warwickshire pays its providers £3.96 per hour. Ceeda calculates that that shortfall of about £1 an hour adds up to an annual funding shortfall of £63 million for the 30 hours offer for three and four-year-olds nationwide.

The National Day Nurseries Association has found that since 2017, when the 30 hours policy was introduced, closures have increased by 47%, largely as a consequence of financial pressures. It has also found that 19% of nurseries expect to make a loss, while only 43% anticipate a profit or surplus. I have already mentioned the difference between the costs of delivering the service and of funding it. Survey respondents highlighted administration challenges in the sector: 85% said that there is now additional administration to do, while 58% said that managing the complexity of the system is among the challenges they face.

Mrs Dyke is delighted that some parents are now able to access funding and provide a nursery education for their children in a way that they could not before. She and Pathfinders are very proud of the high-quality environment that they offer to children between the ages of six months and five years. They allocate 28 places for three and four-year-olds who receive the extended 30 hours' funding. Her assessment is that children who attend nursery make extremely good progress in their development and gain an enormous advantage, but she is concerned about how to fund it—I understand that the rate has now been frozen until 2020, despite the increasing costs of labour, staff training and service provision. She is also concerned that for children on the 30-hour funded places, providers are being required to provide a no-frills service, which does not equate to quality childcare.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West referred to the fact that many providers are asking parents to pay for additional services; Mrs Dyke highlights snacks and other food, as well as other consumables and specialist sessions.

Chris Green: There is also an additional cost for those parents who need 40 hours of childcare and have to pay a separate rate for it. They may not have a higher income—they may still be on a very low wage—yet they may be subsidising additional hours for other parents who are on the 30 hours.

Mark Pawsey: That is exactly my constituent's point: there is a differential, and those on the higher rate are effectively subsidising those on the Government-funded rate. A further problem that Mrs Dyke identifies is that

parents are not obliged to pay for the additional services. If all parents refused to pay it, more businesses would become unsustainable, quality would be compromised and providers would have to either stop offering the 30 hours or shut down completely. At a time when we are working hard to extend provision to more and more children, that is a matter of concern.

I know that the Minister is aware of Mrs Dyke's concerns, because I wrote to him about them and he was kind enough to send a prompt reply, which I have passed on to her. I look forward to his speech; I hope that he will share some early indications of the results of the Department's evaluations and that we will continue to push forward and develop this very important sector.

10.5 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) for securing this debate on a really important subject. I will not make a lengthy speech, but I would like to follow up on a few of his points, to which I listened with great interest.

I appreciate and fully support the hon. Gentleman's comments about the value of the nursery sector to working parents and the importance of its availability, but I will focus on its value to children, particularly those from deprived communities. Worryingly, extensive research shows that as many as 35% of children arrive at school with language skills that are inadequate or below the level expected of their age group. It is important that we distinguish between childcare and the educational value of this excellent sector; Ofsted judges more than 90% of providers as outstanding in providing exceptional support for children's development. For children in deprived communities, that is often a lifeline for the entire family.

When parents have so many life challenges to deal with, the daily support of qualified professionals can make the difference between getting by and not getting by, and can be crucial to children's life chances. Highly qualified and well-trained staff can often pick up developmental issues, mental health stresses and strains, or special educational needs. They can nip problems in the bud and search out specialist help at a very early stage, which has an impact further down the line. Extensive Oxford University research has shown the value of investing in early years.

I understand that organisations in the sector have business costs, but I would prefer that we saw them as an educational service for children in their early years—a national priority. The current funding arrangements are complex and extremely fragmented, and many nurseries and nursery schools are in danger of closure. I fully understand the pressures on local government; my local authority has endured nearly 60% of cuts to its funding. However, what I seek from the Minister today is recognition that early years should be part of the Government's plan to increase social mobility and educational attainment and to enhance our economic opportunity as a nation by ensuring that every child can contribute.

I hope that the Minister is listening and that he will try to change the focus—and maybe the Prime Minister's mind. Instead of focusing on the impact of things like grammar schools, let us get investment into the early

years where it will make the real difference. Education does not begin at 11; it begins in the early years. If we invest in children and ensure that they have that opportunity in their early days, they will reap the benefits tenfold in their later educational life. I dare say that we will all benefit from that.

10.9 am

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) on securing the debate. As we have heard, our nurseries play a vital role in children's development and in preparing them for their future education and careers; if we get it right, they play a very important role in promoting social mobility and alleviating poverty. Improving standards should be a central part of that, along with ensuring that they are properly resourced.

Since the Government introduced the new early years funding formula and the 30 hours free childcare policy in 2017, 121 nurseries in England have closed, which is a 66% increase in closures from the previous year. That is a very worrying figure when we know—from the Government's commitment to provide 30 hours and so on—that their intention is not to see a decline in nursery provision, but that is what is happening. Of the nurseries that have closed since the policy was introduced, 71% received an hourly funding rate of less than £5 per child. A total of 44% received the lower hourly funding rate of £4.30 per child. These recent closures are affecting thousands of families. To be charitable to the Government, I believe this is an unintended consequence of a well-intentioned but flawed policy.

Although I welcome the 30 hours free childcare scheme for working families, the range, complexity and fragmentation that have been mentioned have made take-up less than desirable. Some of the things that have been introduced include the 15 free hours for disadvantaged two-year-olds, the 30 free hours for three and four-year-old children of working parents and the tax-free childcare scheme. In parallel, the childcare voucher schemes have been closed to new entrants, but no assessment has been done to see what the impact would be on those who have benefited and others who could benefit from it. That is despite requests from the Treasury Committee, which I serve on. Although the time was extended, there is still a lot further to go in looking at how childcare vouchers could be used to continue supporting families where schemes have worked well.

The funding situation is underlined by the wider concern about passing on the requirement to increase wage levels as a result of the national minimum wage, and about pension contributions and business rates. Yet, the Government have not faced up to the fact that nurseries cannot afford to pay for that without national Government support. Nor can local authorities step in any longer—again, because of the context of unprecedented funding cuts over many years to local authority budgets.

The wider context is that, in constituencies such as mine, where schools have worked in partnership with nurseries to co-finance and support them, that is no longer an option. Despite some of the changes after the general election, the school system still faces some £2 billion-worth of cuts under the so-called fair funding formula, which is nothing short of a disgrace and is

[Rushanara Ali]

certainly not fair to constituents such as mine, who have seen a massive cut in school funding. Those options, which have been a huge help in protecting nurseries in constituencies such as mine, are no longer available.

The number of free places for disadvantaged two-year-olds and children with special educational needs and disabilities—something I know the Minister cares deeply about, given his brief—is falling because those children are more expensive to care for due to the higher staff-to-child ratios. The Government have not taken that on board; if they did, they would recognise the important contribution that nurseries working with SEND children make in our constituencies. Two-year-olds are currently not eligible for support from the disability access fund, the early years pupil premium or the SEN inclusion fund, all of which could be used to improve their access to early years provision.

After campaigns and petitions—one petition received over 10,000 signatures—the Government committed in the 2017 early years national funding formula to continue the level of funding for maintained nursery schools until 2019-20 through a supplementary grant of £59 million per year, but there are no guarantees that this will continue after 2020. Our maintained nurseries are left unable to plan and are, as Members will hear shortly, facing closure in some cases. It would represent a 31% cut if there is no continuity of funding, so I hope the Minister will say today what he is going to do post 2020 and whether he is extensively lobbying the Chancellor ahead of his statement to try to address this major problem, because the specialist support that is provided to maintained nurseries is vital if we want to address the specific needs of the children who desperately need that provision.

Maintained nurseries are vital services, and they completely transform lives. I have seen that when visiting nurseries, meeting children and parents across my constituency, and meeting outstanding professionals who work really hard with very little remuneration because they believe in our children and in giving them a good future. Some 64% of maintained nursery schools are in the 30 most deprived areas of England; 63% are graded outstanding by Ofsted because of the quality of education they offer. When Ministers talk about cost savings, they should not use such blunt instruments, which do not take into account the way professionals and families have worked to improve achievement from an early age, creating the building blocks for success in later life.

In those nurseries, admissions policies prioritise children who are in greatest need and provide a high number of places for disadvantaged and SEND children, particularly those with the most complex needs. These children make great progress through the education system, which they would not do otherwise. The average number of available childcare places in areas of disadvantage has fallen from 33 children per 100 in 2016 to just 25 per 100 in 2018. That is a worrying trend, which the Government need to reverse. Across the UK, there are now over 500 fewer Sure Start centres than there were in 2010, so the wider support structure has also crumbled, at a time when families are facing huge pressure, uncertainty and insecurity. That is one area of vital provision that needs protecting.

The child poverty rate in my constituency is the highest in the country, and yet our education system has been transformed over the past 20 years; early years and maintained nurseries have played a critical role in that. We also face funding cuts of 24% from 2010 to 20, and the local authority will have to make a further £58 million-worth of savings because of the national Government cuts. In that context, unfortunately, the local authority can no longer co-finance and meet the shortfall of a number of maintained nurseries in my constituency. I am deeply concerned about that, because it was announced this September that three out of six were to be closed. We simply cannot afford for that to happen, but the local authority no longer has the bandwidth to be able to continue to finance them.

Nurseries such as Overland, Mary Sambrook and John Smith have made huge differences to children's lives. For example, the Overland children's centre provides specialist care services for deaf children. Parents are extremely anxious about what is going to happen in the future, and they are particularly concerned about other children who could have benefited from those nurseries but who will no longer be able to.

I hope the Minister will heed the warnings of a cross-party group of more than 70 Members of Parliament, including 12 from his own party, who called on the Government to think again about the funding that is available for this important service. I also hope he will heed the Treasury Committee's report, which recommended that the Government ensure that the costs that are being passed on through the national minimum wage, pension contributions and business rates are borne by national Government. Otherwise, nurseries will have no option but to charge—some have started to do so, making a mockery of the policy of 30 or 15 hours of free childcare—or, as the Minister is aware, to close.

The Treasury Committee also called on the Government to look closely at why take-up is so low. At the time, it was 90% lower than initially expected. We highlighted the importance of targeting disadvantaged people, because the new arrangements do not seem to be reaching those communities and families.

Cutting back higher quality staff and changing the services that were previously free may undermine the Government's overarching policy objective of supporting those who live in disadvantaged areas, including constituencies such as mine and those of many other Members of Parliament. I hope the Minister will redouble his efforts to persuade the Chancellor to do more to finance this important sector, which is vital to the future of our children and our country.

10.21 am

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) for securing this important debate. It has been absolutely fantastic to hear so many contributions from Members across the House.

I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Bolton West and for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), who are obviously listening MPs and are very much connected with their communities. The survey that the hon. Member for Bolton West instigated was a great tool for getting to the nitty-gritty of what is going on in his community. He talked about

business rates, about primary schools that cannot get their VAT back when non-school nurseries can, and about ratios, which I am sure the Minister will want to look into. Given the way the world works now, we need flexibility more than ever. The hon. Member for Rugby talked about the stark costs and the shortfall of £1 an hour in his community, and asked how nurseries can keep going with that shortfall.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) has worked very hard with the maintained nursery sector in her area—in fact, I visited a group of nurseries in her community. She said that they are a lifeline for many families. She made a powerful argument, and she is a massive advocate for her community.

I am so grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made a contribution, because she was an early implementer and was at the coalface of the roll-out, so she has seen the effects of the funding shortfall. I am glad that she mentioned Sure Start and SEND provision, which are vital parts of our offer for families. I congratulate her sister, who is working very hard in the sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who is no longer in her place, made a powerful intervention about losing five outstanding nurseries, and she talked about the prospects for SEND children. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) has done incredible work in her community, where the school for deaf children potentially faces closure. Her work on the Treasury Committee was really helpful a few months ago in helping us to understand the landscape in more detail, and it gave us a granular understanding of the funding shortfall. I congratulate her on her work and on the way she has supported her community. It is a pleasure to follow so many fantastic contributions.

The Minister and I have discussed the financial sustainability of the early years sector many times in the Chambers of this House. Our discussions have focused on the funding levels the Government set for their policies. As hon. Members are aware, Government-funded childcare schemes have become an increasingly large part of early years settings' incomes in recent years. The biggest single change was arguably the introduction of 30 hours of free childcare per week, which came into effect in September 2017. In many instances, those free extra hours result in some financial support being available for all the childcare hours a family uses in a week. Of course, there is a wider discussion to be had about top-ups and the additional charges placed on those hours, but it is undeniable that, for many working families, financial support is welcome overall. However, the change means that what nurseries and childminders can charge is limited, as a larger proportion of their income comes from an amount set by central Government.

That would not be a problem, however—this is where the Minister and I stop agreeing—if the funding levels set by the Government were not too low. I do not want to ruin the surprise for anyone, but I imagine that the Minister will point to a report by Frontier Economics and to a 2016 National Audit Office report that called the Government's spending review “thorough and wide-ranging”. I have heard that response many times, and read it in the responses to many written questions. However, I want to push the Minister a bit further

today. In the same sentence in which the NAO said that the review was “wide-ranging”, it also stated that the review

“used a variety of sources, including evidence from 2,000 providers and other stakeholders.”

Although the Government did receive about 2,000 provider responses to its call for evidence about delivery costs, they subsequently admitted that, because the providers' responses

“were often not supported by figures”,

they were

“unable to determine from the responses what providers' unit costs were”.

I would therefore be grateful if the Minister could confirm the number of providers whose evidence was used in the review. If the number is below 2,000, has the NAO been made aware of that?

The early years sector is in a precarious financial position and is one of the lowest-paid sectors in our economy. I am sure every hon. Member in the Chamber will have visited nurseries in their constituencies and seen the passion, talent and commitment of practitioners. I hope we can agree that the low pay is a scandal. Margins in the sector are always tight, and we see a considerable churn of providers. However, I am extremely concerned by some of the recent research. For example, the Pre-school Learning Alliance survey of more than 1,600 early years practitioners in September found that eight in 10 said that it would have a somewhat or a significantly negative effect on them if their funding rate stayed the same next year. Half of providers have increased their fees because of the 30 hours offer. Four in 10—42%—have introduced or increased charges for additional goods and services, and, incredibly, four in 10 say that there is a chance that they will have to close their setting in the next academic year due to the 30 hours offer and/or underfunding.

That survey is not a one-off. The National Day Nurseries Association unearthed a yearly funding shortfall of £2,166 per three and four-year-old child. That has contributed to a 66% rise in nursery closures over the past 12 months—a loss of a staggering 5,000 places. A Department for Education-commissioned report conducted by Frontier Economics, released last month, found that 25% of providers had moved from making a profit to breaking even or making a loss.

Despite the weight of evidence clearly showing that there is an urgent need for a funding increase for early years policies, the Government remain defiant. Later today, “Save Our Nurseries” campaigners will be outside Parliament, and campaigns are springing up in Salford, Birmingham, Tower Hamlets, Burnley and elsewhere, but for too many there is nothing to be saved. Bright Beginnings in Stockport said that

“the reality is that we can't provide Outstanding nursery care on the funding provided.”

The Ark Nursery in West Sussex is closing because of a decade of underfunding. Windymiller, in my own constituency, where I grew up, closed its doors a few months ago because of funding pressures. It seems that at least once a week, I hear of another outstanding nursery closing its doors for good.

What is to be done? Well, the Budget is coming up this month, and I wonder whether the Minister could enlighten us as to whether he or the Secretary of State

[Tracy Brabin]

have held conversations with the Chancellor about a funding increase for free childcare. In recent days, a petition calling for a review of how business rates are applied to nurseries has reached 10,000 signatures. Perhaps the Minister could let us know his thoughts on that, and whether he supports the decision in Wales to scrap business rates for nurseries.

Maintained nurseries remain concerned that there has been no commitment to extra funding, considering the extra costs that they incur. With budgets requiring sign-off two years in advance, can the Minister tell us when a decision will be made? As the Government occupy a larger role in the funding of nurseries, they must also face up to their responsibility to nurture the sector. If we continue on our current trajectory, we will see a growing recruitment crisis and an exodus of experienced and outstanding providers. Nobody wants that. I look forward to hearing what plans the Minister has to halt this growing problem.

10.31 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) on a very thoughtful speech and on securing this important debate. We have heard some important contributions from both sides of the House, and I am genuinely grateful for the opportunity to set out both the Government's position on childcare support and our priority of ensuring that hard-working parents are able to access high-quality provision.

Evidence suggests that high-quality childcare supports children's development, as many colleagues have said, and prepares young children for school. Affordable and convenient childcare gives parents the ability to balance work and family life, allowing them to enjoy the benefits of a job, safe in the knowledge that their children are in good hands. That is why—I am very proud of this fact—this Government are investing more in childcare than any other Government. By 2019-20, we will be spending around £6 billion a year on childcare support. That includes an extra £1 billion a year to deliver 30 hours of free childcare and pay our higher funding rates.

The Secretary of State and I announced that we have committed a further £30 million of capital funding to build more school-based nursery places in the most deprived areas. That supports our commitment to social mobility, ensuring that we provide more quality places for those that will benefit the most. We are also providing additional funding, worth around £60 million per year, to support maintained nursery schools at least until 2019-20. Time permitting, I will return to maintained nurseries in response to some of the comments from colleagues.

All three and four-year-olds, along with disadvantaged two-year-olds, are able to access 15 hours a week of free early education. We have just celebrated the first year since doubling the childcare entitlement for working parents of three and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week. The childcare service, which is the online application for 30 hours of free childcare, along with the information

available through the Childcare Choices website and the childcare calculator, have helped 340,000 children to take advantage of more high-quality childcare and put savings of up to £5,000 back in their parents' pockets. That is something to be celebrated.

The recent independent evaluation of the 30 hours free childcare found that over a quarter of parents reported that they had increased their working hours, and 15% of parents said they would not be working without the extended hours. One parent interviewed for the evaluation also noted the wider benefits, which sometimes go unnoticed, of being able to work more:

"By doing four days now instead of three...my company looks at my development and progression in a way that they wouldn't if I was only doing three days".

That is great news which genuinely demonstrates the real and valuable impact of 30 hours. At a celebration, I met one parent who came up to me and said, "I just want to thank you for this. We are not the poorest family in the country, but we are certainly not rich. The 30 hours have allowed my wife to retrain in accountancy and she has got a job in that sector." Those are real lives that are being impacted by a policy that is truly delivering on the ground.

Rushanara Ali: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have so many things to say. The hon. Lady made a thoughtful speech, and I will try to get through as many of the questions asked by her and other colleagues as possible. I hope she will forgive me for not giving way.

In this research, parents also reported wider benefits for their families: a fantastic 86% thought that their child was better prepared for school, and 79% felt that their family's quality of life had improved. The recently published "Study of Early Education and Development" report evidenced the beneficial impacts of high-quality early education for all children aged two to four on both cognitive and socio-emotional development at the age of four.

The introduction of 30 hours has been a large-scale transformational programme, and change can be challenging for everyone. But we have seen tens of thousands of providers respond magnificently—I want to thank them for that—because of their ongoing commitment to helping families. The evaluation of 30 hours found that three quarters of providers were willing and able to deliver the extended hours, with no negative impacts on their provision or on sufficiency of childcare places. As we have heard from colleagues' local experiences, the childcare market in England consists of a diverse range of provider types, allowing parents to have choice over their childcare provider. The supply of childcare in England is generally of high quality, with strong indications that existing supply is able to meet parental demand for Government-funded entitlements.

Nearly 80,000 private childcare providers were registered with Ofsted in March this year, and we know that nearly 10,000 school-based providers offer early years childcare. While there are, of course, sad examples of providers closing—as some hon. Members have shared—there is no evidence of widespread closures in the non-domestic childcare market. [Interruption.] Well, let me share the Ofsted data if hon. Members do not believe me. The Ofsted data published in June 2018 showed that the

number of childcare places has remained stable since 2012. It is normal for providers to join and leave the Ofsted register, as it is a private market, and it can happen for a variety of reasons.

Most significantly, we have not heard via local authorities, from hon. Members or in the media of eligible parents being unable to find a 30-hours place or a place for any of the free entitlements.

Tracy Brabin: I am so grateful to the Minister for giving way. He says that there is no evidence of parents not being able to access the 30 hours. I have spoken to providers and nursery owners who say that they are not offering 30 hours at all.

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady makes an important point. It is up to providers whether they want to offer the 30 hours or not. That is a choice for them to make, but we have seen no evidence of parents being unable to find a place.

As important as the availability of a place is, I am also pleased, and in many ways delighted, that the quality of childcare providers remains high, with more than nine in 10 rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. In January 2018, over 1.2 million children under the age of five were receiving funded early education in settings rated good or outstanding by Ofsted.

We continue to support growth in the childcare sector. We have already invested £100 million in a capital fund to create extra high-quality childcare places in all provider types. We continue to work with councils to support the providers who deliver our free entitlements, through initiatives such as the £7.7 million delivery support fund and through our delivery contractor, Childcare Works.

I was not going to mention the NAO report or Frontier Economics, but I am pleased that the shadow Minister commended the thorough and wide-ranging review that the NAO report mentions—we will say a bit more about that later. Over the next year, Childcare Works will continue to work with local authorities to raise awareness and to support childcare providers to deliver the Government's childcare entitlements, including the 30-hours offer.

The Government have introduced a range of business rate reforms and measures, which will be worth more than £10 billion by 2023—my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West mentioned the issues to do with business rates—such as raising the rateable value threshold for 100% relief from £6,000 to £12,000, which means that about 655,000 small businesses pay no business rates at all. A package of support worth £435 million over five years is available to those that have had a large hike in business rates. We are also increasing the frequency of property revaluations from every five to every three years following the next revaluation, to ensure that bills more accurately reflect property values.

We have provided powers under the Localism Act 2011 to enable local authorities to offer business rate discounts as they see fit. In 2015, my predecessor and the local government Minister asked officials to write to all councils to encourage them to use those powers to support access to local high-quality childcare provision. So far, I am aware of only two councils that have chosen to do that. Members could talk to their local authorities about joining in to do that.

