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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 16 October 2018

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Business Growth in Scotland

1. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect on business growth in Scotland of the UK leaving the EU internal market. [907070]

17. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect on business growth in Scotland of the UK leaving the EU internal market. [907087]

23. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect on business growth in Scotland of the UK leaving the EU internal market. [907094]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Reaching a good agreement with the European Union will have a positive effect on business growth in Scotland and in every other part of the United Kingdom. In Green GB Week, it is important to highlight the huge clean growth opportunities in Scotland in a sector that supports tens of thousands of jobs and brings £11 billion into Scotland's economy.

Peter Grant: Yesterday, AstraZeneca joined a long line of major UK employers that have put investment plans on hold because of Brexit uncertainty. The Governor of the Bank of England has indicated that, even before we leave, Brexit has already cost £900 per UK household. Does the Secretary of State agree with the Governor's estimate? If he does not, what is his estimate of what Brexit has cost us to date?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman's point underlines why it is important that we secure a positive deal, and the implication of that analysis is that if we do secure that deal, as I hope and expect that we will, there will be a substantial upside for the economy. The hon. Gentleman is interested in the negotiations because they provide us with access to European markets, but it is a matter of record that the Scottish National party wants to take Scotland out of the internal market of the United

Kingdom by dint of leaving the rest of the UK, with which Scotland does four times as much trade as it does with the rest of the EU, so I would call for a bit of consistency from the hon. Gentleman.

Patrick Grady: This is just nonsense. Does the Secretary of State not accept that, by definition, the best possible relationship with the European Union has to be membership and therefore that leaving the single market and ending the freedom of movement of goods, services and people will inevitably be bad for business? Can he offer any reassurances at all to the 134,000 Scottish workers whose jobs the Fraser of Allander Institute estimates are reliant on trade with the EU?

Greg Clark: The proposals have been warmly welcomed by businesses across the country, including in Scotland, because they would allow us to continue what are successful trading arrangements without frictions.

Gavin Newlands: In its Brexit risk assessment, Airbus said that if the UK left the EU without a deal, that "would lead to severe disruption and interruption of UK production" and

"would force Airbus to reconsider its investments in the UK, and its long-term footprint in the country".

What steps is the Secretary of State, along with the wholly united Cabinet, taking to ensure that more firms do not depart Brexit Britain?

Greg Clark: We need to make sure that we have a negotiated deal along the lines of the proposals made in the White Paper that have been welcomed by the manufacturing industry in all parts of the UK.

22. [907093] **Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): One of the effects of leaving the European Union is that Scottish businesses will not have access to patient capital from the European Investment Bank, so will my right hon. Friend take the time to review the industry panel's response to the patient capital review, which highlights the need for a patient capital investment vehicle? With only a few changes, the British Business Bank could become such a vehicle.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right. Part of the industrial strategy is about making more patient capital available in Scotland and all across the UK for growing businesses, of which he has many in his constituency.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that our membership of the internal energy market is not necessarily conditional on our membership of the wider single market? Does he agree that we would be better off were we to remain within the internal energy market, with all the energy security advantages that that brings?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend anticipates some negotiations that will need to take place on our future economic partnership. Suffice it to say, however, that we have a mutual interest in the interconnection between the UK and the continent, and it is strongly in the interests of consumers in this country and on the continent that the ability to trade over those interconnectors should continue.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend made any assessment of the impact on business growth in Scotland if it left the UK's internal market?

Greg Clark: It would be disastrous. The value of exports from Scotland to the rest of the UK is £45.8 billion, compared with around £12.5 billion to the rest of the EU, so anyone who, like me, is interested in being able to trade without frictions should apply their own analysis to their own policy of pulling out of the UK.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Scotland's financial sector has described the prospect of a no deal Brexit as "horrific". Does the Secretary of State agree that to protect businesses and to stay in the single market and the customs union the resignations of the Secretary of State for Scotland and Ruth Davidson are a price well worth paying?

Greg Clark: I hope that the hon. Gentleman supports the Government's determination to ensure that the integrity of the whole United Kingdom is guaranteed by the negotiation. He suggests that the consequences of no deal would be negative; of course they would. That is why we are doing everything we can, with increasing confidence, to secure a positive deal with the rest of the European Union. I hope he will support that.

Electrical Product Recall

2. **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the electrical product recall regime. [907071]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): In March, we published the first Government-backed code of practice on recalls, and we have trained almost 300 trading standards professionals on its use. The Office for Product Safety and Standards is working with UK manufacturers and importers to ensure that their recall plans and processes are adequate.