On the work on costs—I want to address the issue of costs—funding is inevitably and understandably high on our agenda during any discussion about free early education entitlements. My Department continues to pay close attention to the matter. I do not want colleagues to go away with the impression that this Minister thinks funding is not a challenge. We are, however, clear that getting the funding right is critical to the successful delivery of free entitlements.

Tracy Brabin: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am coming on to something the hon. Lady raised, but I shall give way happily if I have time at the end.

This year, we shall be enhancing our annual survey of childcare and early years providers with more detailed research. Again, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West on his research, and I am interested in getting deep into the evidence on provider finances and childcare fees for two to four-year-olds. We have also commissioned independent research that involved site visits to a representative sample of early years providers to provide us with robust, up-to-date evidence on the costs of delivering childcare, including operating costs such as business rates. That is part of our ongoing monitoring of 30-hours implementation, and we shall consider the next steps once we have the findings on costs.

I shall now turn to some of the comments made by colleagues. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West mentioned VAT. Under European law, registered childcare providers deliver an exempt service, which means that they do not charge VAT on their services. The exemption is obviously designed to ensure that tax does not fall on individuals using welfare services, such as nursery services. However, goods and services purchased by the providers are subject to VAT, which causes understandable frustrations in the sector, but the rules cannot be changed within the existing legal framework. There may be opportunities to make changes to the VAT system in the future, but our rights and obligations remain unchanged until negotiations on our departure from the European Union are complete.

On the point my hon. Friend and many colleagues made about nurseries going out of business, the Ofsted data in itself is interesting. It shows that the number of childcare places available has remained stable since 2012. I also remind hon. Members that childcare providers do not have to offer the free 30 hours—that is entirely up to them—although, since the roll-out of 30 hours of free childcare, we have seen a sizeable majority of providers increasing the number of free hours available to parents, with no evidence of an impact on their funding.¹

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) and other Members mentioned the issue of nurseries charging parents. The Government have been clear that the funding is intended to deliver free high-quality, flexible childcare. It is not intended to cover the costs of meals, consumables or additional services, so providers can charge parents for such things. However, parents must not be required to pay any fee as a condition of taking up a place. Our guidelines state that providers should ensure that their charges are clear to enable parents to make an informed choice.

1.[Official Report, 16 October 2018, Vol. 647, c. 8MC.]

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

A number of colleagues mentioned financial support for parents in connection with disadvantage. I remind hon. Members that, in addition to the investment that we are making, under universal credit working parents may claim back up to 85% of eligible childcare costs, compared with 70% of costs covered under the outgoing tax credits system.

The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) raised another issue to do with disadvantage, pointing out that two-year-olds cannot access the disability access fund, the early years pupil premium or the SEN inclusion fund. In 2017, we increased the funding rates for all disadvantaged two-year-olds by 7%, and we pay a higher rate for them because we recognise the higher costs associated with two-year-olds. The two-year-old funding is, by its nature, already targeted to the disadvantaged in that age group.

Rushanara Ali: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I shall give way later if I have time. The hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) mentioned maintained nurseries. The Secretary of State and I have both seen the incredible work that maintained nurseries deliver for their communities, and we have made £60 million a year of supplementary funding available at least until 2020. My message to local authorities is: do not take premature decisions on maintained nurseries. Many colleagues have made representations to me about the quality of maintained nurseries in their constituencies.

The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who is no longer present, spoke about nurseries in Salford being forced to close as a result of funding rules. I met the hon. Lady and other colleagues to discuss the matter, but it is for the council to manage its local markets and to ensure appropriate provision for children with special educational need and/or disability. Councils may request exemption from the high pass-through rule, but Salford chose not to do that. My officials continue to discuss the matter with council officers. I am pleased that there are no 30-hour sufficiency issues in Salford.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made a strong speech about the early years workforce and professional development. As she said, staff training and development is associated with quality, and I have announced that we are investing £20 million in professional development and training for practitioners in disadvantaged areas of our country.

The attainment gap was mentioned by the hon. Members for York Central and for Burnley. I would say that we were in agreement. More than a quarter of children finished their reception year still without the early communication and reading skills that they need to thrive. The Government have ambitious plans to halve that number over the next 10 years. The Department is working closely with the sector to deliver on our commitment to reform the early years foundation stage profile. We know that those gaps can emerge much earlier in a child's life, as the hon. Member for York Central rightly indicated, well before the child enters the reception year. That is why we have recently launched a capital bidding round of £30 million, inviting leading

schools to come forward with projects to create new high-quality nursery places for two, three and four-year-olds, which I spoke about earlier.

The hon. Member for York Central also spoke about the need to put the right investment in place for children with SEND. A high-needs funding system provides funding to local authorities for children and young people with complex special educational needs, from age zero to 25. The total high-needs block of funding now stands at a record high of almost £6 billion in England. Every local authority will attract at least a 1% increase in core formula funding per head in 2019-20 compared with 2017-18. The support is there for children with SEND, and our disability access fund is worth £615 per child. Local authorities should also establish an SEN inclusion fund. I think I shall end there, unless colleagues wish to intervene.

Rachael Maskell: The Minister was asked about funding. He has heard from Members across the Chamber that funding does not match need. Will he set out the discussions he has had with the Treasury ahead of the Budget to ensure that we have the right amount of funding for nurseries? Can we expect an announcement on 29 October?

Nadhim Zahawi: I hope that I conveyed to the hon. Lady, even if I did not convince her, that we are looking at funding very closely—a real deep dive. We have included our own additional survey questions for providers and have taken a representative sample of providers so that we can begin to understand it. My hon. Friends the Members for Rugby and for Bolton West and Opposition Members have offered evidence that we will look at very closely. I assure the hon. Lady that we are doing the work to ensure that there is continued sufficiency and that providers are able to deliver the excellent service that many thousands of them deliver.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West for securing this debate and for his thoughtful contributions.

Rushanara Ali: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I think I have enough time, although my hon. Friend is allowed a few minutes to conclude the debate.

Rushanara Ali: I was particularly heartened by the Minister saying that local authorities should not make premature decisions about closing maintained nurseries. Will he say a little more about that? If he cannot now, will he write to me? My nurseries face imminent closure, so local authorities need that assurance to find alternatives. They are stuck between a rock and a hard place. I really hope that he appreciates just how serious this matter is and that the Government should not keep passing the buck to local authorities. To say that it is “sad” that local authorities have to do that is not good enough for families. I hope he takes that message to the Treasury in his campaigning, in which we will support him.

Nadhim Zahawi: I repeat, as I have done many times, that local government bodies—I hope many will at least read the transcript of this very good debate—should not make premature decisions on maintained nurseries at this stage. We have a spending review coming. The

Secretary of State and I have been around the country looking at the great work that maintained nurseries deliver to the most disadvantaged parents in our country. I am happy to write to the hon. Lady to repeat that message so that she may share it with her local authority.

I am grateful for your patience, Mr Gapes, and to colleagues for their contributions.

10.53 am

Chris Green: From London to York, stopping at Rugby, Salford and Burnley along the way, there has been broad consensus, captured by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), that there is increasing pressure on the system that is challenging the sustainability of the nursery sector. Some nurseries have closed; in my constituency others feel under threat and are eating into their reserves. I welcome the Minister's comments; I know he will take away our concerns. I was surprised there was a Brexit angle in this debate—it seems to get everywhere. I hope he will take every opportunity with the Chancellor in the run-up to the Budget.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the sustainability of the nursery sector.

10.54 am

Sitting suspended.

Central Heating Installations: Consumer Protection

10.57 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered consumer protections for new central heating installations.

As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I am extremely glad to have discovered just seconds ago that I do not need to sum up at the end of the debate. Being relatively new to this place, I suddenly had kittens at the thought that I might have completely misunderstood parliamentary procedure, but I think I may have got it right.

The very first time that what I regard as a fairly serious issue crossed my radar was shortly after my mother died. I may be called sentimental by many but I decided that it would be too sad for my mother's old telephone number, which she had all her life, to go to some anonymous BT file. For that reason, three years ago I thought that I would ask for my telephone number to be deleted, so I could take on my mother's old telephone number. That was when the trouble started. Why do the calls always seem to come at 5 o'clock in the afternoon? That is my impression, at least. They go, "Hello. If you're a pensioner or on benefits, you will be very interested to know of a central heating scheme for which you could be eligible." If I had a penny for each of those telephone calls, I would have a few quid by now.

There is nothing inherently wrong at all with the idea of people in need receiving new, efficient central heating systems, paid for by either a Government grant or a levy scheme from a large utility company. The good intention behind the scheme cannot be faulted; after all, it is simply about making those in need warm and able to afford the cost of being warm. However, the trouble comes because the recipient of the new central heating system has not paid for it directly themselves.

The Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellation and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013 do not apply. Those regulations contain detailed and pretty stringent requirements of businesses that sell goods and services off-premises—that is, door to door. They require consumers to be given detailed paperwork, and give them the right to a cooling-off period. In fairness, other consumer laws apply, but I must tell Members, as an MP and a citizen, that making them actually bite can prove a real challenge. I do not want to go into the detail of that in the short time I have, but I am pretty sure that every Member will have some experience of that issue.

I return to the issue of people being called and asked whether they would like a new boiler and heating system. Sadly, all too often we hear stories about cowboy installations. In some cases the heating system is defective, and getting it put right can prove nearly impossible for the household involved.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Related to the matters the hon. Gentleman raises, many people across the UK—certainly in Scotland—fell victim to the Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems green energy scandal. Customers have been left feeling very let down and are pleading with the UK Government

[*Patricia Gibson*]

to intervene directly to assist them out of the mess they found themselves in after that company cold-called them, went into liquidation and left them high and dry.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Lady makes a fair point. As a fellow Scot, I come across that kind of case all too frequently, and it is a nasty example of what I am on about. I will return to the sort of regulatory scheme we might use to try to tackle it. Of course, at that point the person in trouble often turns to their MP for help, so I am pleased to have secured the debate.

I have no doubt that Her Majesty's Government and the Minister wish to do everything they can to help sort out this issue, so I wonder whether I may make a few suggestions. The first is that there ought to be a truly independent body—it could be administered by local authorities—to assess the need for a particular household to be considered for a new central heating system.

I suggest that would achieve two things. First, it would nip in the bud the rather extraordinary situation, which I am sure my Scottish colleague will recognise, whereby virtually new boilers and heating systems are unnecessarily removed and replaced when there is no need for that to happen—the system may just have needed some mechanical tweaking to make it work better. Sadly, that happens, and it is a waste of money. Secondly, I hope that it would tackle thorny situations where there is a really old heating system—30 or 40 years old, or more—that is highly inefficient but, for reasons I know not, contractors hesitate to replace it. There is something wrong with the system in that respect. There is evidence of that, and I suggest that the Department should look at that aspect of the issue.

My second suggestion is that there should be an accreditation system for businesses that install such equipment. After all, in the building world, we have building control regulations. We all know them—they run in parallel with planning conditions. Those regulations cover all manner of issues about the design and construction of a new build—everything from the steepness of a staircase to the load-bearing potential of roof trusses. The fact is that those rules work well—I think I can say that is true throughout the UK—which is why we do not have houses falling on our heads. People may get a bit irritated when building control people come out and say, “No, you’ve not done it right,” but the regulations are there for the best of reasons. It seems to me that a similar regime could be applied to heating systems purchased through grants and levies. The bottom line is that if a heating system is installed wrongly, it can, in the wrong circumstances, be dangerous and may cause a household fire.

My third and final suggestion is that there should be a cooling-off period after a householder agrees to a system being installed during which they are allowed to change their mind. Indeed, my first suggestion could kick in at that point. It should be the law that, when a householder says to the person on the other end of the telephone, “Yes, I like the sound of a new central heating system,” it must be pointed out to them that that system must be run past the independent body I mentioned before they proceed. The independent body may agree with the householder and say, “Yes, your system could do with upgrading, and this suitably accredited firm might be just the people to do it for you.”

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for pointing out how we could improve the situation and prevent the unfortunate experiences of our constituents, but I hope the Minister agrees that we must also try to address some of the huge injustices that my constituents and people much further afield have experienced. We are in a situation where consumers cannot sell their houses. Under the HELMS deals, consumers had solar panels fitted in good faith but found they were not in the feed-in tariff and could not register for it. They were mis-sold credit deals, they pay more for their electricity, and they are tied into payment contracts with energy suppliers for two decades. I wonder what the hon. Gentleman thinks about fixing those injustices before—

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Lady that interventions are meant to be brief.

Patricia Gibson: Indeed, but I just wondered—

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Yes, they will be brief—thank you. I call Jamie Stone.

Jamie Stone: It is a pleasure to take an intervention of that quality. The hon. Lady contributes wisely to the point I am trying to make. She is exactly right that the sale of a house can be affected.

I said that a householder, once they have said, “Yes, we like the idea of a new central heating system,” should have to go to an independent person, who should ask, “Do you or don’t you actually need it?” However, I would not want that rule to be absolute. For instance, social workers and, to an extent, NHS employees may have a good idea of which households might benefit from a Government grant or levy scheme heating system, but the householder may not feel inclined, for whatever reason, to reply to the telephone call or make an independent application. Sometimes there has to be a push from a different angle to ensure that someone gets the best deal.

Let me conclude where I started. A lot of people find the telephone calls I mentioned intrusive, but for some they are quite frightening, which many people do not need. In the case of my late mother’s telephone number, my wife is sick and tired of telling firms that my mother is no longer with us. Curiously, as an anecdote, one of our neighbours—a doctor’s widow, who is no fool whatsoever—finds that when she mentions that she is over 80 the conversation from the other end stops immediately. I have no idea why that is, and I will forgive the Minister if she does not know the reason for that curious quirk of fact.

I repeat—I give the Government credit where it is due—that the good and kindly intention of giving someone an affordable, warm home absolutely should not be underestimated. There are various marks of a civilised society, and I believe that is surely one of them. As I represent one of the coldest parts—nay, the coldest part—of the British Isles at Altnaharra, I do rather know what I am talking about on keeping houses warm.

It is a shame if a number of loopholes lead to unsatisfactory service delivery, and I suggest to the Minister that that is what we see. Of course, there are good contractors who are proud of their standard of their work, and it would be a real shame, would it not, if their reputation were tarnished by the odd rotten apple?

I suggest that, sadly, that is rather the case. It is simply not fair on the firms that are trying to do their best, or on the Government, who have the best of intentions in trying to look after old people and make their lives of the highest possible quality.

Whether through a Government grant or a levy scheme, money can be used to the good of people. Getting it right and targeting the money with absolute accuracy is crucial. The electorate are not stupid. They like to see the public pound targeted for maximum effect, and they expect nothing less of good government.

11.11 am

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing the debate and on approaching it in a collegial way. He asked important questions on behalf of his belated mother—I extend my condolences to him for his loss—and raised important questions that cross the provision of better forms of central heating as well as, more broadly, telephone mis-selling and consumer rights. I feel qualified to answer some of his points but, in my summation, I will say how I will help to perhaps raise all of our understanding.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Government are committed to making energy bills more affordable, particularly for lower income or more vulnerable households. Of course, that involves working with industry in particular to improve both the targeting of schemes such as the one to which he referred and the process of delivering improvements in a way that benefits consumers. I will take a moment to talk about current protections and then address some of the hon. Gentleman's excellent suggestions.

Reasonable levels of protection are in place for boiler installations. Indeed, all installations should be reported to a local authority building control, which is responsible for ensuring that such work meets building codes and regulations, not least because of safety questions. All installers of gas boilers must be on the Gas Safe Register—and, of course, they can be struck off. We have the highest energy efficiency standards for gas boiler installations of any European country, and we continue to raise those standards to ensure that consumers get the maximum heating efficiency for the minimum cost and carbon dioxide emissions. As with any other consumer contract, if consumers are dissatisfied with how the work has been delivered, they can appeal to their local citizens advice bureau or trading standards. In Scotland, people can appeal to Home Energy Scotland, which can provide free and impartial energy advice.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about cooling-off periods, the installation of a boiler, as with any consumer contract, is subject to a cooling-off period, which I believe is 14 days. I will put that in a letter to him, which I will refer to later in my remarks.

As the hon. Gentleman noted, we also have the energy company obligation scheme to help those who are struggling with bills. Historically, that scheme has been split between helping those struggling with bill payments and reducing carbon emissions. I have decided to put as close as possible to 100% of that scheme into solving the challenge of fuel poverty, as part of the

Government's manifesto commitment to reduce the level of fuel poverty by 2035. The scheme is worth about £640 million a year—a large sum of money—and 10% of the households in the hon. Gentleman's constituency have received measures under it, which might include electric storage heaters and oil boilers. I am sure that, like in my constituency, many of his constituents will live off the gas grid and be reliant on stand-alone heating.

The hon. Gentleman asked an important question about how we can ensure that these things are needed. I live in an off-gas-grid area in the middle of my constituency, and most weeks I go home to a flyer through my door suggesting that I apply for a new oil boiler. I do not feel that I am the target audience for these measures, and I have raised repeatedly with my team how we improve the targeting of this valuable sum of money towards those who need it most.

I hope the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that, in the latest iteration of ECO, we have increased the level of money that a local authority can spend with its discretion to 25%. We have also increased the level of money spent in rural areas such as those we represent to 15%, so there is now more of a local targeting element. On the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that local authorities should know who has been approached, I am the least likely person to want to burden our hard-pressed local officials with more reporting requirements on behalf of central Government, but the local relevance of measures, as he said, is incredibly important.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned standards. Any ECO installation must meet building regulations and British installation standards, and insulation measures must have an appropriate lifetime guarantee—even tighter measures than for general installations

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) rightly raised the question of renewable heat contracts sold to constituents that had indirect payments associated with them. In June, I introduced an assignment of rights so that people trapped in such contracts can assign them to another party, which should enable them to free up their homes for sale. One of my action points from the debate is to write to her with the details of that scheme to share with her constituents.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for promising to write to me on that, because it is important to many constituents. Given that we know that HELMS exploited constituents by mis-selling a Government-backed deal and that the Government backed the company, will the UK Government undertake even to consider a review of green deal loans proposed by that company, given the high volume of loans that have a payback period exceeding 20 years?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is not alone in raising the challenges of mis-selling under the green deal, and I have asked my officials to look at that. The green deal—I was on its Bill Committee—was designed to unlock the issue of persuading people to improve the energy efficiency measures of their homes. Currently, all contracts are covered by existing consumer protection, but as a second action point I undertake to go away and review this specific company and write to her with the state of progress on those conversations.

[Claire Perry]

I mentioned the assignment of rights, and both hon. Members have raised the challenge of whether there should not be more trust in the system. We have a question of mis-selling, which I will address in my final remarks, but should households not be able to trust the installer phoning them up to offer what could be a valuable addition to their homes? We conducted a review called “Each Home Counts”, and one of its key recommendations was for an independent, all-encompassing mark of quality for both installation and customer service that consumers can rely on and trust. We will launch a more robust, Government-endorsed quality scheme through TrustMark.

Jamie Stone: This is a side issue to what I said earlier. Given what the Minister just said, there may be some evidence that wood pellet boilers are being proposed for households—particularly for the elderly—where that may not be the most suitable form of heating. I have heard stories of pensioners going out in the snow to shovel wood pellets.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman raises an important question, and because of the changes to the renewable heat incentive, which were a driver for many domestic wood pellet installations, such things will no longer be supported. I agree, however, that we had a shortage of domestic pellets for much of the winter, and in my region we have a shortage of engineers to service those boilers. I do not suggest that people should rip those boilers out, because they play a valuable part and are supported historically under the RHI, but in future I would like homes in rural areas that are off the gas grid to be supported with things such as heat pumps and other technologies that are far less complicated and costly. That is part of the change that we are hoping to make to the RHI scheme and the energy compliance obligation going forward.

Let me return to the question of trust. We plan for all Government schemes such as the ECO to require installers to deliver those TrustMark standards. That will help drive out rogue traders—the hon. Gentleman is right to say that some traders claim falsely to be part of the Government’s scheme, when they are no such thing—and we will strongly support such measures, and encourage consumers to use only reputable traders. Consumers should be certain when they see a brand that they are dealing with a company that has the right technical competencies and is committed to customer service and the customer for the long term. The Consumer Protection Partnership has identified energy efficiency measures as a priority area, and it will be taking forward work to see how consumer detriment can be reduced in that area.

The hon. Gentleman raised other important points, which I do not feel qualified to answer, regarding the whole challenge of consumer mis-selling over the phone—that has now switched to mobile phones, since many of us decided never to answer our landlines to an unidentified number. He raised the question of rights for consumers under existing contract law, and my fellow Ministers have done good work in this area. I am afraid I am not prepared to give the hon. Gentleman the details, but I will write to him as a third action point to set those out, so he can be sure that the question of telephone mis-selling and consumer protection is being addressed.

I hope that that partially answers some of the hon. Gentleman’s excellent suggestions about independent bodies, local involvement, an accreditation system and cooling-off points. I have set out a number of actions for my team to follow up, and I thank the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran for raising such important points on behalf of their constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.

Asylum Accommodation Contracts

[MRS ANNE MAIN *in the Chair*]

2.33 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered asylum accommodation contracts.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main.

This issue might not grab the headlines of the mainstream media, it might not be a scandal that starts to trend on Twitter and it is unlikely to be an issue that party leaders are doorstepped on, but it is an issue of extreme importance. It reflects what kind of country we are and want to be, and what kind of people we are and want to be.

A huge number of areas could be addressed to improve the quality of life of asylum seekers, particularly when they are living on asylum support, from the amount of financial support they get to their general health and wellbeing. We can and should do better, and it need not cost the taxpayer any more money. Today's debate is specifically about asylum accommodation contracts. The Government are just weeks away from signing new contracts that will determine the quality of asylum accommodation support for the next 10 years. This is a tremendous opportunity for mostly small but significant improvements to be made to provision. Perhaps even more importantly, it is an opportunity to ensure that service providers are delivering what they are supposed to and treating asylum seekers with the dignity and respect that we would expect for our own families.