Carolyn Harris: Electrical Safety First tells me that the successful product recall rate for electrical goods is abysmally low, so why are the Government not doing more with platforms such as Amazon and eBay, which hold considerable consumer information, to find a solution to this problem?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I understand her particular interest in this area. She is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on home electrical safety, which I look forward to meeting at the end of the month. With particular regard to online traders, we need to ensure consumer confidence. Amazon and eBay already have primary authority partnerships with trading standards. They are advised by trading standards on the regulations and work with them to make sure that goods are removed as quickly as possible.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Those who do not wish us to leave the European Union claim that standards will fall, but will the Minister confirm that enhancing the UK's product safety regime

is in the industrial strategy, to give consumers in the UK and around the world ultimate confidence in the quality and safety of UK-manufactured goods in the future?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I absolutely agree. Consumer product safety is a key part of our industrial strategy. The Government are determined to maintain a strong safety regime, and consumers can be confident that consumer protections already based in EU law will be retained. We want robust systems that identify unsafe products, share information and make sure that the checks at our borders and ports are right.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am glad that the Government now take product recall seriously. They certainly did not in the case of the 5 million Whirlpool tumble dryers, many of which are still in our constituents' homes. More catch fire every week, destroying peoples' properties and putting their lives at risk. What will the Minister do about those?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question; he raises an extremely important point. The Office for Product Safety and Standards is already reviewing Whirlpool's recall programme. Some 1.7 million dryers have been replaced or maintained under the programme. We are keeping it under review, and we will report once that review has taken place.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to her new role. I also welcome the Government's recent steps to improve the recall process. However, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said, tumble dryers continue to be a leading cause of devastating house fires, as happened to my constituent in Long Eaton just last week. Will my hon. Friend look at what more can be done to improve the recall process, and more importantly, what more can be done to improve the rights of consumers who have purchased faulty products?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and express my condolences to her constituent over that horrific incident.

I assure my hon. Friend that the new Office for Product Safety and Standards takes this issue seriously. We are working with UK manufacturers on the recall process; we are keeping it under review. We want to make sure that the UK is recognised for having high standards and consumer protections, and my Department will continue to work on that.

Sainsbury's and Asda: Merger

3. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): Whether he has made an assessment of the effect of the proposed merger of Sainsbury's and Asda on the (a) pay, (b) conditions and (c) job security of the employees of those companies. [907072]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Sainsbury's has confirmed that there are no planned store closures as a result of the merger. The proposed merger of Sainsbury's and Asda remains conditional on clearance by the Competition

and Markets Authority. I wrote to the CMA on the issue in May, and the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) and I had a meeting with the chief executive of Sainsbury's yesterday.

Mohammad Yasin: It is right that the concerns of the workers are heard during the Asda-Sainsbury's merger, so does the Secretary of State agree that there is a pressing need for the Competition and Markets Authority to hear the worker's voice and take into account the impact of any merger or takeover on the workforce, not just on the competition?

Greg Clark: It is true that the directors of the company have an obligation to have regard to the workforce. The CMA is independent of the Government, as the hon. Gentleman knows. It will make its report and assessment, and I am sure that it will look at all the companies' responsibilities.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): In taking forward this merger, will the Secretary of State urge Sainsbury's to reaffirm its commitment to local suburban high streets, not least in New Barnet, where Sainsbury's is a key store?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. Our supermarkets make an important contribution to our high streets, as do independent stores, and we want that to continue in the future. Sainsbury's plays an important role on the high street.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Competition and Markets Authority says that it will not let the merger go ahead if any concerns that it has around higher prices or worse quality of service for shoppers are not fully dealt with. What assurances will the Secretary of State give that the same rigorous tests are being applied regarding the employment rights of employees at both companies, and will he commit to a meeting with the recognised trade unions?

Greg Clark: I am always very happy to meet the trade unions. As I have said, I met the chief executive of Sainsbury's yesterday. The company intends to run the Asda and Sainsbury's businesses separately. It does not propose store closures or changes to the terms and conditions of the separate employees.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In the town of Kettering, there is a large Sainsbury's and a large Asda, but local shoppers and supermarket employees are asking what guarantee there is that both supermarkets will still exist in two or three years' time.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. That is why the CMA is conducting its investigation, and it has powers to prevent the loss of competition if it is in prospect.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister further outline what effect this merger will have on my constituents, who may see higher prices and less competition as a result of further limitation of the already smaller

choice of supermarkets than on the mainland? Has the Department fully taken the likes of Northern Ireland and rural areas into consideration?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important question. The essence of the CMA investigation is to see whether there could be—not just nationally, but in particular places—any diminution of competition. If the CMA thinks that that is in prospect, it has the powers to block the merger or to place conditions on it, such as requiring the sale of businesses to a competitor.

Energy Prices

4. John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle rising energy prices. [907073]

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): My hon. Friend's constituents are keen to invest in the energy transition, as well as to ensure that their bills do not go up. Earlier this year, we brought forward the price cap Bill, which received strong cross-party support, and we are looking forward to those provisions coming into place by the end of the year. We estimate that my hon. Friend's constituents on the most expensive tariffs will save around £120. All the other steps that we are taking, including the roll-out of smart meters, the warm home discount, the energy company obligation—which is now focused on the most fuel-poor households—and our work with Citizens Advice and the Energy Saving Trust are helping to keep bills down.

John Stevenson: I thank the Minister for that positive response. Given that we as a society want carbon-free energy but also low energy costs, does she agree that requiring all newly built residential properties to incorporate solar panels would be a step in the right direction, and will she ask her Department to consider that initiative?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is quite right that solar PV has an important role to play in the energy system. It might be ideal on some existing or new build homes. What I hate to see is the tokenistic solar panel that some developers pop up on roofs. Obviously, there may well be more effective and expansive measures to reduce running costs and cut emissions. When the Prime Minister launched her buildings mission as part of the industrial strategy earlier this year, she targeted the measure of overall energy. We want to halve the energy consumption of all new buildings by 2030 and we are working closely with the construction sector to deliver that goal.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): As Ministers know, the development corporation site in Redcar is critical to the economic development of the Tees valley, and to get international industrial investment, we need affordable energy supplies. Will Ministers review the current arbitrary limit of 100 MW on the amount of electricity that can be supplied by private wire networks so that we can bring in jobs and investment, and fulfil our potential?

Claire Perry: As always, I commend the hon. Lady and her colleagues for doing such an amazing job, cross-party, in promoting the next iteration of Teesside as the centre of clean economic growth. I know that the Secretary of State has met the company. We are aware of the issues. We will continue to review this, but we will

also continue to review the chance to have a low-carbon industrial cluster, which is the way to get the new investment and get the carbon down in the area she is so proud to represent.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The price comparisons available to the public are not transparent and often unintelligible. Can the system be made easier?

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend is always seeking advice on how he can cut his energy bills. I am delighted to see that, particularly as it is Green GB Week. There are lots of opportunities on the website to see what more he could do. The price comparison websites are getting better. One of the challenges is that they do not always show consumers who are in receipt of a warm home discount whether they might lose that. That point was raised by the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who chairs the BEIS Committee, and we are working with it. We want that decision to be as transparent as possible. As somebody who has switched twice, both times using a price comparison website, I can tell my right hon. Friend that it is actually a much simpler process than it used to be.

Mr Speaker: I was rather hoping that the right hon. Gentleman would be minded to consult the meerkat.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will be aware that wholesale prices of gas and electricity have risen significantly in the past year. What protections will she be ensuring for people on lower incomes, from poorer families, or who are older citizens and may be worried about the winter, particularly those who may still be using prepayment, pay-as-you-go meters?

Claire Perry: It is quite right to note that the wholesale price determines the overall energy price, and of course it goes up and down. That is why the price cap Bill that we have all supported introduces a cap, not a freeze. I am sure that the hon. Lady is as pleased as I was to welcome the roll-out of the protection for customers on prepayment meters. That cap is already in place. It is already saving those households tens to hundreds of pounds a year. Indeed, the extension of the cap to the vulnerable consumers group is required by the CMA report. I would like to see these protections continue. Of course, all customers who are on rip-off tariffs will benefit when the price cap Bill we all worked so hard for comes into effect this year.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Winter is almost upon us, yet those suffering most from fuel poverty in the highlands are still paying higher electricity charges than those anywhere else in the UK, despite living in a centre of energy production. When will the Minister act to end this electricity unit price discrimination, which is estimated to add £400 a year to the already high cost of rural living?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman raises a point that is also often raised by MPs who represent other areas, such as the peninsula of Cornwall and Devon. There has always been a convention that because it costs more

to deliver energy through conventional structures to those furthest parts of the UK, they bear a higher tariff. There is work ongoing, supported through BEIS innovation funding, to encourage self-generation and self-storage in many of the most remote communities—perhaps some of the things we have seen around the Orkneys with the hydrogen bus. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. That is why the price cap Bill is so valuable and should be supported by all parties—because it caps energy prices for everyone in the UK.

Economic Growth and Emissions

5. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What steps he is taking to support economic growth while decreasing emissions. [907074]

19. **Mr Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to support economic growth while decreasing emissions. [907090]

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) will know—and, I am sure, celebrate—that we have led the developed world in cutting emissions in our economy. Growth in our economy went up by 72% while emissions have decreased by 43%. That is not good enough—we want to go further and faster. That is why we set out last year all the policies in the clean growth strategy and why this week the first ever Green GB Week is helping us to re-emphasise the message that growth and green go hand in hand.

Henry Smith: Earlier this month, I was pleased to welcome a Virgin Atlantic flight into Gatwick, the first ever sustainable fuels flight to land at the airport, using fuel derived from the recycled steel-making process. What can this Government do to ensure that the UK leads in this technology, which has the potential for zero carbon aviation by 2050?

Claire Perry: This is a brilliant project and an example of exactly the innovation we need to tackle one of the most insurmountable problems we face, which is airline emissions. The Government relaunched last year a £22 million industry competition on future fuels for flight and freight to stimulate exactly this sort of innovative thinking.