Sadly, under the current contracts that is not generally the case. The total lack of adequate monitoring lets contractors get away with providing the most basic of services, which often fail to meet the old contract criteria. Brief after brief and organisation after organisation has called on the Government to step up the monitoring and to work in partnership with local authorities and third sector organisations to ensure that asylum seekers get the services they are entitled to and that the British taxpayer pays for.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. There is a pattern with these private companies in relation to public services. We have seen it in social security, where companies have actually had their contracts cancelled. More importantly, we should also touch on the Shaw report, which lays out what the Home Secretary thinks and the changes he is going to make. We must do what my hon. Friend suggests and go along with the Shaw report.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows by now that interventions are supposed to be short.

Alex Cunningham: My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) makes a fair point. That is why we have to take opportunities with the new contracts to improve on what we had in the past.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is just one of dozens of organisations that has reached out to me since I secured this debate. In common with many others, it has recommended that the new contracts must have robust monitoring, with compliance and complaints mechanisms built into the agreements. I wonder whether the Minister agrees with that.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in relation to funding support I receive for research capabilities in my office on immigration and asylum. In its report, the Select Committee on Home Affairs suggested a much tighter monitoring and inspection regime—something we would have hoped that the Government would have picked up in issuing the new contracts.

Alex Cunningham: Yes, indeed; that is the case. It is something that I will allude to later on in my remarks.

My staff team and I know first-hand how hard it is to break through the barriers of service providers and their subcontractors to try and get them to fulfil their contracts to vulnerable people. One example in Stockton is a family with a seriously disabled member. They were dumped in a second floor flat, making the person a prisoner in their home. It took us weeks and umpteen phone calls to providers, contractors, subcontractors and the Home Office to sort it out. Had the contract been properly monitored, this would never have happened.

The Home Affairs Committee—I said I would mention it—recommended that the Government recognise local authorities and the third sector as key stakeholders, empower devolved Governments to monitor the delivery of the contracts and give local authorities greater flexibility to determine where accommodation is procured.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I appreciate my hon. Friend giving way and congratulate him on securing this debate. As my neighbour in Teesside, will he join me in congratulating the local authority there? They have proved themselves to be excellent partners in delivering the Syrian resettlement programme. Does he agree that flexibility should be extended on the asylum dispersal system, so that local authorities can again prove themselves to be excellent partners in providing these services when the private sector fails?

Alex Cunningham: Yes, I most certainly do. We have some great local authorities throughout the Tees valley. The local authorities really want to work with the Government on this. They have the expertise, they know the people, they know the places and they know the facilities.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for being generous with his time. Specifically on that point about local authorities, my local authority, Newcastle City Council, recently received a court judgment that prevents it from imposing decent home standards on asylum accommodation. Does he agree that that is absolutely unacceptable?

Alex Cunningham: It is absolutely unacceptable. All the more reason why the Government can now take an opportunity with the new contracts to lay down higher standards for the vulnerable people who we should be looking after.

[*Alex Cunningham*]

A briefing from the Local Government Association confirms that the current model of provision for asylum seekers does not provide the necessary funding for councils and is likely to place further pressures on specific areas of the UK. I share the view that partnership structures need to be established as a matter of urgency that allow local authorities and regions to work with the Home Office and contractors to better manage the provision.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is very generous with his time. He is making a passionate speech. I want to add to the point about local authorities and community members. I have been supporting an Iraqi family who have had a real issue. The community came to me and said that the way that the family were being treated was absolutely unacceptable. In the scrutiny we need to make sure that communities are on board as well.

Alex Cunningham: That is most certainly the case. If it were not for the community organisations in my constituency and throughout the Tees valley and the country, the people who are refugees in our country would be suffering a hell of a lot more than they currently are. The current contract fails in so many ways, and the new one will also fail if it is not designed and monitored properly. We need to listen to these organisations, be they local authorities or third sector groups. Daily, they meet and work with asylum seekers; they know where the failings are and how services could be improved.

A briefing from Asylum Matters says that the Government's asylum accommodation contracts are worth more than £4 billion. That is £4 billion of public money, but Parliament seems powerless to influence the procurement process in order to ensure that some of the most vulnerable in our society get the support that they deserve as human beings. I hope that that will change today.

I want now to take a few moments to talk about simple matters: duvets, pillows, plates and mattresses. I am appalled at the poor quality of the ones provided to asylum seekers in Stockton. The contract says to provide a duvet and pillows, and the contractors do, but it is possible to get two pillows into one pillowcase, and the duvets are so thin as to provide no warmth at all. The mattresses, too, are poor; they are uncomfortable and often dirty. Then there is the single plastic plate issued to some refugees. The contract says to provide a plate, so the contractors do, but the plates are not fit for purpose and end up stained with knife marks cut into them from the simple task of cutting up food. If it were not for the churches and charities in my area and, I am sure, elsewhere that provide better quality goods, refugees would be freezing in houses where heating is often restricted.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to highlight those cases. All of us are present at the debate, I guess, because we have dealt with very distressing individual cases and too many of them. I had one recently in which for six months and after 30 telephone calls, G4S failed to deal with accommodation

where there was damp and cockroach and rat infestation. My hon. Friend mentioned the Home Affairs Committee report. The Government have said that they want to—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but this cannot be a speech, because a lot of hon. Members are down to speak. I therefore ask for short interventions.

Alex Cunningham: I know exactly what my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) was talking about, and I am sure that I will address some of those issues later.

Surely refugees should not have to rely on charity. I therefore ask the Minister to get into a little bit of detail and ensure that the new contracts define good tog ratings, decent pillows and—who knows?—even a plate that can be left clean for use the next day. That would be an easy and quick win that would make a tremendous difference to the lives and dignity of our refugees.

There is a tendency among some in this country and in the wider world to view someone seeking asylum as an “other”. So often it is ignored that asylum seekers are fleeing some of the most horrendous and dangerous situations, which we in this country could not even imagine. I will continue to use my voice to inform and educate and to communicate the message that asylum seekers are welcome here, that they will be treated with dignity and respect, and that they have a right to expect a quality of life that we would want for our own friends and family. I therefore stand with all those organisations that have contacted me and with asylum seekers in this country in making a plea to the Home Secretary to work in partnership with local authorities and the third sector, which can add so much value.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I am sure that he has spoken with Refugee Action about the enormous need that asylum seekers have to learn English. Perhaps through him, I can appeal to my right hon. Friend the Minister to talk in her reply to the debate about what can be done to increase the capacity for teaching asylum seekers English.

Alex Cunningham: That is a very strong point. Local churches including my own, the Portrack Baptist church, are running the English classes for refugees in our community, so the point is well made and I am sure that the Minister will have taken it on board.

Asylum Matters commissioned an analysis of the statement of requirements for the new asylum accommodation and support contracts in order to identify how they differ from the current COMPASS—commercial and operational managers procuring asylum support services—contracts. It found that, on the whole, the new contracts resemble the current one, with most of the alterations being made unlikely to improve significantly the service that is provided. Has the Minister seen that analysis and, if so, what does she think of it?

There is also serious concern that the contract is for 10 years without any review period built in. That is reckless and wrong. The whole approach lets the Government wash their hands of the whole issue for a

whole decade. With inadequate monitoring, many profit takers will just maximise their returns by short-changing refugees.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. Does he agree that it is wrong to award 10-year contracts without adequate contract compliance being in place to ensure that people meet the obligations and that basic standards are met, so that the human rights of asylum seekers are not violated?

Alex Cunningham: Exactly. I really look forward to hearing from the Minister how the compliance and monitoring will be improved for the new contracts.

Things may have changed in the last few days, but we believe that the Home Office has not yet received compliant bids in north-east England, Yorkshire and the Humber and Northern Ireland. With no information provided to local authorities about why that situation has happened, the people who could be left to pick up the pieces are being left in the dark. Perhaps the Minister can update the House on the current status of compliant bids and, if we do not have them, tell us about plan B.

In a report put together by Asylum Matters on asylum housing in Tyneside, it was found that there are real concerns about mother-and-child accommodation. Women with two children of different ages are still all put together in one room—a situation that would never normally be accepted in the UK. Babies are particularly vulnerable to sickness in such situations, and the cramped conditions are causing disease to spread at an alarming rate, leading to everyone suffering from a sickness bug but still having to join a queue to use the bathroom down the hall. That is intolerable and even inhumane.

One of the other more emotive issues with the proposed contract has been highlighted by the Home Affairs Committee and so many other people. I am referring to asylum seekers being forced to share a bedroom, perhaps with a person of a different culture, different nationality and different religion. Often, it can be a victim of torture who is forced to share a room. Freedom from Torture has many examples that demonstrate that the Government and their contractors are failing to consider properly the vulnerability of many of these people.

One asylum seeker was placed in a shared room, and even though his therapist wrote to UK Visas and Immigration on three occasions, outlining his depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation and chronic pain, no response was received for weeks on end and the suffering continued.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a really important point. One reason why this situation happens is that the Home Office fails to effectively share the information with the accommodation provider. Does he agree that the contracts should require the Home Office to share the information and that the accommodation providers should act on it accordingly?

Alex Cunningham: Yes, there are always going to be all sorts of issues in relation to confidentiality, but people who are providing direct services need information if they are to provide the correct facilities for people, so that definitely has to be addressed. I see this as the Government overseeing not just bad practice, but dangerous and cruel practice.

Another example involves a young Kurdish man who was moved from Teesside, where he had settled and joined a local church, to Tyneside because an older man sharing his accommodation thought that he could tell him how to live his life simply because he was his elder. The young man was intimidated, but rather than the older man being dealt with, the young man was moved, leaving the troublemaker to start on the next young person to be accommodated there.

One of the organisations in my own patch is Justice First, and I am pleased to see Kath Sainsbury from Justice First sitting in the Public Gallery. It has stressed to me that currently the Government's position is that a person will not have to share a room if they are determined to be "vulnerable", yet the Government have refused to define what vulnerable means to them.

In the reply to my parliamentary question about shared accommodation, the Minister said that room sharing will continue to be permitted

"providing it complies with the strict criteria set out in the contracts and with relevant national and local housing regulations, including advice from social services and primary and secondary care bodies on whether room sharing is inappropriate..."

In addition all accommodation providers will be required to continue to ensure that they take into account a service user's individual characteristics and provide them with appropriate accommodation reflective of any changing needs, including adherence to religious practice."

I ask the Minister today how that will work. Will she spell out what those "strict criteria" are? How does she define vulnerability? How will providers be monitored—the word "monitoring" comes up again—and managed to ensure that they do not just ignore the advice and disregard individual needs? That is quite a list of questions for the Minister and, if she is not prepared sufficiently to reply to them today, I ask that she write to me and publish the reply, because we all need that level of understanding.

We must also work to reduce the use of large-scale houses in multiple occupation. In particular, vulnerable service users such as pregnant women, new mothers, victims of violence or torture, and those with physical and mental health needs should not be in large-scale HMOs. Proper and effective vulnerability screening needs to take place regularly in asylum accommodation to identify individuals with specific support needs, such as those with mental health issues, the survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, survivors of trafficking, pregnant women, young mothers and LGBT individuals. Sadly, the existing contract often fails here, too. The experts on those issues tell me that the new contract is no better. I ask the Minister, what will change in the contract to sort this out? These people need to feel safe and secure in order to be able to rebuild their lives away from the horror they have escaped.

I received a briefing note from Doctors of the World, which recommended that the contracts be amended to ensure that those seeking asylum are provided with the right to register with a GP while housed in initial accommodation. It recommended that the contracts be amended to require accommodation providers to register vulnerable people with a GP within five working days of arrival at initial or dispersed accommodation. Does the Minister agree with those recommendations? Will she at least listen to the doctors and act on that?

The Government's current position is that accommodation should be safe and habitable, but those are largely relative assessment factors. What is safe for

[*Alex Cunningham*]

someone who has experienced physical and mental torture? What is habitable to someone who has severe and advanced physical needs? Temporary accommodation should mean exactly that—not six months of never-ending uncertainty and despair. There have been cases in this country under the contracts where there has been a lack of access to suitable nutritious food, a lack of access to drinking water—right here in 21st century Britain—and a lack of a clean and hygienic environment.

There are also examples of bullying from staff at large accommodation facilities. One person, when complaining about the food at the hotel where they had been placed, was told by a manger from the hotel that they would simply, “Tell the Home Office to take you away”—a direct violation of the specific stipulation that asylum seekers should be treated with sensitivity. There must be a complaints management system to provide ways and means for asylum seekers to raise complaints. Instead, they are threatened with removal by the Home Office. That is not a proper complaints management process.

The Home Office has a choice: it can choose to work with local authorities, third-sector organisations and other hon. Members of this House, or Ministers can bury their heads in the sand and try to wipe away their responsibility for another 10 years. But we will not let them forget it and we will keep using our voices to stand up for those who are resident in our country and just want to get by and live their lives.

I have more questions for the Minister to address. Would she be content knowing that her own child was sleeping in a cold, damp house with just a duvet with a 6.5 tog rating? Could she sleep at night if she had an 18-year-old daughter who was sharing a room with a stranger, whose background she did not know? Would she be okay watching cockroaches and rodents crawl across the floor and perhaps on to the bed, while her children were trying to sleep? That is the reality that some people in asylum accommodation are going through.

I have talked extensively—I do not apologise for it at all—about monitoring provision. I wonder whether the Minister has ever visited the supposedly temporary accommodation of asylum seekers. I would be pleased if she has. Maybe next time she could come to Stockton unannounced and see what people have to put up with, rather than going to a place where a provider can set things up for a nice, pleasant ministerial experience.

We have a duty of care over people who are in this country, the conditions they live in and how they are treated. The Minister still has the opportunity to take on board the suggestions from dozens of organisations that really want to help the Government and our refugees. I hope she will take a step back, think and do just that. I look forward to her response.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Given the number of hon. Members who are seeking to catch my eye, I will impose, with immediate effect, a time limit of four minutes.

2.54 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing this important debate.

There are so many horror stories about asylum accommodation in the UK and so many reasons why we need independent oversight that it would be impossible to cover everything in the time I have, but I hope that what I do share gives an understanding of how outsourcing companies acting like vultures are failing our most vulnerable. I hope these contracts can be delivered better locally by those who have the interests of the residents at heart.

G4S holds a contract in the giant north-east England, Yorkshire and Humber region. It has a home for 14 mothers and 14 babies in my constituency. I was first contacted about the property by the manager of a local children’s centre, who described a multitude of issues and the unwillingness of G4S to act. On visiting the house, the first thing that struck me was the stickiness underfoot and the smell of urine. That was the result of an earlier rat infestation, which was reported to G4S and ignored.

Although the local church stepped in and blocked the rats’ entrance to the bedroom, the carpet remained coated in rat urine. A toddler crawling over the carpet had a skin infection. Her mother told me, “There is nowhere else for her to go.” That was not strictly true. Her baby could have crawled in the hallway, where a missing baby gate left a steep set of stairs exposed—something of which G4S had been informed months before. Or perhaps the child could crawl around the kitchen, where rat poison was left on the floor and mould covered every wall.

There are other issues in the property, including a lack of cleaning and cooking equipment, which G4S should have provided. After writing to G4S in exasperation, I met the landlord of the property, who stepped in and provided what G4S did not. That was in addition to the maintenance requests that G4S had failed to pass on, increasing its profit margin at someone else’s expense.

Vermin is a common theme in these properties. Another woman living with a young child reported a mice infestation, caused by holes in the walls of the property. G4S refused to be held accountable. Instead of dealing with it, it sent the woman on a training course in kitchen hygiene. After six months of complaining, and with multiple open wounds caused by mice biting her face, she went to Leeds City Council, which acted swiftly to solve the problem. That cost should have been covered by the asylum accommodation contract. However, the public sector had to step in, subsidising the private sector. It is not only G4S that is failing. I heard about one young woman who moved into Serco-run accommodation only to find human faeces smeared on her bedroom wall. She cleaned it up, but the cockroaches and rodents were more persistent.

These stories represent the dark side of Conservative ideology—a disturbing faith in privatisation and outsourcing, no matter the human cost, and the growing of private profits at the expense of the public and the vulnerable. These contracts underline the unwillingness and inability of the private sector to provide safe, habitable accommodation to some of the most vulnerable in our society.

My experience of working with those 14 mothers in my constituency shows the neglectful regime of G4S, compared with the generous and loving nature of the city of Leeds and our Labour council. I thank our children’s centre, which worked unpaid to support those mothers, as well as the church, which did the jobs the

private sector could not, the landlord, who stepped in, and my staff and local party members, who helped to provide basic items that G4S would not.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in cases such as this, local authorities ought to be empowered to take over these contracts and oversee them, because this situation clearly is not acceptable?

Alex Sobel: It is absolutely not acceptable. I was just coming on to those points, which I thank my hon. Friend for raising. As she said, it is not up to individual and local groups to step in. These contracts cost millions of pounds in public funds, but struggling local authorities step in to prevent homelessness when the private firms cannot fulfil their contracts. Our councils are expected to bail out these companies, but they are not granted any oversight of the delivery of their contracts. That is both insulting and impractical. It has created a system lacking in democracy and dignity.

Everyone deserves a safe and secure home in this country. These contracts must be revisited. Councils and charities must have a central role in ensuring that the safety of asylum seekers is the priority in delivery. There must also be independent oversight of these contracts to ensure that people come before profit.

2.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I want to congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on bringing this debate to the House and on his excellent presentation. I thank him for giving us all an opportunity to make a contribution.

I want to address a couple of points to the Minister, which are specific to Northern Ireland, in relation to how the Home Office looks at some of these issues. I want that to be on the record and, if possible, for the Minister to get back to me and to let me know how we can improve the system to help people in Northern Ireland.

My friend the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) told me that he has similar issues to the ones that I see in Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast. As we are all aware, and contrary to what we have heard touted, asylum seekers are not permitted to work or to receive mainstream social security benefits. I am concerned that the financial support is £37.50 per person per week, and that accommodation is provided on a no-choice basis, so if an asylum seeker refuses an offer of accommodation, she will be denied access to ongoing support. I am concerned about that, and I want to put it on record. The stories that we have heard about the accommodation, and others that we will hear later, clearly illustrate the issue. Asylum seekers may also be required to move accommodation at short notice, which creates problems by its very nature.

The view of the Law Centre NI is that asylum seekers living in Northern Ireland may face particular difficulties that are simply not reflected in Home Office decision making and guidance. An asylum seeker seeking an accommodation transfer due to racial harassment is generally required to provide documentary evidence in the form of police reports. Unfortunately, we are aware of cases where asylum seekers do not feel able to approach the police to seek their help. That can be because of a lack of trust, which can arise due to negative experiences of policing in the countries they

came from—it is not necessarily to do with our police force; it is to do with their experience and what has happened to them.

Lack of trust is also prevalent in particular neighbourhoods in Belfast as a legacy of the conflict. That is a fact, so we have to address that issue as well. It means that, despite encouragement from support organisations, asylum seekers do not seek assistance from the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

In such instances, there may be other forms of evidence. I suggest to the Minister that we look at medical reports to enable the consideration of alternative accommodation. Mental health issues may arise from a fear of a particular neighbour, but the Home Office is not likely to accept such forms of evidence. Gently and honestly, I request that the Minister looks at alternative ways to address the issue—whether it is mental or physical health. Let us do that, and give these things an equal status with the police.

As the Minister will understand, and as I am sure everyone else does too, we must be ever mindful that we have had 30 years of conflict, so things are different in Northern Ireland. Another example of a situation that is particularly acute in Northern Ireland is when children are moved to a new area away from their school. Parents must make a difficult decision, either to transfer their children to a new school, assuming school places are available, which is disruptive to the children's education, or to make arrangements for their children to continue at their old school. That is not an option, because £37.50 per person means that people cannot put their child on the bus to school. Difficulties also arise when a child walks through a neighbourhood wearing a school uniform associated with the “other” community. These are real things that are happening, which is why I want to bring them to the Minister's attention in the short time I have.

I ask the Home Office to review and revise its allocation of accommodation policy to better reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. In particular, Home Office guidance should provide for greater discretion. I also refer to my earlier request regarding an asylum matter involving the extension of the refugee transition period from 28 days to 56 days. I hope the Minister can take all that in.

3.3 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I have no doubt that, when I sit down after making my remarks, I will receive a threatening letter from the chief executive of Serco, as has happened on the last two occasions that we have debated the issue. I have had to go to Mr Speaker twice for a ruling on that correspondence.

This summer in Glasgow, Serco threatened 330 asylum seekers with immediate eviction. It was during the parliamentary recess and Glasgow City Council's recess. Was that a coincidence? We all know the answer to that. If it had not happened during recess, an urgent question would have been tabled the very next day after Serco had announced that it was threatening those 300 asylum seekers with immediate eviction.

Why did Serco threaten them with immediate eviction? It claimed they were failed asylum seekers, but refugee and asylum charities established within days that they were not. Many had lodged an appeal, and many had submitted a fresh claim. Why did that multinational

[Chris Stephens]

profit-making company think it was appropriate to threaten 300 asylum seekers with lock changes and eviction—to put them on to the streets? Obviously, there had been no meaningful discussions between the local authority and the Home Office about sharing information. Why is that?

The average time it takes for someone to make a section 4 application and receive a decision about getting support is 37 days. Frankly, I do not think that that is good enough. The only reason that not one asylum seeker in Glasgow has been evicted is the Govan Law Centre, which raised a case in the Court of Session on behalf of two of my constituents. I thank my fellow Glaswegians and my fellow Glasgow Members of Parliament who attended all the protests. It was quite clear that the anger in Glasgow was such that hundreds would have been outside the accommodation if Serco had gone there and tried to issue a lock change to lock asylum seekers out of their accommodation. It is clear that the people of Glasgow were going to use their human rights to protect the human rights of others.