Mr Bacon: Given that most people would prefer to live in a house that costs nothing to heat, boosting their spending power, that we have known for decades how to construct such houses cost-effectively and that there is no sign that big house builders will routinely offer such houses, are the Government planning to raise minimum standards for the thermal performance of new build houses, which will help the planet, the real economy and ordinary people's household budgets?

Claire Perry: I have here a card with my hon. Friend's title—he is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on self-build, custom and community housebuilding and placemaking, and he speaks with such knowledge and enthusiasm on this subject. He is quite right, and that is why we have set up the clean growth mission, why we have set out clear standards to drive up the energy efficiency of all homes to at least band C by 2035 and

why we can no longer see new homes—particularly new build homes—that are off the gas grid being built with fossil fuel heating; we want that out by 2025.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): But does the Minister not agree that the two aims can be brilliantly combined if we have an ambition to become a world leader in renewable energy and to increase investment in research and development in tidal and wave energy—two resources we have in abundance—to take them rapidly to commercial stability and create the jobs of the future?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that our renewable energy build is already over 30%, which is why we were able to get off coal earlier than many other developed countries. The problem with the tidal projects that we debated so extensively this year was that we were being asked to fund the most expensive power station that this country had ever built, with very few jobs created, and it was simply too expensive to burden consumers with. That is why we have said that the door is always open to innovation, but it has to be funded at the right price.

18. [907088] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): There is a huge opportunity for economic growth in the solar industry, but the news that the export tariff is being scrapped has alarmed many clean energy providers. More than 300 organisations, from small solar co-operatives up to Nissan, have signed a letter calling on the Secretary of State to reinstate the tariff. I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me in the past to discuss solar. Will she again meet me and representatives from the industry to discuss why a fair export tariff is essential to a viable solar industry?

Claire Perry: It is always a pleasure to meet the hon. Gentleman. The problem we have with feed-in tariffs is that we have spent nearly £5 billion since 2011, through consumer bills, on supporting some often very uneconomic projects. Quite rightly, particularly given the reduction in the cost of other renewable energies, the decision was made that that was no longer affordable. I support that. He asks whether there are other ways to continue to invest in the sector, and he is quite right that solar has an important role to play in the system. We have just finished the call for evidence and are considering the responses, and I hope to come back to the House soon.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Yesterday, the Minister requested that the Committee on Climate Change update its advice on the action necessary to respond to the report on 1.5° by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. For a brief moment, I thought she had done the right thing, but then I read her letter, which says:

“Carbon budgets already set in legislation...are out of scope of this request.”

The committee has already written to her twice, warning that the country is not on track to meet the lesser targets in those budgets. By saying that those budgets are out of scope, the Minister is pushing back the necessary change by 12 years. When did she become a follower of St Augustine—“Lord, make me virtuous, but not yet.”?

Claire Perry: Blimey! Let me just clarify some of the hon. Gentleman’s misinformation. The reason those budgets are out of scope is that we already have a set of policies and procedures that will deliver 97% and 95% of the decarbonisation—[*Interruption.*] If he listens for a second and stops mansplaining, he might learn something. I live in hope; which saint said that?

The point is that the Committee on Climate Change told us last time we discussed the challenge of zero carbon that it was not technically feasible now. It would be pointless to ask for its advice again when we already have some of the most ambitious carbon reduction plans in the world up to 2032, set in statute. We need to know what to do from 2032 onwards, so that we can start planning for it now. Just once, it would be lovely to have some cross-party consensus on the challenging, vital issue of the destruction that climate change will cause. I live in hope.

Business in Scotland: Support

6. **Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the level of UK Government financial support available to businesses in Scotland. [907076]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Chancellor and I work closely together to support businesses across the United Kingdom. I also work with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work in the Scottish Government to ensure that we can create the right environment for innovative businesses throughout Scotland to thrive. Indeed, I will be meeting him again later this afternoon.

Neil Gray: I hope the Secretary of State has heard that the Scottish Government have provided £18 million as part of a £65 million package of investment for its National Manufacturing Institute, which will be good news for manufacturers in Airdrie and Shotts, so will he change his industrial strategy to match that funding?

Greg Clark: The industrial strategy is something on which we have good collaboration with the Scottish Government. It is right that we should work together for the long term. If we want to make sure that Scottish businesses can thrive, there needs to be a competitive environment. One thing that I know is very much on the minds of Scottish businesses is that Scotland is the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom, which is a substantial drain on confidence. I hope the hon. Gentleman will take that back to his colleagues and discuss it with them.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) has Question 21, which is on the matter of businesses, and he does come from Scotland. It therefore would be pertinent for him to come in at this point if he wishes.

21. [907092] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Really first-class broadband connectivity is crucial to young people getting into business. Do Her Majesty’s Government recognise that the low level of broadband connectivity is a serious issue in my constituency?