I thank the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), and I stand shoulder to shoulder with him and many of the comments he made about the lack of engagement and meaningful consultation that is taking place with local authorities. That is clearly the position that has been adopted by Glasgow City Council, which has made public its concerns, as have the local authorities in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. The Local Government Association is supported by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in that.

I have dealt with constituents—asylum seekers—who were the victims of sexual violence. The accommodation providers thought that it was appropriate to put those women in a tenemental property where the other five occupants were single men. If the providers had had meaningful consultation and dialogue with the local authorities and the Home Office, we could have avoided that situation. That is one of the many errors that we are seeing. My real concern is that, with the new 10-year contracts, those mistakes will be made again.

3.7 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing the debate. I thank him for the work he has done with my friend, Suzanne Fletcher, from Citizens UK and Tees Valley of Sanctuary. She brought him one of the duvets that were provided, which were so thin that the health of the people who used them was hit—their limbs were affected and their general health deteriorated. That is one of the shocking examples of how poor service, and the failure to comply with basic human standards, are undermining the health of these people. We have already heard some graphic stories.

As I do not have much time, I will focus on asking the Minister about the contracts. We do not know an awful lot about them, although some local authorities have seen the statements of requirement, but they will be signed in the next few weeks—by the end of the year—and they are worth £4 billion over the next 10 years. This debate is timely because it gives the House a chance to scrutinise them and to ask what the Government are doing before they sign the contracts.

First, have local authorities been offered the contracts? It seems that they might be able to do a lot better with £4 billion over the next 10 years. I would not be surprised if they could do it for less, and it would be of higher quality. They could lock it in to their overall local housing strategy. Has there been any discussion with the Local Government Association, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities or other local authority organisations about whether they could provide the services? If not, why not?

Secondly, we have heard a bit about sharing bedrooms from the hon. Member for Stockton North. There is no doubt that some of the most vulnerable people living in our country not only are being given some of the most shocking accommodation, but are being asked to share rooms, which is causing their mental health to deteriorate, as we heard in the graphic example from the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). We hear about people who left a country because they were afraid of another group of people in that country or a neighbouring country, and who, in this country, are being asked to share a room with people whom they tried to escape from or who are from a group they tried to escape from. The lack of sensitivity and understanding of the mental health needs of such people is extraordinary, so my second question is, can we go beyond just protecting an undefined group of vulnerable people? Can we not get to a point where people simply do not have to share bedrooms? It does not seem too unreasonable a question to ask or too unreasonable a criterion to have in the new contracts.

On monitoring quality, if local authorities had the contracts, there would be a group of people in the local authorities who could help monitor them. What reassurance can the Minister give us today that the contracts will be properly monitored, whether that is to do with duvets, quality of housing, advice or other aspects of the contracts that will be let?

I have not had a chance to read the statement of requirements. Why has that not been shared with Members of Parliament? Can aspects of the contract not be shared with Members of Parliament—perhaps the Home Affairs Committee—beforehand on whatever terms are needed? If Members can see the contracts, can the Minister tell us today whether there really will be minimum standards? A statement of requirements seems too wishy-washy. We need to know that legally enforceable minimum standards will be provided in the contracts so that people who are not getting them might have recourse to the law. That is the only way we can ensure that people will be treated properly. It is absolutely right that the contracts should have legal safeguards.

3.11 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I will refer specifically to the case of Solihull, which, during my 23 years as an MP, has been a destination for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. I want to raise with the Minister the legacy issues associated with accommodating the most vulnerable of the vulnerable: the children who arrive here on their own.

The difficulty that faces my local authority is the shortfall in costs of accommodating this vulnerable group, which are estimated to be in the order of £1 million a year. That might not sound like a lot to Members with larger local authorities, but mine is relatively small with a disproportionately high number of unaccompanied

asylum-seeking children. After a visit by the regional director of the UK Border Agency, whose staff spent a month embedded with the local authority, it was confirmed as a result of the audit that the costs could not be contained within the standard rates. So I want to raise with the Minister the problem that legacy or old standard grant rates have not been increased since they were introduced in 2011-12, eight years ago, during which time there has been considerable inflation.

To illustrate the shortfall in accommodation costs, the invoice costs of supported accommodation are £22 a day compared with the national grant rate of £28.57 a day, or a legacy grant rate of just £21.43 a day. The invoice costs of external foster accommodation for 16 and 17-year-old unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are £113 a day compared with the national grant rate of £91 a day, so there is a baked-in shortfall year on year. I know that the leader of the council has written to the Minister, but I want to place on the record the unique position of Solihull in doing its very best by the most vulnerable of the vulnerable.

3.13 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my neighbour and colleague in the midlands, the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman). I associate myself with what she said. I also want to talk about the financial element of the contracts and how the money works. I do not know whether I am in an exclusive group in this room or perhaps this House, but I am somebody who has applied for a commissioning contract through a national Home Office contract, so I know what it takes to win a contract with the Home Office. I did it for accommodation for victims of human trafficking. When the Home Office, another Government Department or a local authority commissions things through the voluntary sector, I can tell Members that the monitoring, the length of contracts and the amount of money in the contracts is certainly not what has been suggested today when we have talked about the private sector. The idea of a 10-year contract—even a 10-minute contract—in the voluntary sector would be manna from heaven.

However, I have applied and was successful in the commissioning round of national contracts for accommodation and support services for victims of human trafficking. I remember the very detailed stuff I had to learn about special secure thumb turns for security, specialist issues around single-sex accommodation, specialist support that had to be provided, and the training that my staff had to have. It was very detailed, and rightly so. Nobody would criticise that.

The women we supported in the community—we provided support both in the community and within accommodation support services—were largely women who had been trafficked into sexual slavery and forced to have sex with 15 or 20 men a day. “Raped” is what I should say. Because of differences in where they came from and different immigration statuses, even though they were trafficked, some of those women stayed in National Asylum Support Service accommodation. So we would go out and support them in the community, and that took me to Stone Road in the centre of Birmingham.

I had to go and give financial support to a woman who had been through the national referral mechanism and been identified as being trafficked. I remember the

level of security that I had to go through: the police checks and the training I had to do to get the contract as a voluntary sector provider. I went to Stone Road and asked to see the woman. She was on the run from a trafficking gang who had trafficked her for sex, and as I walked through the Stone Road accommodation I saw her name written on the wall with a message that said she had to pick up her post. It was just written there. Anyone could have walked in. Now that was not in the contract that I had to sign up to. The standard seemed to be different for G4S at Stone Road from what it was for me, the provider of secure accommodation for victims of human trafficking. The Home Office loves to trumpet how brilliantly it behaves, but it is the same people living in that accommodation.

When I meet the woman, she is pregnant and sleeping on a mattress on the floor. She looks a size 10, but she is nine months pregnant. We have managed to find her decent trafficking victim accommodation, but it is in Sheffield and I have to tell her she cannot go because the standards that my contract stipulate say that we cannot move a woman at that stage in her pregnancy because she needs continuity of care, and she cries and begs me to let her go because she cannot bear to live there any more. I simply want to ask the Minister why, for the same people and the same commissioning body, the standards are so different for me and for G4S.

3.17 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who spoke so powerfully about her direct experience. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing this important debate. I rise to speak because my constituency is home to Barry House, a hostel for people seeking asylum or refugee status in the UK, provided by Clearsprings under the existing contract.

Barry House is categorised as initial accommodation, and it provides a temporary home for more than 100 people. I see many residents of Barry House in my surgeries, and I have visited it with an NHS team who provide outreach services there. When I visited I was told that there were 19 pregnant women and 40 children living there at that time. The information I have gathered from residents of Barry House speaks to a much wider set of problems with the current asylum contract.

Barry House is for short-term use, but the reality is that many people are there for long periods. Barry House is not fit for purpose. Conditions are cramped, there is no variation in or quality to the food, and there are no meaningful activities for residents. The corridors are obstructed by many buggies and there are a high number of wheelchair users, leading to concerns about fire safety and basic standards of accessibility. It is very poorly managed. There are infestations of vermin, and it is dirty. Everything about the quality of accommodation is poor, yet there is no accountability. When complaints are raised there is no response, and it is left to the council’s environmental health team to undertake inspections when things get really bad.

Barry House is not suitable for children, despite there being so many children and pregnant women staying there. It is difficult to place children in local schools as

[Helen Hayes]

there is no guarantee on how long they will be there. There is no support with language tuition and no support for the many people living at Barry House who are deeply traumatised by the experiences and situations from which they have fled. There is no structured access to health facilities. A dedicated team from Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust provides what support it can, but support for access to maternity services and any other type of specialist service is difficult to secure and very patchy.

Many residents of Barry House have been through levels of trauma and hardship that is hard to comprehend. There are high levels of physical disability and mental ill health. The instability, hardship and sheer monotony of having to spend long periods at Barry House or in accommodation like it is no way to treat people who are fleeing conflict or persecution. The new contract must address the current problems. There must be a service standard for the timescale on which people are forced to stay in initial accommodation such as Barry House—a time after which they must be moved to suitable accommodation. There must be proper accountability for the quality of accommodation. When overcrowding, infestations, damp, dirt or poor quality food are raised, the providers must be held to account, with financial penalties if necessary. Councils must be empowered and funded to step in if the issues are not addressed. There must be funding for emergency short-term psychological support for people suffering trauma. It is simply not acceptable for people with high levels of mental health need as a consequence of their experiences to be left to cope on their own. There must be provision in situ for language teaching, early years activity for children and education, where school places cannot be provided.

There is a relationship between the situation at Barry House and the wider dysfunctionality of the Home Office. People are at Barry House for long periods partly because their applications are not being determined, or because applications are refused and they must appeal. The constituent I saw a few weeks ago who, as a Red Cross employee, was shot four times by Hezbollah in Lebanon, should not be appealing a refusal by the Home Office. The way that the Government treat those who seek asylum in the UK is part of the wider hostile environment. There is no support, comfort or dignity, and the UK can and must do better than this.

3.21 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I extend my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for securing the debate. I shall try hard not to repeat what has already been said, so there are lots of crossings out in my notes, but I want to try to pin the Minister down, and I hope she will respond on some specifics.

Someone who was forced to make the heart-rending decision to leave their home, family, friends and community, and who made a long, perilous journey to reach a place of sanctuary and safety, would hope to be welcomed by a country that wanted to pride itself on the welcome it gave to victims of torture and conflict. However, as other Members have said, for too many the welcome is to unhygienic, unsafe and unpleasant accommodation—for

which the taxpayer is paying. That serves no one, and I hope that the case has already been made powerfully enough to mean that the Minister will want to take up the cause.

The Government should have known the situation long ago, because the contracts in question are Government contracts, but even if that was not the case, last December's report of the Select Committee on Home Affairs on asylum accommodation should have made the matter clear. I have personally seen cases, through visiting asylum accommodation in my constituency. I have also talked to survivors of torture and trafficking, and to other people who have been in the asylum system. The report made it clear that the incidents in question are not exceptions proving any sort of rule of an otherwise well functioning asylum system. They are symptomatic of wider problems, but they also show specific deficiencies in the design and delivery of the asylum accommodation contracts.

I agree wholeheartedly with the organisations that have provided helpful briefings, some of which are represented in the Public Gallery today. They include Asylum Matters, Freedom from Torture, Doctors of the World, the Refugee Council and many other third sector organisations, as well as others from my constituency, such as Bristol Refugee Rights, Borderlands, Bristol Hospitality Network and Aid Box Community. Also, Councillor Ruth Pickersgill goes above and beyond any example I have known, as a councillor supporting refugees and asylum seekers. All of them have told me that the situation must change. The new asylum accommodation and support services contracts should be an opportunity to right the wrongs and ensure that taxpayers' money funds decent accommodation, reflecting us as the compassionate and welcoming country that we want to be. I therefore ask the Minister whether she will commit to publishing at least the statement of requirements and performance management regime for the new contracts.

Those of us who have visited asylum accommodation or discussed it with refugees and asylum seekers, as well as with the Government, know that if the implementation of the contracts is delayed, or if providers fail to live up to the terms, local authorities, third sector organisations and compassionate individuals will pick up the pieces, but that is not a good way of running the system. We need nothing short of a completely new approach to the way we take responsibility for refugees. The Minister has been very welcoming to me, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and others in discussing necessary changes, but I want to remind her of how those changes connect to housing. On a global level, the UN global compact on refugees provides a helpful model on resettlement. The Minister knows that I want an end to indefinite detention, particularly for survivors of torture but also for other vulnerable people such as victims of trafficking; increased places on resettlement schemes; the comprehensive introduction of classes in English for speakers of other languages; the abolition of healthcare charges; and the right for asylum seekers to work after six months. Those things could all help to ease the pressure on accommodation, but they would also all require the accommodation to be good.

I invite the Home Office and the Minister to let politicians, local authorities and others, and the public, see what is behind the curtain, and to open the tendering

process to proper scrutiny. The quality of the welcome that we extend speaks volumes about who we are and want to be. We are at a pivotal moment. Britain's place in the world has rarely been subject to so much scrutiny. Sanctuary with dignity and respect for people fleeing unimaginable horror will send out an important and powerful message about who we are.

3.25 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing the debate, and my fellow Glasgow Member, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), on his speech. No sooner did the summer recess hit than we found we were dealing with a major crisis in the city of Glasgow, because Serco announced its intention to undertake mass evictions of asylum seekers. Indeed, in my constituency, which has the highest population of asylum seekers in Scotland and, indeed, the UK, I have had to deal with 106 asylum cases in the past five months alone, largely because of Home Office service level failures. I do not think it is the job of Members of Parliament to do the Home Office's job for it and to have to deal with that level of failure. Clearly the asylum contract is not working. I do not know whether the new proposal will deal with the issue, because there is no clarity about it.

I want to pay tribute to those working in the area of refugees' and asylum seekers' housing, who stepped up when there was failure and crisis in Glasgow, including the Living Rent campaign and the Scottish Refugee Council, as well as numerous registered social landlords across Glasgow who undertook collectively to say that there would be no forced evictions from their properties under the Serco contract. That is to their credit. They stood up for what was morally right in the face of Home Office and Serco intransigence. It is clear that the message needs to be taken on board at the Home Office. Glasgow will not accept that level of indignity and callousness in dealing with the "move on" policy.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): As well as being undignified, is not that approach also counterproductive? It forces people into further destitution and the black economy and the rest of it, with people effectively going missing.

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman makes a pertinent point. The self-contained parallel bureaucratic process does not interface in any meaningful way with other services provided in the dispersal areas, such as integrated assistance provided by the city council and associated NGOs. As for the fundamental definition, what does it mean to have exhausted the asylum application process? There is no clear definition of what that means, which is why in most cases the service providers will act to maximise profit, dealing with things in an overly bureaucratic, distant and dubious manner.

One example is the Umeed family in my constituency, who have been living in so-called temporary accommodation for seven years. They are subject to relentless antisocial behaviour, which has had a serious impact on their mental health and that of their young children. Yet they show dignity in their situation. Time and again we confront people who show immense dignity

in the face of an appalling situation. That is the clear issue. When the "move on" policy is applied to people who have achieved refugee status, the fact that it is so rapid creates huge trauma for people trying to go through the transition. My young constituent Giorgi, whose mother died earlier in the year—he is a 10-year-old orphan—was granted leave to remain. He was told within seven days that he had to leave his temporary accommodation, leave his school and seek accommodation elsewhere in Glasgow, which would wrench him out of all that he had left in his life of sustaining comfort and established order. That shows how the policy is failing even young children, and how disgusting the contract is.

I want to understand a few things about what the new contract will do. What checks will be carried out to ensure that accommodation is habitable? Who will define and monitor the minimum quality standards for housing, and what assessment has been made of the habitability of accommodation provided since 2012? It is clear that for most people it is below the liveable standard. What assessment and review has the Department made of the current asylum accommodation approach, and particularly the work carried out by contractors such as Serco? It has been dealing with the "move on" policy in particular. I should like the Minister to assess the impact of the change in approach at local level since 2012 when, for example, the YMCA provided the contract in Glasgow, which is now provided by Serco. What change has that meant to the quality of service provision?

What provisions exist in the new draft asylum contract for future Governments to alter or terminate that contract, and what costs would those provisions incur? What learning from the current contract period has been used to inform the design of the new contract? Did it involve engaging with the views of asylum seekers or speaking to charities on the ground to assess and improve the contract? I do not think any of that has happened, and there has been no discussion and no indication whatsoever that such things have taken place.

I note that the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) is sitting behind the Minister as her understudy, but there has not been a word from the Scottish Conservative party on this issue throughout the summer. I have great respect for the hon. Gentleman, but he should stand up and be counted. The 13 Scottish Conservative MPs hold the balance of power in Government, and they should start exercising that power in the interests of the most vulnerable people in Scotland today.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Before I call the Front-Bench speakers, may I remind them that we wish to leave one minute for the mover of the motion? To give the Minister plenty of opportunity to respond, perhaps the Opposition speakers could confine their remarks so that a lot of the questions can be answered.

3.30 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for securing this debate. We are at a hugely significant moment for our asylum accommodation system, and this debate could not have been more timely. It is great to see such a significant turnout.

[*Stuart C. McDonald*]

Members have, quite rightly, used this opportunity to highlight the many problems that have beset COMPASS asylum accommodation contracts almost from the beginning. Those problems included poor—sometimes absolutely shocking—standards of accommodation and furnishings, and we heard a particular horror story from the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). We heard about inappropriate accommodation allocation and the forced sharing of bedrooms, about totally ineffective complaints and inspection regimes, and about disregard for the needs and vulnerabilities of torture survivors—my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) gave an appalling example of that.

We heard about the outrageous conduct of certain providers, including in Glasgow, as several Glasgow MPs have described, and about the linked issues of asylum support levels and transition periods, which were highlighted by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) spoke about the design of the contracts, and how that makes it impossible for local authorities to compete. Indeed, Glasgow City Council expressed an interest in taking on one of these contracts, but the design made it impossible for that idea to be taken forward.

The sad fact is that none of this is remotely surprising—we have heard the same criticisms over and over again from asylum seekers, from organisations that do such fantastic work on their behalf, and from the Home Affairs Committee, the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee. The fundamental problem behind all this is that local authorities are not being given an appropriate oversight role and powers to determine provision in their areas, and nor are they, or other partner organisations, given the necessary resources to support all the work and services required in dispersal areas. That has to stop.

This debate is slightly different, however, because the Home Office has now pushed the whole system of asylum accommodation to breaking point. Some key local authorities that have been involved in the scheme for decades are now saying enough is enough, and they are seriously looking at withdrawal from it. Responsibility for that lies squarely with the Home Office, which has repeatedly failed to address those concerns, which have been expressed again today, instead playing them down and tinkering around the edges. Our local authorities have been pushed too far.

As hon. Members have said, the expiry of the COMPASS contracts provides the perfect opportunity to deliver fundamental reform and to safeguard and improve asylum accommodation provision. Instead, the Home Office has decided to press on with a new set of contracts that repeat so many of the flaws in the existing model, including a lack of proper accountability, a lack of oversight for local authorities and a lack of proper resources to allow them to fulfil their duties. As the hon. Member for Stockton North said, having contracts for 10 years is reckless and wrong.

The Home Office must think again urgently and listen to the requests and calls made by participating authorities and organisations that work with asylum seekers. Those bodies are calling for equal partner status

for local authorities involved in the new contracts, and for full disclosure of terms and conditions. They call for full transparency and accountability from contractors when sharing information requested by local authorities to support the work they do on dispersal. They are calling for local authorities to have full authority over dispersal levels and cluster limits at a council and ward level, and for the Home Office's power to overrule councils on procurement decisions to be brought to an end. The Home Office should directly and adequately fund local authorities to undertake all the work they do in supporting asylum seekers effectively. That includes those destitute families that the Home Office prevents from accessing public funds.

Other sensible proposals were presented by the hon. Member for Stockton North, so will the Minister listen to those perfectly reasonable asks and engage with dispersal authorities about them during her imminent four nations meeting? If the Government will not listen to those asks and engage with the authorities, the Minister must explain the consequences of their alternative approach. For example, do they accept that they are required to re-engage with existing dispersal authorities to seek their participation in the new contracts, or is it the Government's position that having endured COMPASS 1, those authorities have no option but to continue on to COMPASS 2? In the latter case, what is the legal basis for that assertion, and what will happen if councils take a different approach?

Will the Minister clarify her Department's plan B if key local authorities withdraw from the scheme? Would the Department seriously consider attempting to procure private accommodation and place asylum seekers in cities without engaging dispersal-area councils? Does she believe that the legislation gives her those powers? If she is seriously stating that funding for local authorities is already sufficient, will she provide accountability by setting out the funding formula used for that in an easily comprehensible published document?

In conclusion, the ball is very much in the court of the Home Office. There is a chance to reform the system in a positive way, benefiting communities and asylum seekers alike. Equally, however, there is a genuine risk of an escalating crisis if the Home Office gets this wrong. This time, it must listen and act on all the concerns raised today.

3.36 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing this timely debate. I thank all Members for their contributions and for the important and powerful examples they have given from their own areas.

I, too, will start with an example from my constituency. A few months ago I was approached by a journalist who had visited asylum accommodation for mothers and babies in Longsight, Manchester. The conditions he described and evidenced were truly shocking. There were bedbugs on the family's bed—he sent me photos of the children's bites—and the mother could not sleep because of the sound of mice. Traps were full of cockroaches, and the extent of the damp was worsening a child's asthma. Although supposedly for mothers and

babies, this was in fact a mixed hostel, with families in the basement, and the upper floors inhabited by men. One mother was forced to stay in such accommodation for months, even after her doctor and health visitor had asked for her to be moved. As I said at the time, nobody, let alone families with children, should be forced to live with cockroaches, bedbugs, damp, leaks and mice.

The even greater tragedy, however, is that that was not an isolated case—we have heard about such things again and again this afternoon. The conditions in much asylum accommodation have long been appalling, and concerns have been raised consistently and by a wide range of parliamentary and external bodies. The Home Affairs Committee, the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have all published highly critical reports of the current COMPASS contracts.