Greg Clark: I do recognise that, not just in the case of hon. Gentleman's beautiful but remote constituency but in the case of those of very many hon. Members across the country. This is a commitment that we have made in the industrial strategy. If we are to be a successful economy, using digital skills and attracting digital businesses, we need an upgrade in our broadband infrastructure.

Small Business: Finance

7. **Gordon Henderson** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve access to finance for small businesses. [907077]

9. **James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve access to finance for small businesses. [907079]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Improving access to finance is the mission of the British Business Bank, which addresses gaps in the finance market through guarantees and through debt and equity finance. The bank recently launched an online finance hub to help entrepreneurs identify the most suitable finance options for their needs. It is currently supporting about £5.2 billion of finance to almost 75,000 businesses across the United Kingdom.

Gordon Henderson: I thank my hon. Friend for her response. As somebody who campaigned to get her elected, may I say how good it is to see her on the Front Bench?

Small businesses play an important role in my constituency's economy. Will my hon. Friend tell me what the Government are doing to tackle the late payment culture, which has such a negative effect on small businesses?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. It is great to be answering a question from him at my first Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy oral questions today. I know his constituency well, and I know that he represents the interests of his small businesses.

It is true to say that late payments are an issue that we want to tackle. Debt to small and medium-sized enterprises has halved since 2012. We have established a Small Business Commissioner, and introduced a requirement for large businesses to report publicly on their payment practices. However, we want to go further and bring in new measures to underpin the prompt payment code. We work closely with the Federation of Small Businesses, which has said that

"it is good to see the government getting serious about this issue, especially when it comes to large firms paying their supply chains promptly."

James Duddridge: What specific programmes are available to coastal businesses in towns such as Southend-on-Sea that not only benefit hospitality businesses but help high streets that are sometimes suffering?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I know what a champion he is particularly for that industry in his constituency. The coastal communities fund supports jobs and growth in coastal towns. Projects are forecast to deliver more than 18,000 jobs and

£363 million in new visitor spending, benefiting local businesses along seafronts and in coastal towns. In England, the local enterprise growth hubs in coastal areas also provide local business support and advice. Retail and hospitality businesses in coastal towns benefit from those national programmes as much as they do from business rates relief, business improvement districts and the business support helpline.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Social enterprises—for example, Wrexham football club—are important employers and active community hubs in a lot of constituencies up and down the country. It seems to me that banks do not support or understand social enterprises sufficiently well. Does the Minister agree?

Kelly Tolhurst: There are a range of options to support all kinds of SMEs and social enterprises in the current system. We have launched a finance hub which, with the British Business Bank, is available for organisations to get in touch with. A whole range of finance is available for different types of organisations. As MPs, we have a duty to make sure that our constituents and the businesses operating in our constituencies are aware of Government information, so that might be useful in future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is very good to see the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw back in the House. As she knows, I once fought her constituency, but unfortunately for me it fought back. I call Mrs Marion Fellows.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): And it continues to fight, as do I. Thank you all.

Some of our most important small businesses are local post offices. In 2017-18, post office profits rose to £35 million, while postmaster pay was cut by £17 million. Communities and the Post Office are facing a crisis as more and more postmasters resign, as they are undervalued and underpaid while executives receive a pay rise. What are the UK Government going to do to support sub-postmasters and make their businesses financially viable?

Kelly Tolhurst: Fundamentally, the Government absolutely support the post office network, and we are determined to make sure that it is provided across the country. As the Minister with responsibility for post offices, I have taken a particular interest in that since taking up my role. I am determined to make sure that we keep the network running across all parts of the country to benefit our communities.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): First, I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box.

The British Business Bank is simply not reaching most businesses that need support. Only 12% of members of the Federation of Small Businesses apply for external finance, and two thirds of those applications are rejected. In the spirit of cross-party co-operation, how about setting up a network of regional development banks to deliver business finance where it is most needed? The Government have stolen a number of our policies—why not that one?

Kelly Tolhurst: I must remind the hon. Gentleman that the British Business Bank has access to the £20 billion investment in the industrial strategy. Through our start-up loan scheme, we have made 57,000 loans, delivering £436 million in finance and creating more than 56,000 jobs. Access to finance has improved a great deal since I became an MP. The hon. Gentleman served on the Committee on which we made invoice financing another option for many small businesses.

Small Business: Rates

8. **Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of business rates on the viability of small businesses.

[907078]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The small business sector is thriving. We have 5.7 million small and medium-sized enterprises, and we are ranked in the top 10 in the world for ease of doing business. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have taken significant action on business rates in each of the last three Budgets, including £9 billion of support announced in 2016, making sure that nearly two thirds of a million small businesses pay no rates at all.

Sir Edward Davey: Small retailers across Kingston and Surbiton have been hit by a combination of high rises in business rates and unfair competition from online retailers, who too often escape taxation. Will the Secretary of State talk to the Chancellor before the Budget, and to European colleagues before Brexit, to agree a new tax for internet retail, using the proceeds to slash business rates and save our high streets before it is too late?

Greg Clark: When the right hon. Gentleman was a Minister in the Business Department, he took part in a decision to defer revaluation, for reasons that he understands. I accept the point—it has been made strongly by the Retail Sector Council—that reflecting the contribution that high street businesses make to their communities is a significant need. As business rates are reviewed, that is one of the council's recommendations that we will take forward.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that I have been concerned about this issue for some time. I met a business on Saturday whose business rates, which are currently about £300 a month, will go up to over £1,000 a month next April. What can I take to that business to assure them that we are on its side?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend can reflect on the fact that the Government have taken action to permanently double business rates relief from 50% to 100% and to raise the threshold from £6,000 to £12,000. That means that a third of all properties, including small shops, now pay no business rates at all.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): With Small Business Saturday coming up on 1 December, I am sure everybody in this House will be celebrating their local small businesses. I will be launching my Small Business Saturday competition

soon. Is it not a good opportunity to use the Budget to show that we are behind small businesses by doing something about business rates, which are hitting small businesses on the high street?

Greg Clark: I join the hon. Gentleman in drawing attention to Small Business Saturday, which is coming up. I am sure colleagues right across the House will want to enthusiastically promote businesses in their constituencies. I hope that, being a fair-minded Member, he will reflect on the major changes that have been made. As I said, the Retail Sector Council has made some suggestions for the future, and I am sure the Chancellor will be listening.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Does the Secretary of State believe there is a level playing field between high street providers and internet providers?

Greg Clark: I think it is well known, and my right hon. Friend is aware, that we have been one of the leading forces in the world in ensuring that the rules should be changed, so that companies that currently pay little tax because of international agreements make a fair contribution. There is more to be done, but my right hon. Friend served in Cabinets in which this was put at the top of the agenda, and some progress has been made.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), to her new role. I am sure she will do fantastically.

All the major business representatives, from the CBI to the chambers of commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses, have highlighted the need for business rates reform and temporary relief. The CBI says:

“The...system is stifling growth and investment”,

and the FSB says it creates a significant barrier to small business growth. Can the Secretary of State confirm today whether there will be any action on this issue in the forthcoming Budget?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady knows that decisions on the Budget are for the Chancellor, but one of the measures we have taken, which I hope she would acknowledge, is a very substantial reduction in the burden of business rates on small businesses. That shows that the Government are alive to the importance of business rates for small businesses. We of course listen constantly to the organisations she mentions, but also to the Retail Sector Council.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I suddenly have a sense of déjà vu. At the last autumn statement, business groups warned of the devastating effect of business rates. In return, we saw only minor tinkering. Since then we have had a raft of store closures, with more than 100,000 retail jobs lost in the past three years. Many businesses cite business rates as a root cause. The Secretary of State has reportedly said that adjusting business rates would be one way to recognise the value of our high streets, yet the Chancellor said in July that there were no plans for reform. Just what is going on? Will there be action, or should we expect another year of meaningless tinkering from the Chancellor?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady knows, and retailers will tell her if she listens to them, that the change in the pattern of retail trade, as more of us are buying more goods online, is going to make a change to the high street. Everyone accepts that. Do business rates make a contribution, and can they help? Yes, of course. That has been behind the changes that have been made. I have said before, and I said it today, that it is reasonable for the taxation system to reflect the contribution that high street businesses make to communities.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

10. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What his policy is on achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. [907080]

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): As the hon. Gentleman will know, on Monday I wrote to the chair of the Committee on Climate Change for advice on how to get to a zero-carbon future. We did not ask for a specific date. We asked for advice on what date would be appropriate, as well as an analysis of the costs and benefits. I expect a response by next March. He will know, as the proud representative of one of the finest universities in the world, that so much of that change will be based on innovation and research, much of which is going on in his fine city. That is why we have contributed more than £2.5 billion during this Parliament to support that research, which can help us to save the planet.

Daniel Zeichner: I thank the right hon. Lady for her reply, but does she not understand that freezing fuel duty and cutting support for electric vehicles and hybrids is in no way going to help us to achieve the goal that we all want to arrive at?

Claire Perry: I know the hon. Gentleman's city well and I commend the council there—it is the wrong colour, but it is making many good decisions on such things as solar bins, cycling and walking, which are very possible in a city such as Cambridge. In constituencies such as mine, people have to rely on their vehicles. We know that the cost of living is an issue and it is right that we continue to help people to put some money back in their pockets. On electric vehicles, 13% of new vehicles sold in August this year were ultra-low emission. That market is evolving and the cost of those vehicles is coming down. We have spent half a billion pounds of taxpayers' money subsidising the purchase of those vehicles and my expectation is that the price will continue to fall faster as we see the infrastructure build up.