Less than a year ago, I was in this Chamber discussing urgent recommendations made by the Home Affairs Committee, many of which have yet to be resolved. The Home Secretary is currently sitting on a report from the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration, which was sent to him on 9 July and should have been published within eight weeks. Third sector organisations and faith and community groups have been ringing alarm bells about the contracts for years. Last month, 14 local authorities took the unprecedented step of writing to the Home Secretary to warn that the asylum accommodation system is on the brink of collapse, and that he must personally step in. It is therefore unacceptable and profoundly undemocratic that the Government are taking an “as is” approach to the new contracts, which are due to be renewed next month.

What Labour is calling for, and what a Labour Government would oversee, is the return of responsibility for asylum accommodation, and the billions that come with it, to local authorities. In the absence of that, the very reasonable key recommendations from local authorities and third sector and community groups should be incorporated.

There are three broad issues that urgently need to be addressed. First, key stakeholders are being kept in the dark on the procurement process. Feedback during the consultation was not taken on board, and problems were treated as one-offs, rather than as symptomatic of wider failings. In a letter to the Home Secretary, the leaders of eight local authorities in Yorkshire said they were disappointed by the decision to seemingly limit public scrutiny until the re-tender process was closed. They described the transition to the current COMPASS contracts in 2012 as a failure, with mass sudden homelessness prevented only by local authorities stepping in.

Local authorities, charities and community groups are an essential part of asylum accommodation delivery. They are already central to integrating asylum seekers, and they are the ones who step in when things go wrong. It is essential that the Government are transparent with both the public and Parliament during this procurement process.

Secondly, local authorities lack oversight over asylum accommodation. Asylum seekers are not evenly distributed across the UK, with 35 local authorities—less than 10% of the total—hosting three quarters of the asylum seekers in dispersal accommodation. Many towns and cities across the north of England have more asylum seekers in a handful of wards than entire regions in the

south and east of the UK. This often causes problems in local areas, especially as local authorities have no power to veto where accommodation will be procured.

I outlined earlier the awful condition of some accommodation. Local authorities need the power to inspect properties and safeguard vulnerable people. Despite being the ones who step in when contracts fall short, often to prevent destitution, local authorities do not have the power to regulate the conditions of asylum accommodation. The new contracts must give more powers and resources to local authorities to oversee and inspect accommodation in their areas.

Finally, all these measures must improve the shocking conditions of asylum accommodation. No one should be forced to share a bedroom, and providers should respect local rules on homes in multiple occupation. There must be better provision for vulnerable asylum seekers. To highlight just one example, pregnant women are being moved late in their pregnancy and at very short notice, interrupting their maternity care. That can have a significant impact on the mental health of the women, who have often already faced significant trauma. Maternity Action has called on the Government to require contractors to comply with existing Home Office guidance on the dispersal of pregnant women and new mothers and to collect data to enable the Home Office to monitor compliance with that guidance.

The proposed COMPASS contracts are worth £4 billion and will be binding for the next 10 years, with no review period built in. The previous contracts did not have adequate review provisions, but there was at least a break clause after five years. So far, the Government have not recognised or addressed the wide-ranging criticisms of the current arrangements. Will the Minister commit to taking a more transparent approach to ending the appalling conditions that are, at the moment, common in asylum accommodation?

3.43 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on having secured the debate, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed. I will do my best in the time allowed to answer all the questions asked of me. Members did incredibly well in their four allocated minutes to convey their key points. It is always a huge frustration when time runs out. I will undoubtedly drive my officials, who are sat behind me, slightly potty, because I am about to divert completely from my script and respond to some of the important points that have been made, for which I apologise.

In no particular order, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) made a point about dispersal engagement. No doubt I will at some point return to my script and find the actual points that I am supposed to make on this issue, which will no doubt detail precisely the engagement that has already taken place. Suffice it to say that I am conscious of the debt we owe those local authorities that are part of the dispersal areas and which work incredibly hard to make available services and facilities to enable those seeking asylum to integrate into local communities.

[*Caroline Nokes*]

We have already started a dialogue about how we can increase the number of dispersal areas. We all know that the more that we are able to disperse asylum seekers among different local authorities, the easier it is for those authorities to manage. Indeed, it is better for our communities for there to be a wide range of people living within them and contributing to the better integration of asylum seekers.

I have engaged in discussions over the past few months with some metropolitan mayors, local authorities, the Local Government Association, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and other groups of local authorities that come together—it would be wrong of me to try to remember all of the local authorities that I have engaged with. Serious conversations are ongoing about how we can increase the number of dispersal areas, whether I have the power to mandate that and whether that is the right way forward. In my view, it is better to engage with local authorities and to encourage them to take part in dispersal schemes. My gut instinct is that that has to be the right way.

I have learned from engagement with local authorities—hon. Members might expect to hear this from someone who spent a happy 12 years on a local authority—that they sometimes come up with the best solutions and ideas. I know that the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) will undoubtedly pick me up on this, but it is true that no local authorities have come forward as part of this bidding process. It may well be that the procurement process that we are bound to take part in, as current members of the European Union, is too prohibitive and difficult for local authorities, which would be a matter of profound regret.

Stuart C. McDonald: City councils have provided asylum accommodation while the United Kingdom has been a member of the European Union, so it is not the European Union that is at fault here but the design of the contract. Glasgow City Council previously provided such accommodation, but it cannot, for example, provide asylum accommodation for the whole of Scotland. It has to be broken down into much smaller units.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Glasgow City Council will of course not seek to provide accommodation for the whole of Scotland, and perhaps there is a very good case for breaking contracts down further, which might increase engagement from local authorities. I have to say that I am never averse to the greater engagement and involvement of local authorities. We all know that, first, local authorities are very good at providing services and, secondly, people in a crisis often turn to the local authority first.

Sir Edward Davey: Have the Minister or her officials talked to different local authorities to see what sort of contract they would be able to bid for? It is clearly not an argument that local authorities cannot bid for contracts because of the European process; they do that every day. It is a question of whether the Home Office is willing to design the contracts in a way that would be achievable for local authorities.

Caroline Nokes: Officials have of course engaged with local authorities and will continue to do so, and they have shared with both local authorities and stakeholders the statement of requirements, which has been the subject of much discussion among some Members this afternoon. I am perfectly happy to share that statement of requirements, as some hon. Members requested. I see absolutely no obstacle to doing that, given that we have already shared it with a number of stakeholders and local authorities.

The hon. Members for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) raised the Serco contract, and the hon. Member for Glasgow South West commented on the timing of Serco's announcement. From Serco's perspective it was probably very unfortunate timing, as I was pretty much already on my way to Glasgow. However, that gave me the opportunity to have some very constructive engagement with Glasgow City Council, and later with the Scottish Government.

I am perhaps sometimes too much of an optimist and look for the positives in even very negative situations, and one thing that situation taught us is the benefit of making sure that there are information-sharing mechanisms between the Home Office, local government and the accommodation providers. That is absolutely key. We must all instinctively understand that by sharing information, we will get a better outcome. To be frank, one can face the obstacle of not being allowed to share sensitive data, but we are all working towards the right outcome for individuals so we actually have to find mechanisms—not just for the Glasgow contract, but across all these contracts—to find a better way to share information.

Chris Stephens: Does the Minister share my concern that Serco was bandying around unfortunate terms such as “failed asylum seekers”? Will the Minister tell us from where Serco received the information that there were 300 so-called failed asylum seekers?

Caroline Nokes: It would be unfair of me today to comment on numbers without having them immediately to hand, but what is clear through that process, as I think the hon. Member for Glasgow North East pointed out, is that some of those individuals had submitted additional claims for asylum and some were still at an appeals process. That absolutely indicates that the information sharing has to be of the highest quality.

We all know, although Members may find it uncomfortable, that through the asylum process there are many opportunities to submit appeals and to make fresh or additional claims. That sometimes puts accommodation providers, and indeed the Home Office, in the difficult position of having to consider claims and have them properly go through the courts. When people's claims for asylum are found by the courts not to be appropriate, of course we have to take action. In situations where there are people in accommodation that should actually be used by new asylum claimants or those who are at an earlier stage in the process, we are left in a very difficult situation. As the Home Office—I have been completely candid about this—we have to improve our ability to ensure that those with no valid claim for asylum are assisted to return to their country of origin; unfortunately, we have to do that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: I can see that I am about to be intervened on; I will give way to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), who has not yet intervened on me.

Thangam Debbonaire: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. Will she agree that that assertion would perhaps have more support from across the House if it was not for the very large number of rejected asylum claims that are overturned on appeal? Indeed, from some countries it is the majority that are overturned. Her claim does not really add up if we are being asked to agree that people should be removed when they have further rights to appeal to remain and when those appeals often succeed.

Caroline Nokes: I did not say that people who were not at the end of the process should be returned to their country of origin, and I am very conscious—perhaps more conscious than many—of how long the process takes, how many opportunities there are for appeal and, indeed, how often further information is brought forward. There is much more work to do to speed up the process and ensure that Home Office processes are accurate at the earliest possible stage. However, a lot of that is about finding mechanisms for people who are going through the process to bring forward as much information as possible as soon as possible. When information is not forthcoming at the outset and not all the information is available, it is very difficult to make a determination.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: I will continue to give way; I give way to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes).

Helen Hayes: I thank the Minister for giving way. Since she is talking about problems with the process, I will put on the record the very serious concerns raised by Freedom from Torture and others about the lack of medical expertise in the asylum assessment process, which, in large part, is a cause of the inaccurate decisions that her Department is making.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for putting that on the record. I have a comment on the medical processes somewhere in my notes; I may not find it in the course of the next few minutes, but I will try to. Of course we can—at all times and in all ways—improve on our systems, and I am absolutely determined that we will find better ways to ensure that information can be brought forward earlier.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: I will give way to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East, because he has been very patient.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the Minister for giving way on that point. When Rupert Soames phoned me in July to describe his concerns about the contract, as he saw them, he said it was actually the charity of Serco's shareholders that was keeping people in accommodation

for far longer than they were being funded by the Home Office. Somewhere in that balance, there is clearly a point where the Home Office is prematurely cutting funding for provision of housing. Surely there should be a longer cooling-off period to enable legal counsel to be consulted, to see if the intent is to appeal and so on and so forth before people are turfed out of their housing by Serco.

Caroline Nokes: I refer the hon. Gentleman back to my comments about information sharing and ensuring that information is accurate, because that is the only way in which we will make the best decisions.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: I am sorry; I will not give way again for a little while, because there were a couple of other points in the debate that I found particularly poignant and that I wanted to pick up on.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) painted a very clear picture of how the situation in Northern Ireland could be different. His description of children walking through certain areas in a school uniform that was different from that of other children particularly struck a chord with me. He will know that Northern Ireland is one of the areas where the contract has not received the same level of interest that it has in other areas, so clearly we have more work to do there. I will certainly bear his points in mind.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke about the opportunity for oversight of complaints and how to monitor complaint resolution—that is a key issue that several other hon. Members referred to. Of course the preference must always be for a service provider—the body delivering on the ground—to deal with complaints from service users promptly and adequately in the first instance. However, I recognise that that does not always happen, and of course escalation routes exist and will continue to exist—ultimately to UK Visas and Immigration—and I am very keen that complaints should be raised and addressed with the utmost efficiency and speed. I have heard some horror stories from hon. Members this afternoon, which we would certainly not wish anyone, let alone one's own child, to experience. That was particularly true of the comments about vermin and cockroaches. Of course those things are not acceptable and we do not wish them to happen now, let alone under the new contracts.

I will not give way to the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), because he made a point I wish to address about the length of contracts and whether they are set in stone for 10 years. There is a break at seven years, at which point we would be able to address the—[*Interruption.*] Well, the current contract is seven years as well, and that will give us the opportunity to review matters, should we need to do so.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: I will give way to the hon. Member for Stockton North, who secured the debate.

Alex Cunningham: In the light of what the Minister has just said, seven years is still a hell of a long time. Will she take that point back and think again about it, and see whether we could perhaps have breaks at three years or five years?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point; I will certainly think about it.

On break clauses, there are indeed mechanisms within the contracts being proposed to ensure that any changes that the Home Office wishes to make in the future can be enacted appropriately, so these are not contracts that are set in stone for a 10-year period. As I said, there is a break clause at seven years, but we will also have the opportunity to make changes that we may need to make.

Afzal Khan: I thank the Minister for giving way. I have two very simple questions for her. First, can she tell us what significant improvements there will be in the new contracts? Secondly, can she say whether there will be any penalties for any breach of contract or poor performance?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am conscious that I only have a couple of minutes left and I was hoping to move on to the bits of my prepared speech that actually include those points.

Alongside the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, we continue to explore how central and local government can work better together to enable us to meet our international commitments and to let service providers, local partners and civil society play their part. We are currently working with a number of local authorities to develop a place-based approach to asylum and resettlement, and considering how closer working and greater collaboration could work in practice.

As I have said, I have met many local authorities and the devolved Governments, but we are determined to improve standards and will stipulate more standardisation in the initial accommodation estate. That will ensure that there are dedicated areas for women and families, and more adapted rooms for those with specific needs, including pregnant women.

The new contracts will improve service-user orientation, to help service users to live in their communities and access local services. There will be better data-sharing with relevant agencies, to better join people to those services. The new contracts will also focus on safeguarding and improvements to support—

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: I am sorry; I have got one minute left.

The new contracts will also focus on safeguarding and improvements to support vulnerable service users, which will build on the enhancements to safeguarding that have been put in place across the immigration system over recent years. Standardised health checks will be introduced to identify those with specific physical and mental health needs, and we will provide more uniform training for providers' staff on safeguarding.

I also want the new contracts to improve advice services. We will introduce a national contract to provide advice to and assist destitute asylum seekers in making support applications.

The new contracts will further improve engagement with other agencies, and the accommodation provider will be required, during the normal course of its operations, to liaise and co-operate with other organisations, including local authorities, the voluntary sector, the NHS and the police, which will ensure that the interests of the service users are best served.

I am clear that I want the new contracts to build on the groundwork for a constructive relationship between central Government, local government, the private sector and civil society, for the benefit of communities and those seeking asylum.

3.59 pm

Alex Cunningham: Thank you, Mrs Main, for calling me again.

I am grateful to everybody who has taken part in today's debate. We have had a list of horror stories, broken systems, broken lives, poor-quality provision, contractors failing in spectacular style and different standards for third sector organisations from those for private-sector organisations, and not one soul mentioned any success stories in this process.

I appreciate the Minister's response to the debate. There were many things that she did not manage to cover in her remarks and I hope that I can look forward to receiving a letter from her that addresses some of the things that I outlined in my speech. Nevertheless, I make the appeal again to be transparent, to get into the detail and to work with others, especially local authorities. I also go back to that word "monitor". Please, please, please put a system in place to monitor these contracts properly to ensure that asylum seekers get the facilities that they need, so that they can at least live a peaceful life in that respect.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered asylum accommodation contracts.

Universal Credit Split Payments

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered universal credit split payments.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Universal credit has been slammed by charities, experts, politicians from both sides of the House, and—most importantly—people living and suffering in the system. Just today, we heard from former Prime Minister Gordon Brown about the failures of universal credit and how it pushes more people into poverty, but today I want to focus on automatic split payments.

I firmly believe that it is a matter of human rights for all women—for all people—to be entitled to financial independence. The Equality and Human Rights Commission agrees, but the Government do not seem to. This year, I met the Employment Minister, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), to talk about universal credit. In that meeting, I asked him about automatic split payments, but I was told they were not going to happen. I was disappointed by that response, which is why I am glad to have secured today's debate to raise the issue and add the voices of some of the people I have been speaking to. I hope that I will get some answers from the Minister and that he will take away some of the issues that I raise.

First, as I said, I believe that this is a human rights issue. When couples work, they do not get their wages paid into a single account, so why should welfare payments be any different? It seems like an oddly backward system. Under the current system, universal credit payments for a household are paid into a single bank account or joint account. Recipients of the joint award are required to nominate who receives that payment at the outset of the claim. For much of this debate, I will refer to women being able to have financial independence, but of course the policy will affect men too. The policy is not that the man automatically receives the payment; however, it will mainly affect women, which is why most of my comments will refer to women.

A report by the Scottish charity Engender pointed out that the policy

“does not account for the fact that financial decision-making takes place within the context of gendered power dynamics. The majority of jointly awarded ‘out of work’ benefits are claimed by men and assumptions that couples own, access and control joint bank accounts on an equal basis are unfounded.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Universal credit was rolled out in my constituency in September, so it is fresh to us. My staff went on a reminder course to learn how to do it, and one of the key issues that has come up is the very issue that the hon. Lady has brought forward. We are new to universal credit, but split payments—especially in a home where one partner might have a mental health issue—are simply a must. Does the hon. Lady agree that rather than having to apply for a legal power of attorney, we need the Minister's Department to apply discretion in allowing split payments to be part of the system? They have to be part of the system; if not, it is unfair.

Danielle Rowley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. That issue came up at a roundtable to discuss universal credit that I held in my constituency earlier this year. It brought together charities, local groups and service users to talk about their experience. In my constituency, full service universal credit has been rolled out since March 2017. At the roundtable, the need for automatic split payments was highlighted as a clear and prominent issue that has been impacting the lives of survivors of domestic abuse. Attendees of the roundtable, as well as respected organisations and groups, have stated that a single household payment has been shown to be highly problematic for a number of reasons, the first of which is that it perpetuates and contributes to inequality. Engender stated:

“Payment...to one partner in a couple is likely to result in less equal relationships, with one individual less able to access income.”

Again, this applies especially to women, as women are more likely to be economically dependent, to hold caring roles and to be subject to financial and other abuse.

That brings me to the heart of this issue, which is that single household payments facilitate economic abuse, where a person is deprived of financial independence. I pay tribute to the work of the Work and Pensions Committee on this issue. Evidence submitted by Scottish Women's Aid and Engender to that Committee's investigation into universal credit and domestic abuse stated:

“The single household payment is a gift to perpetrators of domestic abuse as it rapidly facilitates and legitimises what may previously have taken months or years of coercive control to achieve.”

That is disgraceful. It is shocking and deeply concerning that Government policy can be making it easier for abusers. What makes it worse is that single payments can then act as a barrier to survivors leaving abusive relationships.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making such a powerful speech. For those who are watching this debate, and for Members with concerns on both sides of the House, it is baffling that the Government are continuing with a policy that will encourage further economic abuse and encourage victims of domestic abuse to stay with their partner. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate.

Danielle Rowley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: being financially dependent can make it very difficult to leave a relationship, even just on the basic levels of affording transport and accommodation. A local case—one of the first cases I dealt with when I was elected—was that of a woman who was trying to leave an abusive partner. She had three children, one of them very young, and she came to me and said, “I don't know what to do. My welfare payments are paid into my partner's account, and I can't leave. I'm now faced with a choice between staying, and subjecting not just myself but my children to this abuse, or leaving, making myself and my children homeless and unable to afford accommodation.” It cannot be Government policy to force people into that terrible position.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. As someone who sits on the Work and Pensions Committee, know

[Chris Stephens]

that the—evidence we received was shocking. Is the hon. Lady as disappointed as I am that the Select Committee's eighth recommendation—that

“where claimants have dependent children, the entire UC payment should be made to the main carer by default”—

appears to be getting rejected in the Government's response?

Danielle Rowley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I absolutely agree with him, and I will give some of my own thoughts on the Government's response to that as well.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I am sure the Minister will respond by saying that people can apply to have split payments, but Women's Aid has said that this is not enough—that the Government are not, for example, monitoring how many people are applying and how many people are being refused. The record of what is being provided for in terms of alternative payments gives a very skewed and false picture, and we must have a default split payment soon.

Danielle Rowley: I absolutely agree.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Danielle Rowley: I will make some progress, if that is okay.

As I said earlier, I met the Employment Minister and talked about this issue, and he assured me that one can request a split payment. He even boasted that the system is designed so that a person will not be informed that their partner has made a request for a split payment, but I imagine most people will notice if an amount of money is missing from their bank account when the payment comes in. That just shows that the policy has not been designed with any thought to those in abusive relationships, and that the Government do not understand what life may be like for someone in such a relationship.

Dr Whitford: The Women's Aid survey showed that 85% of abuse survivors would not dare apply. That is why having it as the default is so important. Long before women reach the point of leaving a home, they have no money in their purse to go for coffee with friends or to go out with family, and they become isolated. Nobody is around them to offer a bed or advice. That is the start of it.

Danielle Rowley: I thank the hon. Lady for her comment. Absolutely—there is a whole host of reasons a woman might not be able to request it, and the Government seem unable to grasp that.

Under the system, survivors of domestic abuse are required to request split payments—a process that might put them at greater risk of further abuse, which is clearly preventing requests. Women, often accompanied to appointments by abusive partners, will fear repercussions when the abuser notices a change in the payment amount. The Department has said to the Select Committee that it recognises the risk that requesting split payments poses to those experiencing domestic abuse, but it has made no significant moves to rectify the problem.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the powerful speech she is making. Does she agree that the Government are being derelict in their duty to keep women safe if they put any hurdles in the way that could put women at greater risk? This is one such hurdle, and the Government must get rid of it.

Danielle Rowley: I absolutely agree, and I hope that the Government listen to that important point.

Although clearly detached from reality, it was somewhat unsurprising that, when I spoke to him, the Employment Minister believed that there was no problem with having to request split payments. That is because the Department has not been collecting the data needed to identify the issues surrounding domestic abuse and universal credit. It has only recently finally started publishing statistics on the number of households that request split payments, although it still does not require any information on why people request them.

When I asked for statistics on the number of people experiencing domestic abuse who are on universal credit, I was informed that that information is not available. Without the relevant data, the Department cannot ensure that people are effectively supported. The Work and Pensions Committee report states:

“the lack of data on split payment requests and abuse disclosure means there is no systematic way of understanding, identifying or disproving any relationship between financial abuse and UC.”

How can we help people when we do not have the data to work on?