Industrial Strategy

11. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What progress he has made through the industrial strategy on ensuring that the UK is the best place to start and grow a business. [907081]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): We are making the UK the best place to start and grow a business and a global draw for investors: for example, Green GB Week showcases fantastic opportunities in clean growth for businesses, as put forward in our industrial strategy. We have put in

place the building blocks to drive £20 billion of investment into high-growth potential businesses and to support long-term investment across the UK.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for his answer. Town deals are a welcome part of the industrial strategy. Yesterday, a delegation from Torbay Together met the Minister in the other place to discuss how a town deal for Torbay would make our bay the best place to grow and start a business. What view does the Minister take of how such a deal for Torbay would help to deliver this objective of the industrial strategy?

Mr Gyimah: I am aware of the ambitions in Torbay and I am encouraged to see the high-level commitment from the Torbay Together partnership. I encourage Torbay Together to continue its engagement with the Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership to ensure that the forthcoming local industrial strategy reflects the potential for the local area, and I commend its strategy.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): UK shipbuilding is vital to the industrial strategy and our long-term economic success. When he visited Cammell Laird last year, the northern powerhouse Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry)—said:

“The future of this yard is absolutely crucial to the future of Birkenhead and Liverpool and I will do all I can to support them.”

Since the decision was made last week to cut more than 290 high-skilled jobs—40% of the entire workforce—the silence from the Government has been deafening. What will the Government do to defend jobs in this vital industry?

Mr Gyimah: The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), met and spoke to Cammell Laird last night. It has finished one contract and a number of other contracts are on the way. It has also received £150 million for projects that it is engaging in and the Minister will be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman to update him.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry—time is against us. I call Jack Brereton.

Research and Development

12. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase levels of investment in research and development. [907082]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): Research and development plays a vital role in improving productivity and helping us to expand our global opportunities. The Government are investing an additional £7 billion in R&D funding by 2022—this is the biggest increase in public funding. Our ambition is also to increase total R&D spend to 2.4% of our GDP by 2027, and 3% in the long term.

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he agree that the development of an advanced ceramics research park in Stoke-on-Trent would be a significant addition to the UK's R&D capabilities?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I understand that my colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), is meeting with him and leaders from the ceramics sector on 24 October regarding its proposal for future investment. I wish them all the best.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister may be aware that there is a need for more research and development funding for geothermal energy projects, which I have previously raised with the Energy Minister. Will he set out what additional funding he will give to get more projects in line, such as the one in Caerau in my constituency?

Mr Gyimah: I commend the hon. Gentleman on what has been done so far. As I said, a record increase of funding is available for research and development, mainly through UK Research and Innovation. We also have the industrial strategy challenge fund, but in all that, we are looking for projects that are cost-effective and if those become available, we will be happy to fund them.

Nuclear Power

13. **Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con):** What steps he is taking to secure the future of nuclear power in the UK. [907083]

16. **Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con):** What steps he is taking to secure the future of nuclear power in the UK. [907086]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I thank my hon. Friends for asking this question during Green GB Week. Nuclear power is the key to the UK leading the world in decarbonising its economy, which is why the Government are working hard to secure a good deal at Wylfa, Anglesey and to develop alternative financing models to benefit future projects and implement the landmark nuclear sector deal.

Trudy Harrison: Will the Minister recognise the contribution that Cumbria has made to the nuclear industry and commit to working with me and the Moorside strategic partnership to ensure we deliver new nuclear in Copeland?

Richard Harrington: One of my most exciting days since I took up this post was spent visiting my hon. Friend's constituency, and of course I would be delighted to work with her and anyone else in Copeland to develop the Moorside strategic partnership.

Mrs Trevelyan: Would the Secretary of State meet me and cross-party colleagues to progress the nuclear decommissioning of our out-of-service nuclear submarines, which are currently decaying in Plymouth, not only to maintain our world-leading skills in this vital nuclear sector, but to develop the export potential for this work,

to help meet our global commitment to a cleaner planet and to ensure a continuing increase in the number of nuclear engineers?

Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend is correct to bring this subject to my attention. The Ministry of Defence leads the submarine dismantling programme and my Department the civil dismantling programme. I talked to the Secretary of State for Defence only yesterday about co-operation between our Departments, because it will unlock significant opportunities for the UK economy, including exports and skills. Our Department is getting very good at decommissioning.

15. [907085] **Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab):** All major forms of renewable energy, such as onshore and offshore wind and solar, are now cheaper than new nuclear, and energy storage is on a similar cost trajectory, so why are the Government wasting billions of pounds on nuclear power?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that the Government have a responsibility to ensure a mixture of power sources. Nuclear has a role to play and makes a tremendous contribution to the economy, employing nearly 70,000 people, but renewables are also very important. It is all about a mix and ensuring that the country has secure green energy for the future.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): As the Minister is aware, the Civil Nuclear Constabulary is an important element of the future of nuclear power. In December 2017, I asked about its pension arrangements, and I understand that we are still awaiting an equality impact assessment from the Minister's Department. Will its staff have it for this Christmas?