The Government response to that report, which I believe is being published today, states support for the recommendation to prioritise gathering and publishing data on abuse and split payments, including the reasons for requests for split payments, so they seem to agree with it. Yet the Government also state later in the document that

“providing data on the reasons for split payments is not something the Department is currently considering as we need to consider sensitivities and protecting our claimants as a priority”.

That just sounds like an excuse for not collecting the data, as there are many ways of collecting it in an appropriate and sensitive manner that ensure that the claimant's data is protected.

Of course, as a Scottish MP, I have to talk about the situation in Scotland. The case for automatic split payments is so compelling that earlier this year we won the argument on the need for split payments in Scotland. Thanks to the hard work of Scottish Labour, all parties, including the Scottish Conservatives, supported my colleague Mark Griffin's amendment to the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, securing a change in the law. As such, the Scottish Government have committed to use their powers to split payments automatically. Given that the Scottish Tories supported automatic split payments in Holyrood, Conservative party policy appears to be confused. The Scottish Tories have seemingly failed to influence their party on this harmful policy. That is disappointing and weak, and it shows how little power they hold.

Looking at the practicalities, now that the Scottish Government have committed to automatic splitting of universal credit payments, the Department, which retains the practical responsibility to implement split payments through its automatised digital payment system, must

work with the Scottish Government, as well as relevant civil society organisations, to ensure that the decision is appropriately implemented. It needs to do that quickly and positively, scoping out and agreeing different forms of trial and of splitting the payment.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech on the compelling case for split payments. As she says, the system being rolled out in Scotland defaults to split payments. If that infrastructure is available, surely it would make absolute economic and financial sense to scale it up to a UK level.

Danielle Rowley: I thank my hon. Friend for his point.

I welcome the Government's support for the Select Committee's recommendation that they view the introduction of split payments in Scotland as an opportunity to learn about carrying out such a system. However, there is very little detail in the Government's response about how they plan to do so. There is no mention of carrying out the evaluation recommended by the Select Committee report. The Government's response states that they will implement the policy on the Scottish Government's behalf

"when it is feasible to do so",

but sets out no detail of the current plans and timelines.

I would like the Minister to answer the following questions. What is the Department's timetable? Have the Scottish Government proposed a possible split formula? Have they told the Department that they are preparing prospective regulations, and has it been consulted on them?

For the sake of women across the UK, the Government need to follow Scotland's example and agree to adopt automatic split payments UK-wide. The recommendation is to view the introduction of split payments in Scotland as an opportunity to further consider whether, on the basis of evidence, there is a case for splitting payments by default in the rest of the UK. I suspect that, if such an evaluation is undertaken, the evidence in support of split payments will be, as it was in Scotland, overwhelming. However, it could be a lengthy process and, for many women, it would be just too long.

In the meantime, given figures released last month that showed that just 15 out of 880,000 households benefit from split payments—I was shocked when I heard that figure—what is the Department doing to better promote the option of split payments and to reduce the associated risks of opting for it? The Government have taken an important step recently, acknowledging economic abuse as significant by proposing to include it in a statutory definition of domestic abuse for the first time, but how does that fit with the wider Department's policy on split payments, which supports economic and wider domestic abuse? Is the policy in contravention of the Government's own position on domestic abuse? Can the Minister also please tell me, in the light of the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, what discussions have been had on split payments?

Automatic split payments will not prevent abuse altogether in households claiming universal credit. Some abusers will find a way to control their partners regardless, but automatic split payments are a significant step to ensuring that the state is not implementing a policy that

plays into the hands of abusers, strengthening their hand and giving them more power than they already have over victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

Currently, universal credit is paid as a single household payment. It poses a risk to women's financial independence, autonomy and security, and generally stands in the way of a person's right to financial independence. The Department and the Government have a duty to ensure that they are providing the right support to survivors of abuse, and currently they are failing in that duty. The availability of the option of split payments is clearly not sufficient. To avoid supporting domestic abuse, split payments need to be a default—an automatic way to prevent abuse.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley), who has been a long-standing campaigner in this area through parliamentary questions; meeting the Minister for Employment, who has overall responsibility for universal credit; and visits to her local Jobcentre Plus, where she has also met supporting organisations. I know it is an area in which she has a long-standing track record of campaigning.

I share that passion. For many years I have supported my local women's refuge. I have also worked with Women's Aid, hosting parliamentary events prior to my ministerial appointment. I was very briefly on the Work and Pensions Committee, so I was present when they were considering the report, although I did not contribute to it because I was not there during the hearings. I pay tribute to my former colleagues on the Committee who were really engaged with this incredibly important topic.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: I will take a few interventions, but I am conscious that I do not have too much time.

Ruth George: The Minister heard the powerful evidence taken by the Select Committee, of which I am a member. I am interested in how, having heard that evidence on the impact on women and, in particular, on children, he can justify the Government response to the recommendation that if a payment cannot be split it should go to the main carer by default.

Justin Tomlinson: I was not present when that evidence was given, just when the Committee was considering it, but I will cover many of those points as I proceed.

With respect to domestic abuse, we are covering physical, sexual, psychological, emotional and financial abuse, and controlling and coercive behaviour. We are particularly looking at economic abuse. We all agree that the solution to domestic violence is complex and should ultimately be delivered through the judicial system, but the Department has an incredibly important role, not just through UC but through the wider work of the Government. The Government are fully committed to taking the issue very seriously, and I expect that to have full cross-party support. The Department will continue to feed into progress towards the domestic violence and

[Justin Tomlinson]

abuse Bill. I represent the Department on the inter-ministerial group on violence against women and girls, and we regularly work with key stakeholders such as Women's Aid, Refuge and the ManKind Initiative—I shall give more details on that work as I proceed.

I was particularly touched by the case that the hon. Member for Midlothian raised. Today I met representatives of Women's Aid and Refuge to talk specifically about the journey in the jobcentre process. It is now mandatory for all work coaches to have training to recognise and identify victims of domestic abuse and those at risk, and to offer support, which can include signposting to national partnership organisations such as Refuge and Women's Aid, but also to local organisations—every town is different. That approach relies on people being willing to be referred, but they are offered that menu of signposting options.

In her case study, the hon. Lady mentioned financial barriers to people leaving their household. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said in an intervention that it would be totally unacceptable for the Government to put up a barrier. That is a really key point, so we ensure that people who wish to leave their household can be put immediately on the universal credit single payment in their own right. If they are already on a legacy housing benefit, they will get two weeks of additional housing benefit money up front, to give them immediate cash. While they are there, they will also have 100% access to the advance payment on day one, as well as the signposting.

We do not encourage people to stay in such a household, so we put a big emphasis on partnership working and on talking to those with expertise in the area. However, those who do wish to stay, for whatever reason, can request split payments. The hon. Member for Midlothian cited a figure of 15 households, but the figure is actually 20. At the moment, the majority of people going through UC are single claimants, so it is not an exact science, but we will continue to look at the statistics. I take the point that the data is limited; it tells us whether people are now successfully receiving split payments, but I would like more—that is a given. As a Minister, I will push for more data because we will need it to target support. UC design is not a simple process.

Dr Whitford: As the Minister knows, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on the issue: the Universal Credit (Application, Advice and Assistance) Bill. In my work as a breast cancer surgeon I have seen the effects of current policy in action. Does he recognise that collecting data on women who have applied would just lead to more complacency? We know from the survey that 85% of women would not dare to apply.

Justin Tomlinson: The data is not the solution, just a part of it. I am just being supportive on one of the recommendations. I absolutely accept the hon. Lady's point.

On financial support, if someone has financial housing commitments such as rent or a mortgage for their existing household, we can, in effect, make double payments of housing benefit for up to 26 weeks automatically, or up to 52 weeks at discretion. Again, we are doing everything we can to remove the financial barrier to people moving away from their household.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) for securing the debate. I do not believe that my hon. Friend the Minister has fundamentally addressed the issues raised about the particular vulnerabilities of people who face abuse and of people with mental illness, who may well be at risk of exploitation. I ask him to take away from the debate the thought that rather than carving out exemptions for special cases, it would be much simpler to say, "There is a potential problem for vulnerable people, so let's have split payments."

Justin Tomlinson: If my hon. Friend had been a little more patient and had not intervened, my very next point would have covered that.

It is important that when we design policy, we do not presume that everything is utopian. I have made a commitment today to Women's Aid and Refuge—I stress that our meetings were in the diary before today's debate was arranged—that over the next couple of weeks they will work with me and our operational frontline teams to check the typical experience. My hon. Friend makes a valid point about those with mental health issues; not everybody immediately says, "I am a victim or potential victim of domestic abuse," so it is about identifying the signs and looking at what additional support can be given for those who, whether because of mental health or as a consequence of the abuse that they face, do not have the confidence to navigate the incredibly difficult and challenging journey to break free. We will therefore do a deep dive to look at what the typical journey is like for people, and at what more we can do through training and through providing local partnerships. Every single district will have a highly trained named team programme manager solely responsible for making those partnership arrangements locally and nationally.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: This will have to be the last intervention, because I have a lot to say and not long to say it, and I do not want to be criticised for missing things.

Jess Phillips: I just wonder what the jobcentre will do when it discovers, as we have all done, that those local partnerships lead to a dead end because the services are no longer there.

Justin Tomlinson: We will be looking at that. I understand the hon. Lady's point. I want to engage with the experts—the ManKind Initiative, Women's Aid and Refuge—to look at it and identify the problems. I am not in charge of UC; I am in charge of trying to make it better for those with complex needs, including victims of domestic abuse. That is a real priority for me.

I welcome the work of the Work and Pensions Committee and the fact that its report states:

"Since 2010, the Government has begun to make great strides in tackling domestic abuse... It has also demonstrated a clear commitment to being more supportive of survivors of domestic abuse."

Although we are not everything, we play an important role, and I take that seriously.

I am conscious of time, so let me address the specific point about split payments. I welcome the fact that Scotland wishes to try them. As it stands, anybody who is a victim of domestic abuse can be given a split payment. I accept the point that there are then challenges—not unreasonably, the hon. Member for Midlothian said that the current recipient would notice that it was potentially half of the income. We need to look at Scotland because we have to learn from the test and look at the unintended consequences.

Those groups that campaigned for a split payment do not agree on how to split it. It is not the case that everybody would simply do it 50:50. If the state arbitrarily says that somebody should have 70% and somebody else should have 30%, that could have unintended consequences. That may not mean that it is not the right way to do it, but it is why we have committed to give support to the Scottish Parliament to do its pilot. The pilot will cover a sufficiently large area for us to draw good information from it and decide whether split payments are the way to go or whether—because of unintended consequences, and despite the good intentions—they are not.

The answer to the specific question of whether the Scottish Government have introduced suggestions on how to do split payments or a plan for legislation is, “Absolutely not.” I suspect, in their defence, that that is because the issue of how the payments are split is so complex. However, they will get our full support to make whatever they do work. Just to be clear, the principle of having household income is not new to UC; it has been the case for legacy benefits since the dawn of time. That does not mean that it is right, but we will look closely at the Scottish Government.

Dr Whitford: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: No, because I have only one minute left.

It is a shame that this debate was not a longer one in which hon. Members could have expanded on the points they made today in interventions. However, there is a real commitment from me as the Minister that we will work with the experts and the Scottish Government to see whether lessons can be learned from their pilot. In the immediate future, we are looking at what will happen and what we can do to identify and support those who are in danger of domestic abuse or are current victims of it, so that we can do our bit. It is an issue that the Government take very seriously and will continue to push, not just in this area but through the forthcoming domestic abuse Bill. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Midlothian, who has been a dedicated worker in this area.

Question put and agreed to.

Economic Growth: East of England

4.30 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered promoting economic growth in the East of England.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. The purpose of this debate is to highlight the enormous economic potential of the east of England and to put forward proposals for promoting growth, which can benefit people right across the region. In the past, East Anglians have perhaps been slow to come forward. We have hidden our light under a bushel, and thus the region has not secured the investment in infrastructure that is needed to transform what is already a highly successful economic region into a global leader. It is important that we now cast aside such shyness.

As we look beyond Brexit, the UK must strive to be the leader in a variety of fields. The east of England can help secure this goal, whether it is in the clean energy, agri-food, life sciences or information and communications technology sectors. The catalyst for this debate was the formation last December of the east of England all-party parliamentary group, which the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and I co-chair, and which last month launched its Budget submission, “Building together the foundations of more productivity, prosperity and inclusivity in the East of England”. Much of what I will say is based on the proposals set out in that publication.

What is the east of England? In some respects, it is an area without boundaries. It includes the counties of Suffolk and Norfolk as well as Cambridgeshire and what used to be Huntingdonshire, and it extends to parts of Essex and Hertfordshire, though owing to the post-war growth of London, it does not reach as far south as it used to. From the Minister’s perspective, I fear it does not include Watford—its inclusion would enable the region to claim a premiership football team, as the Town and the Canaries currently flounder.

The region is relatively flat—it is often described as the bread bowl of England—and made up of attractive villages and countryside, interspersed with popular market towns and larger towns and cities such as Cambridge, Norwich, Ipswich, Colchester, Peterborough and, on its southern boundaries, Chelmsford.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend is a fine bastion of our region and I congratulate him on securing this debate. The east of England is beautiful, but if we want to encourage tourism, people have to be able to get there. Does he agree that one of the fundamental challenges is our rail network in the eastern region?

Peter Aldous: My hon. Friend is spot on: infrastructure and communications, whether road, railway or digital, are hugely important to the region’s future. I shall briefly touch on that, and I am quite sure my colleagues will do likewise.

The east of England APPG held its inaugural meeting on 13 December 2017, when we were addressed by Lord Heseltine, who emphasised the need to think strategically and to consider how best to manage and spread economic growth across the whole region for the benefit of all people. The Budget submission has been

[Peter Aldous]

supported and endorsed not just by MPs, but by business, local government and local enterprise partnerships. Signatories include British Sugar, Stansted Airport, AstraZeneca, Anglian Water, James Palmer, who is the Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the Haven Gateway Partnership, the New Anglia local enterprise partnership, the Hertfordshire local enterprise partnership and the East of England Local Government Association.

In arriving at our recommendations, we held evidence sessions and considered a range of innovative ideas as to how to promote and sustain economic growth, including proposals from Lord Adonis; Councillor David Finch, who is the leader of Essex County Council; and Mayor James Palmer, who is working up plans for much-needed infrastructure improvements through land value capture. The recommendations that we are putting forward should be regarded not as a wish list, but instead as a new way of working and getting things done—business and Government, both national and local, working together to secure investment that ensures the whole of the east of England realises its full potential.

It is important to highlight the enormous economic potential in the east of England. We are one of the fastest-growing regions, in terms of both population and economy. With a population of 6.1 million, the region is growing rapidly at a pace that is second only to London. In 2016, the east of England was one of just three UK regions to contribute more in tax than it received in public moneys. Despite this, public expenditure in the region was £8,155 per capita in 2017, which is less than the UK average of £9,159.

We are a frontrunner in attracting business. In 2017, the east of England saw the largest increase in business numbers of all UK regions. We are at the forefront of global excellence in innovation. The region is a centre for nationally and internationally recognised expertise in sectors such as life sciences, ICT, agri-tech and low-carbon energy supply. The corridor from Cambridge to Milton Keynes and Oxford has the potential to be the UK's Silicon Valley. We are a jobs powerhouse—total employment is expected to rise by 7% over the next 15 years—and we complement and enhance the position of London as a world city.

Significant investment is already taking place in the east of England. By 2020, all trains in the area served by Greater Anglia will be brand-new, not second-hand hand-me-downs from other regions. Some £1.5 billion is being spent on removing what is probably the worst road bottleneck in the whole country: the A14 between Huntingdon and Cambridge. A further £300 million is being spent on schemes along the A47 from Peterborough to Lowestoft. The Norwich northern distributor road is open, and vital new bridges are being built in Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft—the latter is in my constituency.

There is a need to join up the dots and to think strategically, so that the whole region can benefit from those investments. There are also challenges that are best met at regional level, such as climate change and water resource management. We are not only a very dry region but a low-lying one, with a coast where the battle with rising sea levels has been raging for millennia. The recommendations in the APPG report provide the

foundations to promote growth in three areas: transport, infrastructure and industrial strategy. I shall briefly go through them.

With regard to transport, we recommend that the

“Government should support England's Economic Heartland and Transport East—the region's two sub-national transport bodies—to become statutory bodies.”

By doing so, we will be better able to prioritise, fund and then deliver road, rail and air transport improvements.

On infrastructure,

“councils should have greater discretionary powers to encourage housing delivery...Further action is recommended to free-up finances to build affordable homes at scale”

through a variety of measures, including

“relaxing Housing Revenue Account borrowing...Ministers should explore innovative funding options that could help deliver infrastructure to enable new housing, either by direct council investment or by leveraging in other funding...Government should facilitate greater cooperation between developers, infrastructure providers, and local planning authority providers to improve housing delivery.”

The importance of digital connectivity cannot be overestimated. The need for a full fibre network to all homes and businesses across the whole region is incredibly important. It is an absolute must, if the region is to compete globally post Brexit. If necessary, greater powers should be granted to Ofcom to ensure that commercial operators do not just concentrate on the larger urban areas.

With regard to our regional industrial strategy, we should be focusing on our flagship industries: life sciences, agri-tech, ICT and clean energy. If necessary, Ofcom should be granted greater powers to ensure that commercial operators do not concentrate just on the larger urban areas. Our regional industrial strategy should tackle the productivity gap, which is a particular problem for the region. The local enterprise partnerships are key to developing and enacting an effective industrial strategy for the region, because local private and public sector leaders best understand the region's opportunities and challenges and are best placed to co-ordinate the promotion of the various sectors to ensure consistency. The education strategy should focus on helping local people to develop transferrable and adaptable skills.

I have sought to provide a framework, albeit in an outline form, for promoting and spreading growth across the east of England. There is a great deal of flesh to put on the bones, and I anticipate that colleagues will do that by highlighting the opportunities and constraints in their areas. Now is only the beginning of this campaign. There are many proposals in the APPG's report, and they deserve careful thought and implementation. I ask the Minister to signpost the roadway that we need to go down to ensure that the east of England is a global leader and that we enhance productivity and increase prosperity for all those who live and work there.

4.41 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing the debate. We co-chair the all-party group, and he has excellently described the work it has done since it was inaugurated just over a year ago. It is truly cross-party. Although the issue of what defines the east is sometimes

a matter for debate, I strongly believe that, given that sub-national transport bodies are emerging in other parts of the country, as well as in our own region, it is in our very best interests to work together in the east. That is particularly important, given its geographical proximity to London. Although the east is, by many measures, an affluent area, if the wealth generated by people commuting to London is taken out, the figures suddenly reflect what we actually see on the ground in much of the region: in many places, for many people, life is a daily struggle. I will use the old six-county definition of the east, which many of us still hold dear.

The east is indeed a net contributor to the UK economy and the Treasury, and its industries are world-leading. In my constituency of Cambridge, we have life sciences and tech—I do not need to rehearse the arguments. However, the region is not without its challenges, which were outlined very effectively in the Budget submission. There is a need for more housing, given that so many are priced out of it. Just last week, it was shown that my city of Cambridge is one of the most expensive places for young people in the ratio between income and rent, and buying is almost out of the question for most people. The need for improved transport and infrastructure is well known. We also have a future skills deficit, which risks causing employment growth to slow and eventually to reverse—and, indeed, possibly worse than that.

Those issues are very well explained in the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough independent economic review, which the Business Secretary and the Mayor of the combined authority launched in London yesterday. It was produced by a high-powered commission chaired by Dame Kate Barker, and its high-powered and knowledgeable commissioners include Lord Willetts and renowned telecoms entrepreneur David Cleevly from Cambridge. I hope Ministers will look closely at its work.

The review points out that, without the right tools to tackle these issues, employment growth in Cambridge could level off in the next couple of years, and there is the risk that it will go into reverse after 2031. Most people would find it surprising to learn that there is a danger that big businesses in the area may have to move away. The review's conclusions are clear: future prosperity is not guaranteed, and if action on transport, housing, infrastructure and skills is not taken soon, there will be adverse effects not just for Cambridge or for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, but for the wider region and the whole of the UK economy.

The review rightly highlights the need to spread wealth more fairly and protect all that makes areas such as Cambridge so special for people. That is a very important point. It is about not just the traditional measure of growth—just more—but doing things better, being more productive and improving the quality of life for everyone. Our skilled workforce has been the driving factor in Cambridgeshire's success in recent years, but given that our future relationship with the EU is uncertain, a failure to make the right investment in skills and infrastructure could cause internationally focused businesses to look elsewhere.

I have inevitably emphasised Cambridge so far, but those lessons hold good for much of the rest of the region. I believe that cities will be the driver within the region, but their relationship with the rural—or, perhaps more accurately, semi-rural—areas and market towns is

vital. Skills and labour will be essential in our future relationship with the EU, not least because the agricultural sector relies so heavily on seasonal workers.

Transport is a huge issue, of course. The BBC's Andrew Sinclair recently pointed out that it can take as long to travel the 110 miles from Norwich to London as the 220 miles from London to Liverpool. We desperately need to unlock transport infrastructure across our region to improve our productivity.

There are things we can do. For instance, I am told that digital signalling on our rail network would cost about £1 billion, but the benefits to quality of life and increased productivity would pay that sum back many times over. It does not require building new lines and upsetting people all over the place; it is about using the existing capacity better. It is the same message again: we should improve productivity, not just of people but of assets. If we can improve our links from places such as Cambridge though Stansted to London, we will create vital connections to the wider world.

Although our councils are struggling horribly with underfunding at the moment—it is frankly a disgrace that Cambridgeshire County Council has been reduced to forcing staff to take unpaid leave at Christmas—our ask is slightly unique, in that it is not always for more funds. We want the means to raise our own revenue. I used my first speech in the House three and a half years ago to speak not about glamorous issues but about the slightly arcane subject of tax increment financing. That and land value capture, which the Mayor of the combined authority has argued for, could unlock the investment needed. It would not cost the Treasury. We are prepared to take on the risk. The benefit sharing scheme got so close to being approved by the Treasury, but it was killed. We just need the authority and the tools to get on with the job—to borrow a phrase—of opening up access to jobs, skills and housing.

The east is a region with enormous potential, but we are reaching the point at which business as usual is not enough. Future prosperity has to be earned, but it also has to be shared fairly. Many in the east are up for the challenge, but we need the Government to work with us.

4.47 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing this debate, on his chairmanship, with the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), of the east of England all-party parliamentary group, and on helping to put the east more firmly on the Government's map.

My hon. Friend was absolutely right that the region has not always advocated our case for investment to the Government, and we have not always outlined the reasons why additional investment in the east would unlock a region that already helps to bring economic benefit to the country as a whole. The east is a net contributor to the UK economy. As the hon. Member for Cambridge said, additional support for our infrastructure, connectivity and digital economy will deliver benefits for the whole region, and will help to improve the growth and economic productivity, which will raise tax revenue for the whole country. That is a compelling argument for why the Treasury should support infrastructure projects in our region.

[Dr Dan Poulter]

Before I touch on agriculture, food and drink, infrastructure—particularly the A12 and rail, which I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) will talk about later—and the importance of looking after the public sector at a time when we are seeing private sector growth in the east, it is important to reflect on the fact that unemployment in our region has come down over the past 10 years. Youth unemployment is at lows that we have not seen for more than 20 years—particularly in my part of Suffolk—and we are seeing more vocational training and apprenticeships. Those are all good things. We can also note that average wages across the east of England, particularly in Suffolk, are above the UK mean and median, which means that we live in a relatively affluent part of the country. There are still pockets of deprivation, as we are all aware, such as those in Lowestoft and Ipswich, which need particular attention.

Agriculture, food and drink is one of the drivers of the economies of Norfolk and Suffolk, and of parts of Cambridgeshire and north Essex. There are many national names in our counties that contribute to the UK economy. They are names that we can be proud of, such as Gressingham Duck, Aspoll Cyder and Adnams brewery, to name but a few. However, our agricultural sector needs additional support from the Government for the development of land-based college training so that young people have opportunities in agriculture, food and drink. One area that I ask the Minister to look at is vocational training. Throughout the region, there has been a tremendous expansion in vocational training in agriculture, food and drink, particularly in light manufacturing, and we can be very proud of that. It is the driver of our economy, particularly in Norfolk and Suffolk, but we need more support for our land-based training colleges, such as Easton and Otley College, which can provide the next generation of agricultural and land-based apprentices, farm workers and people working in the food and drink industry that is so important to our region.

We recognise that the east of England—Suffolk in particular—has benefited from considerable Government support for infrastructure. We have support for the third crossing in Lowestoft that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney has campaigned for so tirelessly, and, to alleviate traffic congestion in Ipswich, we have the promise of a bridge, for which the previous Member for Ipswich campaigned very hard.

We have also had additional investment, with the A11 being dualled, but the A12 is the “motorway”—although it is not actually a motorway—for entry to Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk. The Government have already indicated support for improvements to the A12 approaching Ipswich, but if there is a case for additional support and investment, it is the other stretch of the A12—between Ipswich and Lowestoft—which unlocks the energy gateway and energy coasts and needs considerable improvement. It is still a single-track road, which reduces the ability of new businesses to develop on the eastern coast of Suffolk. Investment in the A12 would both benefit tourism—another great driver of our economy—and help to unlock the energy coast, with the potential of Sizewell C, renewable energies and the many windfarms. I know all MPs here will strongly support that investment.

Finally, I will touch on investment in the sustainability of the public sector. If we want a thriving private sector in productivity and economic development, we need to look after our public sector. We have to recognise that in the east of England, we have challenges in retention and recruitment. Although there are national retention and recruitment challenges in some parts of the public sector, such as in the healthcare workforce, in the east of England we face particular challenges, with a shortage of GPs. Many GPs are approaching retirement age, which I believe is also true in parts of north Essex, and we need to recognise that challenge. We must also recognise that we have a shortage of nurses in some areas, and that to continue looking after the private sector, we need to invest in the public sector and support the east of England with financial incentives that will attract public sector workers.

That is also true of education in parts of our region; there are difficulties attracting teachers to some of our schools. If we want to maintain the engine room of our thriving and growing east of England economy, we have to recognise that the package that will attract families will also support teachers and other public sector professionals who relocate to the east of England, as well as looking after the many dedicated professionals who already work very hard there.

I hope the Minister has heard my plea about supporting vocational training and apprenticeships for the agricultural and land-based economy. If he is free, perhaps he could come and visit Easton and Otley College to see for himself some of the good work that goes on there.

4.55 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this important debate. It is a pleasure to stand here and discuss how we can promote economic growth across the east of England. Clearly that is one of my priorities as the Member for Clacton—a place my hon. Friend probably only inadvertently left off his list of great towns of the east.

Nationally, our economy is growing. At last, we are beginning to say goodbye to austerity and are getting the country back on track. However, while national economic growth is without doubt welcome, some communities are being left behind. One such community is my constituency of Clacton. As we begin to discuss the future of our economy, we must ensure that no community is left behind. I was encouraged to hear the Prime Minister argue the same in her conference speech last week.

I am here today to offer my thoughts on how we can be more inclusive as the economy grows. By way of further context, in 2013 my local authority, Tendring District Council, published an excellent economic development strategy. But in its pages was the somewhat troubling assertion:

“While there are some excellent businesses and highly resourceful residents locally, the district’s economy is not performing as well as it could—employment, job numbers and business formation have...been static or shrinking in recent years.”

In a former life as the cabinet member for regeneration and inward investment at Tendring District Council, I saw at first hand how eager our council officers were to correct that situation. I also saw how support for businesses

can pay tremendous dividends in terms of economic growth. As I have said in previous speeches on the economy, in that role I prided myself on being able to make cash grants of up to £150,000 available to businesses in, and coming to, Tendring, so that they could grow, flourish and create inward investment. Many businesses did flourish thanks to that funding from the SME growth fund, which I introduced—businesses such as Nantmor Blinds, based in Clacton-on-Sea, which received a grant to assist with the purchase of an auto louvre machine. It also enabled it to hire new staff. In its own words, Nantmor Blinds said it was

“blown away by Tendring District Council’s hard work and determination.”

To date, the SME growth fund in Tendring has supported businesses, created 20 full-time jobs and leveraged over £200,000 of private investment into the district. I am delighted to say that, thanks to that success, the scheme is being widened and extended to 2020.

Clearly, in my area local government support is truly there for businesses. I have no doubt that that is the case across the east of England. We must ensure that that continues and expands to national support. Nevertheless, and despite our enthusiasm, something continues to prevent businesses from really committing themselves, and the prosperity they bring, to Tendring. That obstacle, which has been mentioned before and will be mentioned again and again, is the quality of our local infrastructure. In my view, a country’s economy will only ever be as good as its roads, rails and ports, and we are no exception in that regard. I have often argued in this place—some might say far too often—that there is a need to improve the connection to overlooked areas such as the Clacton constituency. As a regular commuter myself, I know that it takes far too long for my constituents to travel to the capital and vice versa. I have said it before and I will say it again: the 69-mile journey often takes the best part of one hour and 40 minutes—that is nonsense. Without more investment in our local transport infrastructure, I believe that we will limit the incentive for people and businesses to move to our area. That would mean that my district would continue to be excluded from the strong national economic growth, which is an unacceptable outcome.

Moreover, as I have said before, if we are to do our bit to tackle the housing crisis, we must improve our transport infrastructure before any major new housing developments break ground. We are leading the way with our garden community developments. We simply cannot build more dwellings without first making it easy to occupy, live in and work from them. Investing more in transport would do that.

That is why I will continue to push my “70 in 60” campaign at every opportunity. It aims for the people of Clacton to be able to cover the nearly 70 miles to London in less than 60 minutes, which is not an unrealistic proposition when we look at similar rail services in the area. For example, commuters to Ipswich cover the journey in about 70 minutes, and let us not forget that people can travel the 52 miles from London to Colchester in 58 minutes, only to crawl the final 18 miles to Clacton in about half an hour—on a good day. That clearly has a lot to do with the quality of infrastructure between Colchester and Clacton, compared with the main line to Ipswich, so we should change that.

When we commit cash to infrastructure in such a way, businesses get excited and want to invest, thereby laying the foundations for future economic growth, and I have been shown that clearly by my past experience and conversations I have had as the Member of Parliament for Clacton. If we are to promote economic growth in the east of England, we must adopt the “infrastructure first” mantra everywhere and ensure that our region has the best transport links going.

I therefore welcome the formation of Transport East, a forum that now meets regularly. It will be the vehicle for the delivery of a collective vision for transport and wider infrastructure for all communities in the east of England. Its formation is certainly a positive step. It will lead to the creation of a truly joined-up transport network that does not exclude any of our communities from infrastructure improvements, which are a precursor of economic growth. The forum will also help us to secure vital investment in future infrastructure. I encourage the Government to engage with Transport East in whatever way they can.

To turn to the roads, I ask the Government to look favourably on the application for RIS2—second road investment strategy—funding for the new A120, which will reduce pressure on existing roads used by residents of the Clacton constituency. Improving that road, which runs across the east of England from Stansted airport to Harwich, would also help move goods more quickly and deliver a boost to the local economy. Furthermore, upgrading that strategically important road is an essential precursor to further unlocking Essex’s economic potential, along with the wider east of England region.

That brings me back to the point of the debate. The east of England is a unique region, with strong economic growth prospects, thanks to places such as Cambridge, Peterborough, Ipswich, Stansted airport, Luton airport, Harwich and Felixstowe, Colchester, Waveney, Southend-on-Sea and, of course, the sunshine coast of the Clacton constituency—I get them all in. However, if we do not have first-rate infrastructure, and cannot successfully and efficiently link those economic sub-units together, we will not get the best out of the east of England. We will therefore not maximise our economic potential, and certain communities will continue to be left behind.

To conclude, I return to the economic development strategy to which I referred earlier. Despite the troubling conclusions drawn about Tendring in 2013, it was also argued that the area has the potential for growth which could create thousands of jobs. Good will and hard work from our council has allowed us to start unlocking that potential, and I am proud of our record so far. Real and sustained investment in our infrastructure, however, would allow us to deliver such results quicker. I have no doubt that, in the same way, there will be no shortage of good will and hard work throughout the east of England. To match that, we must now ensure that good infrastructure is in place across the region. That is how we will promote economic growth for all communities in the east of England.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I hope to call the shadow Minister at 10 minutes past 5. It is a pleasure to call Priti Patel.

5.3 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to join the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for

[Priti Patel]

Waveney (Peter Aldous) and all colleagues who have spoken on being strong advocates for the east of England. In so many areas, we have common ground. I agree 100% with many of the comments and points that have been made today.

We have heard that the economy of the east of England is vibrant and dynamic. It is an engine of economic growth that contributes enormously to the Exchequer. It delivers on housing and jobs, and we have pioneering industries and manufacturing bases, and quality research and innovation throughout the region, with global connections through ports and airports. We have a world-class array of institutions ranging from Cambridge University to Essex University and many other educational establishments, as well as our traditional industries, in particular agriculture, which we have heard about.

Cumulative economic growth figures for 2010 to 2016 show that, in terms of gross value added, the east of England region hit 13%, behind only London at 22% and the west midlands at 15%. In 2016, our region's total GVA was £147 billion. The regional population of more than 6 million is also growing fast, at 8.9% for the decade to 2024—the fastest rate after London's.

In the county that I represent as the Member of Parliament for Witham in Essex, we have first-class airports at Stansted and Southend, and the London Gateway, Tilbury and Harwich ports, which all offer world-class global trading connections. They are keen to expand and grow, not only as we leave the European Union, but to diversify what they do to boost global trade and to secure future growth and job creation.

Since 2010, the number of enterprises in Essex has risen by 25%, from 52,000 to 64,000. The county now contributes around £40 billion in GVA to the UK economy. Essex is highly aspirational and ambitious, and that is shown by the jobs being created. We have heard plenty about infrastructure today, and I want to touch on how vital it is not only to economic development, but to economic prosperity and growth in the region—that cannot be taken for granted. We have heard about public expenditure in the region, which is £1,000 per capita less than the UK average, and our infrastructure has suffered severe historic underfunding. That has to change. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) touched on the issue of the A120. I agree with him 100%—we need that road investment to come fast.

On top of that is another awful conundrum. I have spent many debates in this Chamber talking about the A12, which we also heard about today, but the development scheme for that road is being delayed. Any delay costs money and jobs, while the congestion and extra business costs continue. The Government committed to widening the road between the Boreham and Marks Tey interchanges, but Colchester Borough Council caused delay by changing its housing and development proposals. That scheme needs to be actioned quickly, as does further widening up to the junctions north of Marks Tey.

We have touched on rail. The Great Eastern main line taskforce, which I chair, is all about a key infrastructure route that we absolutely need to invest in. A few years ago we proposed a package that could deliver £4.5 billion in economic benefits to the region, unlocking 50,000 new jobs. We need those urgent improvements.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): We all welcome the new trains on the region's railways, but they will clearly not be able to perform as well as they might unless we also get infrastructure investment in the track itself. Furthermore, does the right hon. Lady agree that one of the things holding back parts of our region is the extraordinary and anomalous cost of our rail tickets? Some parts of the region are some of the most expensive places anywhere in the country to get to by train per mile.

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Our constituents as rail passengers are paying some of the highest fares in the country, which also means that we are cross-subsidising other railway networks elsewhere, without reaping money that should be coming back into our own rail lines. That is exactly the purpose of the taskforce—to argue for that infrastructure investment.

Greater investment in digital and broadband has been touched on, so I will not cover that, but it is essential, in particular for connectivity in the rural economy. Instead, I shall end with some comments on fiscal measures, because the debate has come about as a pre-Budget discussion. We want to invest in key infrastructure to boost productivity and jobs, but the Government should also look at fiscal measures to support the economy not only in our region but throughout the economy. That means cutting the tax burden to unleash more job creation and to give entrepreneurs and investors more scope to invest.

More than 80% of my constituents work for SMEs. A worrying trend is politicians constantly looking to introduce tax rises to solve the country's problems. The Government need to use the tax system to encourage and nurture the entrepreneurial spirit, instead of punishing entrepreneurs. We need to be much more dynamic about addressing that issue, as well as looking at business rate reform and support for our high streets and town centres—frankly, we are seeing their death. In a county that has two airports, we need to look at slashing air passenger duty; it is a cost that affects passengers as well as businesses. We could develop many more flight routes as we trade our way around the world post-Brexit.

Fundamentally, when we get to the Budget and the comprehensive spending review, we must review the tax burden on businesses and do everything possible to ensure that we support enterprise and growth across the east of England.

5.10 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing a debate on the important subject of our industrial strategy and economic growth in the east of England. As a Member of Parliament for a north-eastern constituency, I am intimately familiar with the challenges of regional economic growth, although a premiership football club can make a significant difference.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Enjoy it while you can!

Chi Onwurah: Exactly. As we heard, the east of England contributes nearly 10% of the UK's gross value added and has experienced cumulative growth of 13% since 2010—slightly higher than average. It boasts enormous strengths, from world-leading science and innovation to agriculture and food production, as was highlighted by the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). With the right support, the region can continue to thrive and contribute to the future prosperity of our country, yet it appears that uncertainty, particularly over Brexit, is causing economic growth in the region to stall, with both business creation and GDP growth down since 2016. That effect is seen in the news that both Robinsons, which has been in the region for 90 years, and Colman's, which has produced mustard in Norwich for 160 years, are to leave the region, taking jobs with them.

Meeting the challenges of Brexit requires a positive industrial strategy. Unfortunately, what has been put forward so far does not cut the mustard, as Colman's might say. Let us look at just three aspects of the Government's industrial strategy. First, if the Government stick to their current policy of arbitrary migration targets with no concern for economic need, and if they press ahead with the Prime Minister's plans to cut what she calls low-skilled—earning less than £50,000 a year—immigration, businesses will have huge problems recruiting and retaining staff. That is true not only of agriculture, which employs tens of thousands in the east of England, but of research in the region's great universities and development in the Silicon Fen tech cluster around Cambridge worth £1.54 billion. The Government's industrial strategy does not try in any meaningful way to address the huge skills gap caused by the Government's Brexit position.

On skills, it would be easier to plan for future skills need if the Government offered any real devolution or economic decision-making powers to the region, such as the

“massive devolution of the skills agenda and funding”

that the all-party parliamentary group's Budget submission calls for. The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority does not have the powers or autonomy enjoyed by others in England, and there has been no visible effort from Government to consult on or put forward regional industrial strategies. I look forward to the Minister explaining how that will happen.

The Government's approach contrasts starkly with what Labour is doing: we are putting regional need first, with plans for a network of regional investment banks with real money behind them and decisions made locally. We will hold the first in a series of regional industrial strategy conferences in Newcastle next month, and another business conference in the north-west in January. The shadow Chancellor and the shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are touring the country holding regional economic conferences and roundtables.

Thirdly, as the Government are paying scant attention to the spread of growth within regions, the all-party parliamentary group's submission to the Budget argued that the key issue for the east of England is

“how to manage and spread Cambridge's growth to market towns and coastal communities in a strategic and effective manner.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) gave a detailed account of the economic strengths his city brings to the region. It boasts as many

private-sector research and development jobs as the whole of the north, which has 50 times more people. He also highlighted the key challenges of the unaffordability of housing and poor transport links, both of which deter talent and investment. Tory-led Governments have failed to address either of those issues in eight years, but Labour will build 1 million affordable homes over five years and transform our country's transport infrastructure with our £250 billion national transformation fund. According to the comments of the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) and the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, that transformation is much desired.

As shadow Science Minister, I am keen to see an industrial strategy that maintains current centres of excellence such as Cambridge. Our strategy would do that, but it should not end there. Last year, research from Sheffield Hallam University found the Government's pledges as part of their industrial strategy would have an impact on just 1% of the economy. By focusing on a small number of elite technologies and industries, the Government have failed to provide a vision for how workers in Clacton-on-Sea, Yarmouth or Lowestoft can share in the prosperity and growth generated by Cambridge. Labour is committed to building an innovation nation where prosperity, high productivity and good quality, high-skilled jobs are shared across the nation.

The east of England deserves a real industrial strategy that lays out a vision for a shared prosperity across the region: a high-wage, high-skill, high-productivity region that leads the way to a more prosperous post-Brexit future. That is what Labour offers and I hope the Minister will be bold and follow our lead.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Did you arrange the cabaret in the background?

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Especially for you.

Richard Harrington: I could not quite hear what they were saying, and it is probably better that I could not.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) not only on calling today's debate but on his contributions to many other debates I have taken part in. He has always contributed in a non-partisan and a very statesmanlike way, and today was absolutely no exception. I welcome the east of England APPG submission, which we have read in my Department. I hope that some of my points respond to its recommendations.

I have a bit of a strange relationship with the east of England, simply because my constituency, as mentioned by my hon. Friend, is in the east of England, but most people who live in it do not think they are in the east of England, simply because it is such a large area, as was mentioned by several hon. Members. It varies from what some people think is outer London—it is not quite, but there is a more urban type of London demographic—to areas that are geographically quite remote. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) mentioned—eloquently, as ever—that Essex is a huge county in its own right: it varies from outer London urban to quite remote country areas. It is difficult for any policy to take into consideration such a

[Richard Harrington]

large area, and there is no simple solution. I accept the point about transport and more modern infrastructures being critical to everything, and I will come to that. It is easy for the European Union and national Government to talk of regions—as we talk about metropolitan areas—as being fairly homogenous.

I want to reiterate the Government's commitment to promoting growth in the east of England. Any Minister would say that, and I would certainly say that to my constituents in the east of England. But the facts speak for themselves. The region is growing fast. It has seen continued growth in jobs and is one of only three regions that is a net contributor to the UK. Those are exactly the sorts of strengths the country needs to build on in securing a prosperous economic future for the UK as a whole.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) said, the region has not always pushed its case well, probably because of its large area and the different organisations in it. The all-party group's report clearly reverses that, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney said, it is the beginning of a process, not a one-off report—the Government certainly do not treat it as such.

Hon. Members highlighted many of the strengths of the east of England. I will not repeat the comprehensive list, but there are world-famous brands in Cambridge, which the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) mentioned, as there are in Milton Keynes, Hertfordshire, the coastal region and so on. However, I agree with him that the future is not guaranteed, which is why we have an industrial strategy. The shadow Minister was really quite scathing about that strategy—I hope I have time to come on to that. Governments have industrial strategies and policies because nothing in the economy is guaranteed. She mentioned the effects of our leaving the European Union. None of us knows what they will be, but whatever happens while we are in the European Union or out of it, nothing is guaranteed. It is important that the Government realise the importance of the east of England to the economy.

The shadow Minister will disagree, but since 2010 the Government have made good progress on supporting businesses and people in the east of England. Unemployment has halved, the number of small businesses has increased by more than 100,000 and, although good points were made about apprenticeships, 350,000 people have started them in the area.

The hon. Member for Cambridge mentioned the CPIER report. I welcome that and look forward to seeing how it is reflected in the local industrial strategy. He also mentioned land value capture. The Treasury and I look forward to receiving further developed proposals on land value capture in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough from the Mayor in due course. We have yet to see the full effect of Mayors, but I am positive about them and pleased that we have them.

The east of England is at the forefront of industrial strategy. We have local enterprise partnerships and, as I said, mayoral combined authorities developing and implementing industrial strategies. We are at the beginning of that road, but the east of England is in good shape. The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough combined authority and the South East Midlands LEP have been identified

as trailblazer areas as part of the Oxford to Cambridge arc. Those pilot areas have made good progress and are on track to publish their strategies in March next year, with the rest of the region publishing theirs in 2020.

I reject much of what the shadow Minister said—not because she has a premier league football team in her constituency. I have made rather unpleasant comments about that, which I would like to withdraw, and I apologise for any offence caused. I am sure Newcastle United will remain in the premier league at least for this season, if not beyond. If that does not happen, at least she can blame their relegation on our leaving the European Union, since she seems to blame that for everything else.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for the initial generosity of his remarks about Newcastle United. Should they leave the premier league, we will be clear that the fault lies not with Brexit but with the club's ownership. We hope his Government do something to address that.

Richard Harrington: I think the hon. Lady just called for the nationalisation of Newcastle United football club. Another few billion for the national debt—it really doesn't matter, does it? We have many billions more.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. Minister, we need to focus on the east of England, not the ownership of Newcastle United.

Richard Harrington: Governments have learned the importance of giving local areas control of local growth. I have seen for myself that we have to be careful about that. I studied economics A-level and, being from Leeds, we went to Newcastle to visit the National Economic Development Council there. Those bodies, which were known as “Neddys”, showed that localisation in itself is not enough. That was not a very effective system, but at least it was an attempt to regionalise. We have developed significantly beyond that as a society, which means we do not just send civil servants from London to work in Newcastle and say that is regional.

I hope we will see the benefit of devolution, with LEPs, Mayors and everything else. [Interruption.] I am cantering because I have only five minutes—I cannot really take any more questions about that. The Cambridge and Peterborough devolution deal builds on the significant commitments made to the east through previous city deals. I am very optimistic about the greater Cambridge city deal. It is delivering, and I really think we will see a lot more from it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich made many extremely helpful points. The Government are committed to dealing with local skills shortages, such as those in agriculture, through the establishment of skills advisory panels, which are being rolled out to all parts of eastern England and will help to ensure that training matches the needs of local businesses. That cannot be ignored, and I believe our policy will help to achieve it.

The east of England benefits from more than £700 million of local growth funding through growth deals, and the region's business-led local enterprise partnerships determine how that funding is spent. I have seen different kinds of LEPs, but the range of products being delivered in this case—the aviation academy

in Norwich, the STEM innovation campus at Stansted airport and the Watford health campus scheme in my constituency, for example—will lead to a more skilled workforce and are very important for the east.

Infrastructure was mentioned by many speakers, in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham and my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, who stressed the importance of the A12. That is why, in addition to the devolution city deals I mentioned, we have invested £1.5 billion to upgrade the A14 between Cambridge and Huntingdon, which is an important route, and £151 million in new river crossings. Those are just examples. The transforming cities fund will really help Cambridge and Peterborough, which have already received £74 million. I could go on, but time does not allow.

The Government are committed to working with local partners. Many Members mentioned transport, which is absolutely important. I intend to send a summary of the points they made about particular roads to the Department for Transport. I know Members have done that, but I feel it is my job—I am not in that Department, but I represent the Government—to ensure that those points hit home.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) spoke so well about no community being left behind. He feels that his community and others, particularly in coastal areas, have been neglected by the system. He stressed the importance of infrastructure in such areas. I will not forget the points he made about his experience on Tendring Council, and I am happy to chat with him separately about that.

We have had a wide-ranging debate in which we did not have time to consider some of the necessary detail. However, the east of England all-party group has set out a model for how such groups can focus their lobbying of the Government on specific points. I am happy to meet formally with the all-party group or with individual Members. I do not mean only those on the Conservative Benches, as I hope the hon. Member for Cambridge knows. These are important points, and I would like to see the successful implementation of many of the policies mentioned in the APPG's report.

5.29 pm

Peter Aldous: We have had a wide-ranging debate, and I do not have time to highlight colleagues' excellent contributions. Someone who looks at the east of England might say, "Everything looks reasonably okay there. It's perfectly satisfactory. Let's rumble on." But do we want to be just rumbling on, second best? No, we do not. To use another football analogy, we want to be in the premier league. We want to be in the top four. We want to be not just playing in Europe every year but winning World cups. That is what this work is about and what we are putting the framework down for. This is a new way of doing things. This is a start—let's get going.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered promoting economic growth in the East of England.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 10 October 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Competitiveness Council

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

DAY ONE

The first day of the Competitiveness Council (Internal Market and Industry) took place on 27 September 2018.

The UK was represented by Katrina Williams, Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU. The legislative and non-legislative “A” items were adopted; the UK abstained on a decision not to oppose the adoption of amendments to the regulation on vehicle type approvals, and on the adoption of European seabass quotas.

Regional policy and competitiveness

The routine “competitiveness check-up” on day one focused on the role that greater convergence in productivity within member states has to play in boosting the EU’s competitiveness. The UK joined others in support of so-called “smart specialisation” strategies and their emphasis on innovation and comparative advantage. Some member states welcomed the Commission’s intention to incorporate a regional element into the European semester. Over lunch, Ministers also discussed the next multi-annual financial framework in the context of competitiveness.

Artificial intelligence

The presidency identified priority areas for the EU on artificial intelligence (AI) relating to the uptake of technology, ethics and liability, and digital skills. The Commission confirmed its intention to publish an action plan by the end of the 2018 and recalled increased investment in AI proposed as part of the Horizon Europe and Digital Europe programmes.

An external speaker, Mr Michael Hirschbrich, urged member states to cultivate a new, positive “data culture” in Europe as a prerequisite for the EU to profit from the revolution in AI and machine learning. Germany felt this would be a challenge for the EU and would require public trust. Several delegations cautioned against over-regulating in this area and others argued that effective communication and realising the potential of new technologies in the delivery of public services would help to raise public trust and awareness.

The UK outlined its investment plans for AI, its inclusive approach to digital skills, work to establish an independent centre for data ethics and innovation, and noted the importance of regulatory co-operation in this area.

Single market

Under any other business, the Commission called for the full implementation of the geoblocking regulation and recalled the aims of a recent communication on the retail sector.

The Czech Republic and Latvia summarised the conclusions of events held this year to mark 25 years of the single market. Member states urged the Commission to produce a comprehensive and evidence-based assessment of the remaining barriers to trade, particularly in the area of services.

DAY TWO

Day two of the Competitiveness Council (Internal Market, Industry, Research and Space) took place on 28 September in Brussels. I represented the UK during the morning and lunch sessions of the Council. Katrina Williams, Deputy Permanent Representative of the UK’s Permanent Representation in Brussels took the UK’s seat during the afternoon session.

Progress report and policy debate on the Horizon Europe Package: Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2021-2027

The Council started with a policy debate on the Horizon Europe Package: Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2021-2027. The UK called for excellence to remain the key criterion for awarding Horizon Europe funding. The UK also suggested that space should become a separate cluster outside of “digital and industry”, and that the secure society cluster should be divided into two distinct clusters; one for “security” elements and one for “social sciences and humanities” elements. The UK also supported the presidency’s approach to the debate surrounding the legal base of the Horizon Europe Specific Programme, agreeing that the aim should be to reach a timely conclusion on the Horizon package. *Lunch debate on the Horizon Europe package—exchange of views with EP rapporteurs*

During the lunch debate the Council had an exchange of views with EP rapporteurs Dan Nica and Christian Ehler. The UK made an intervention specifying UK’s priority areas for amendments and encouraging debate amongst MEPs at the first exchange of views on October 8. *Strategic planning process in relation to the Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2021-2027*

The Council concluded with a policy debate on the strategic planning process in relation to the Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2021-2027. The UK made an intervention seeking to help find consensus in Council on the process and status of the plan, agreeing that broad areas for missions and partnerships should be set out in the specific programme and suggesting that the process for selecting specific missions and partnerships should also be included. The UK agreed that more detailed strategic content should be determined at a later date.

[HCWS980]

Energy Policy

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government remain committed to putting in place all the necessary measures to ensure that the UK can operate as an independent and responsible nuclear state upon the UK’s withdrawal from Euratom.

We remain on track to have all the international agreements that the UK requires to ensure uninterrupted co-operation and trade in the civil nuclear sector ready for the end of March 2019. Significant progress in this

area is marked by the signing of a new bilateral nuclear co-operation agreement (NCA) with Australia on 21 August. This is the second NCA to be signed with a priority third country in preparation for the UK's withdrawal from Euratom, following the new bilateral agreement with the United States signed on 4 May.

The Government have completed their consultation on the draft nuclear safeguards regulations which set out the detail of a new domestic civil nuclear safeguards regime. We are analysing responses to the consultation and will publish a formal response to the consultation in the autumn. We expect to lay draft regulations before Parliament by the end of this year. The regulations, to be made under powers in the Energy Act 2013 and Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018, will enable a domestic nuclear safeguards regime to be established before the end of March 2019.

In July, we set out details of our ambition to seek a close association with Euratom—specifically, through the negotiation of a nuclear co-operation agreement (NCA) between Euratom and the UK that is more comprehensive and broader than any existing agreement between Euratom and a third country.

Simultaneously, we are ensuring that the necessary legislation is ready, and the civil nuclear industry is prepared for all potential scenarios, including the unlikely event that the UK leaves the EU and Euratom at the end of March 2019 without an agreement (a no-deal scenario). We have laid a number of statutory instruments before Parliament on Euratom-related issues and have published a technical notice on civil nuclear regulation to support businesses and other interested parties in making informed plans and preparations for a no-deal scenario.

Today I will be depositing a report in the Libraries of both Houses that sets out further details on the overall progress on the Government's implementation of their Euratom exit strategy, including EU negotiations, domestic operational readiness, legislation and international agreements. This report is being laid in accordance with section 3(4) of the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018 and follows two voluntary quarterly updates to Parliament.

The initial commitment to quarterly reporting on a voluntary basis was set out in my written ministerial statement of 11 January 2018, *Official Report*, column 9WS. Section 3(4) of the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018 provides for four statutory quarterly reporting periods in respect of which the Secretary of State must lay a report before Parliament. This is the first such report and covers the three-month reporting period from 26 June until 26 September. I plan to lay the next report on Euratom exit progress in January 2019.

[HCWS983]

DEFENCE

Future Accommodation Model

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It was previously announced that the future accommodation model (FAM) was being developed with the intention of changing the way in which we provide accommodation to service personnel to ensure that a career in the armed forces can be balanced better with family life. We are committed to

making the changes necessary to enable our armed forces to work flexibly, reflecting the realities of modern life and to make a new accommodation offer to help more service personnel live in private accommodation and meet their aspirations for home ownership.

This commitment is being delivered through the FAM which aims to design and deliver a new accommodation model that improves and modernises aspects of the accommodation offer for service personnel and better meets the enduring operational and financial needs of the Department.

We had hoped to run a pilot towards the end of this year and remain committed to this policy principle, but the pilot scheme will now take place in 2019. This will allow the Ministry of Defence additional time to fully evaluate the scope of the pilot and better understand its impact on service personnel, with a view to delivering the most effective model. The pilot, in 2019, will also allow us to continue to work closely with broader departmental and cross-Whitehall initiatives to support service personnel accommodation.

We value the input we have had from service personnel, frontline commands and the families federations, and look forward to continuing to work with them on the implementation of FAM in the future. I will update the House in due course.

[HCWS982]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

British Board of Film Classification: Contingent Liability

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): I am today laying a departmental minute to advise that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has received approval from Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT) to recognise a new contingent liability which will come into effect when age verification powers under part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017 enter force.

The contingent liability will provide indemnity to the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) against legal proceedings brought against the BBFC in its role as the age verification regulator for online pornography.

As Members know, the Digital Economy Act introduces the requirement for commercial providers of online pornography to have robust age verification controls to protect children and young people under 18 from exposure to online pornography. As the designated age verification regulator, the BBFC will have extensive powers to take enforcement action against non-compliant sites. The BBFC can issue civil proceedings, give notice to payment-service providers or ancillary service providers, or direct internet service providers to block access to websites where a provider of online pornography remains non-compliant.

The BBFC expects a high level of voluntary compliance by providers of online pornography. To encourage compliance, the BBFC has engaged with industry and charities and undertaken a public consultation on its regulatory approach. Furthermore, the BBFC will ensure

that it takes a proportionate approach to enforcement and will maintain arrangements for an appeals process to be overseen by an independent appeals body. This will help reduce the risk of potential legal action against the BBFC.

However, despite the effective work with industry, charities and the public to promote and encourage compliance, this is a new law and there nevertheless remains a risk that the BBFC will be exposed to legal challenge on the basis of decisions taken as the age verification regulator or on grounds of principle from those opposed to the policy.

As this is a new policy, it is not possible to quantify accurately the value of such risks. The Government estimate a realistic risk range to be between £1 million and £10 million in the first year, based on likely number and scale of legal challenges. The BBFC investigated options to procure commercial insurance but failed to do so given difficulties in accurately determining the size of potential risks. The Government therefore will ensure that the BBFC is protected against any legal action brought against the BBFC as a result of carrying out duties as the age verification regulator.

The contingent liability is required to be in place for the duration of the period the BBFC remains the age verification regulator. However, we expect the likelihood of the contingent liability being called upon to diminish over time as the regime settles in and relevant industries become accustomed to it. If the liability is called upon, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure.

It is usual to allow a period of 14 sitting days prior to accepting a contingent liability, to provide Members of Parliament an opportunity to raise any objections.

[HCWS986]

EDUCATION

Government Asset Sale

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): Today, I can confirm that the Government are announcing their intention to proceed with the second sale from the “plan 1” (i.e. pre-2012) English student loan book. The sale covers loans issued by English local authorities only under the previous (pre-2012) system, specifically those which entered repayment between 2007 and 2009, with a total face value of around £3.9 billion. This is the second sale of the Income Contingent Repayment (ICR) loan book, and it is proceeding on the basis that there is a reasonable prospect of achieving value for money. It will only complete subject to market conditions and a final value for money assessment.

As the Government have previously made clear, the position of all graduates, including those whose loans are part of a sale, will not change as a result of the sale. A sale will not alter the mechanisms and terms of repayment and sold loans will continue to be serviced by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Student Loans Company (SLC) on the same basis as equivalent unsold loans. These protections mean that

purchasers will have no right to change any of the current loan arrangements or to directly contact borrowers. Government have no plans to change, or to consider changing, the terms of pre-2012 loans.

The sale terms are expected to include a number of warranties and indemnities for sale arrangers and investors, which give rise to contingent liabilities for Government. In this case, although there is specific statutory authority for the liability under the Sale of Student Loans Act 2008, I believe it is appropriate to notify Parliament before incurring these liabilities. As a matter of record I have placed a departmental minute in the Libraries of both Houses describing the contingent liabilities that the Department for Education will hold on behalf of Government as a result of this second sale of the pre-2012 English student loan book. The maximum contingent liability against the Department for Education is unquantifiable and is expected to be in place for as long as there are outstanding securities.

The House will also be informed if and when a sale is completed.

[HCWS979]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Deportation with Assurances Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): In November 2013, the then Home Secretary asked David Anderson QC to conduct a review of the framework of the UK’s Deportation with Assurances (DWA) policy, and to make recommendations on how the policy might be strengthened or improved, with particular emphasis on its legal aspects. My predecessor published Mr Anderson’s report and made copies available in the vote office on 20 July 2017.

On announcing Mr Anderson’s report to this House, the then Home Secretary stated that the Government would respond through a Command Paper. I am pleased to be publishing this Command Paper today (Cm 9712). Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS984]

Report of the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Max Hill QC, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, has prepared a report on the operation in 2017 of the Terrorism Act 2000, the Terrorism Act 2006, the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011, and The Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010.

In accordance with section 36(5) of the Terrorism Act 2006, I am today laying this report before the House, and copies will be available in the Vote Office. It will also be published at: www.gov.uk.

I am grateful to Mr Hill for his report. I will carefully consider its contents and the recommendations he makes, and will respond formally in due course.

[HCWS985]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ebola Outbreak in the DRC

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): The current outbreak of Ebola was declared in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), on 1 August. Following my written ministerial statement of 13 September, *Official Report*, column 38WS, I am updating the House on how the UK Government are continuing to support the response in DRC, and preparedness in neighbouring countries.

DRC outbreak

Since my last update, the number of confirmed Ebola cases in this outbreak has continued to rise, and stood at 146 on 7 October. The geographic coverage has also widened, with confirmed cases near the Ugandan border on Lake Albert. On 29 September, the World Health Organisation (WHO) raised the risk of national and regional spread of the outbreak from “high” to “very high”. The DRC Government, which are leading the response with the support of WHO, are preparing an extended response plan which will extend key activities for several months longer. As well as the response in the affected area, activities are also planned to support Ebola preparedness in other provinces across DRC.

One of the key challenges is insecurity. Attacks by armed groups in the affected area have disrupted the response and remain a major risk. This instability, as well as the area’s significant commercial links with neighbouring countries, means that there is a large amount of cross-border movement by both commercial travellers and refugees. WHO has developed a regional plan to help neighbouring countries at risk from Ebola to prepare for any potential cases.

UK response

My Department is ready to respond quickly and effectively to all kinds of sudden onset emergencies. That is why we maintain a central crisis reserve. In 2018-19, I have approved up to £20 million from this reserve to contribute to Ebola responses in the affected region. All donors have been asked not to announce figures for specific activities, to avoid putting implementing partners at risk from criminal elements. I hope the House will respect the need for discretion about this.

Through the crisis reserve, the UK Government provided early funding to the existing outbreak response, and to the WHO regional preparedness plan for at-risk countries bordering DRC. We will also be funding key UN posts in these countries to ensure they are prepared to deal with cases of Ebola.

In view of recent developments, we have increased our support, through WHO, for the response and preparedness activities in DRC and neighbouring countries. This funding will support a range of activities including surveillance, vaccinations, infection prevention and control, community engagement and safe and dignified burials.

To help people affected by, or at risk from, Ebola is the right thing to do. It is also in our national interest to find ways of building resilience to such deadly diseases. Therefore I stand ready to approve additional support, if required.

The UK Government are also drawing on all available scientific data about the latest outbreak. At present, it is not possible to make long-term projections about the

course of the epidemic with any certainty but it is reasonable to assume that the outbreak will continue into 2019. We will continue to liaise closely with WHO and others to ensure that the available scientific evidence is reflected in scenario planning.

The current response is deploying an experimental vaccine to contacts of infected people and frontline health workers. This vaccine was developed with support from UK Aid following the west Africa Ebola epidemic. In DRC, over 14,000 people—over 5,000 of whom are health workers—have been vaccinated during this outbreak so far. The UK is also supporting training in preparation for clinical trials of several of the new therapeutic drugs for Ebola.

Public Health England assesses the risk of this outbreak to the UK as negligible to very low. They will continue to monitor and assess the outbreak closely. The UK Government remain at full readiness to respond should that risk change.

[HCWS981]

JUSTICE

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I will attend the Justice and Home Affairs Council for Justice Day on Thursday 11 October.

Following the partial general approach already agreed at Council in June on titles III, IV and V of the proposed directive on restructuring and insolvency (discharge from insolvency, efficiency of procedures and data collection requirements), work has focused on the remaining titles I, II and VI. These cover, subject matter and scope, measures on preventive restructuring frameworks and final provisions. In the light of the progress made, the Council will discuss a general approach on the restructuring directive. The UK supports the aims of the directive to progress the objectives of the Commission’s capital markets union action plan, and will support the general approach.

The Council will discuss the proposed regulation relating to improving law enforcement access to data held by communication service providers (E-Evidence). There will be a policy debate on the issue of whether a member state should be notified when a production or preservation order is issued to a service provider based in their territory or where the person whose data is sought is based in their territory. The debate will focus on the regulation, which the UK is not participating in.

There will be an any other business item on sale of goods.

There will be a presentation by the director of the EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency (Michael O’Flaherty) following on from the publication of the FRA’s annual report on the fundamental rights situation in the EU, and in the light of the event the FRA held across a wide range of fundamental rights topics last month (25 to 27 September). The Council will also be asked to discuss, and potentially adopt, Council conclusions on the EU’s latest annual report on the application of the charter of fundamental rights.

There will also be a discussion on free and fair elections (including freedom from personal data misuse and cyber incidents), focusing on the upcoming European

Parliament elections. The UK's exit from the EU will mean that we will not be taking part in future European parliamentary elections.

There will be a lunchtime discussion covering EU financing for justice. The UK does not participate in the current justice programme (2014-20) and will be a third country when the next justice programme and the other programmes likely to be discussed enter into force. The UK will consider its participation as a third country in due course.

The Commission will provide an update on the planned preparatory steps on the legal and organisational measures to be taken to make the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) operational. The UK does not participate in the EPPO.

Ministers will exchange views on ways to reinforce judicial co-operation in criminal justice through mutual recognition tools, including the European arrest warrant and European investigation order. The UK values our co-operation under these tools and will highlight our commitment to the principle of mutual recognition and the importance of close operational working between member states to ensure that they function efficiently.

The Home Secretary will attend the JHA Council for Interior Day on 12 October.

There will be a policy debate on the proposed regulation to amend the European border and coast guard regulation which aims to reinforce the EU's integrated border management strategy and further protect the external borders by providing the European Border and Coast Guard Agency with a standing corps of 10,000 staff

with executive powers, their own equipment and the ability to act in third countries. This is a Schengen building measure which the UK does not participate in.

The Council will discuss the proposed recast of the EU returns directive. The UK chose not to participate in the current version of this directive. The UK will need to decide whether to participate in this recast.

The Council will discuss developments under the comprehensive approach on migration. The presidency will focus on the common European asylum system, co-operation with north African countries on a range of migration issues including search and rescue disembarkations, and work to tackle organised immigration crime. The UK supports work to strengthen the EU's external borders and to intensify relationships with key third countries in order to break smuggling networks and ensure that protection is given to those most in need.

The Council will discuss proposed EU JHA funding programmes for the next (2021-27) multiannual financial framework. These programmes will commence after the UK's exit from the EU and the end of the envisaged implementation period. The UK will not be participating in any future programmes as a member state. The UK will consider options to participate as a third country on a case-by-case basis where there is benefit to the UK.

There will be further debate on the reform of the common European asylum system, including the issues of solidarity, responsibility and relocation in the context of the Dublin IV proposal, in which the UK is not participating.

[HCWS987]

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