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Gentleman may know, I like to give Christmas presents wherever possible. I have met the chief constable and representatives, and I have written to the Treasury. I cannot imagine what Santa will bring, but we are doing our best in the Department to resolve this issue.

Family-friendly Working

14. **Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps he is taking to support the provision of family-friendly working practices. [907084]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I am proud that BEIS supports all its employees with comprehensive family-friendly policies. More widely, employees are entitled to a suite of family rights and protections, and we are looking to go further. We are considering requiring employers to assess whether a job can be done flexibly and to make that clear when advertising. We will also consult on a proposal to require large employers to publish their parental leave and pay policies.

Lucy Powell: I have just come from the Education Committee, where we heard from Pepper the robot, who could perhaps help us all give better answers to questions.

Does the Minister agree that one of the keys to unlocking the gender pay gap and family-friendly working practices is to raise the esteem in which part-time workers are held, so that they have the same pay, career progression and investment in training as other employees, and that perhaps if more fathers worked part time, we might raise that esteem further?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady raises an important point. Part-time workers are a valuable part of our economy, and it is right that they be held in the same esteem as full-time workers. With our policies and announcements on flexible working, I hope that the Government can strengthen this and deliver what she seeks.

Topical Questions

T1. [907095] **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): This week, through more than 30 events, Green GB Week is celebrating the UK's status as a world leader in clean growth. At the world's first zero emission vehicle summit last month, we announced further investment in research and development relating to green vehicles, new batteries and low-carbon technology, as part of the Faraday challenge in our industrial strategy. That resulted in a pledge by the industry to invest half a billion pounds in those opportunities.

In addition, since we last met we have announced action to protect small businesses against unfair late payment terms imposed by larger firms. Alongside the Siemens chief executive Juergen Maier, I chaired the first meeting of the Made Smarter Commission, which will help to transform manufacturing through digital technologies. We have also announced that, to evaluate the impact of the industrial strategy in the years ahead, the Bank of England's chief economist, Andy Haldane, will chair the Industrial Strategy Council.

Ian C. Lucas: A business took over Thomson Reuters in Wrexham a few weeks ago, and last Wednesday announced the redundancies of 300 skilled workers who had spent the last 10 years building it up. The jobs are being moved to India. In the context of Brexit, does the Secretary of State agree that we need to reconsider the takeover laws that apply in the United Kingdom, so that this type of predatory behaviour can end?

Greg Clark: Our record as a country of attracting inward investment from all over the world has stood us in pretty good stead. Many times, across the Dispatch Box, we have celebrated the success of Jaguar Land Rover, which is, of course, a recipient of Indian investment. It is important for us to maintain that tradition. As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are consulting on proposals to ensure the appropriate assessment of any national security considerations in respect of investment, but if we want to prosper as a country, it is also important for us to engage with the world and to attract investment from all over the world.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me gently remind the House that topical questions, and the answers to them, are supposed to be substantially briefer.

T3. [907097] **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): What actions are the Government taking to ensure that the commercialisation of research is at the centre of their plans for higher research and development spending, so that the world-class output of institutions such as York University, in my constituency, can rapidly find its way to the factory floor?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): Realising the full economic and social benefits of the excellent research at our universities is at the heart of our industrial strategy. Through United Kingdom Research and Innovation, our industrial strategy challenge fund and the higher education innovation fund, excellent research can be commercialised and translated into businesses that create jobs and growth.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Only last week, the publicly owned Post Office announced the closure of a further 74 Crown post offices. Although the Post Office has not disclosed all its spending for its franchising programme, the Communication Workers Union estimates that up to £30 million of public money will be spent on compromise agreements, with staff being paid to leave, as customers, local high streets and the jobs market suffer. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Post Office must be transparent about how much its franchising programme is costing the public purse?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): On 11 October, the Post Office announced a plan to relocate 40 post offices in WHSmith stores. The overall number of post offices will not be reduced. WHSmith will also reach a franchise agreement for the 33 post offices that are already in its stores, so the total number of post offices operated by WHSmith in its stores is planned to rise.

T4. [907098] **Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): During Green GB Week, what steps is the Minister taking to minimise the negative impact on farmers of renewable energy incentives that are taking away valuable distillery and brewery by-products to be used in anaerobic digesters, thus potentially undermining the livestock industry not only in Scotland but in the rest of the United Kingdom?

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): My hon. Friend has made a valuable point. We have high sustainability criteria, but we must ensure that biofuels are sourced sustainably. We have asked the Climate Change Committee for a bioenergy report, which it will provide shortly, and which will give us new advice on questions of land use and the long-term best use of resources.

T2. [907096] **Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Rather than listening to communities where shale gas applications have been made, the Government have continued to dismantle the hurdles over which fracking companies should be forced to jump. Will the Minister

confirm that she is now genuinely considering weakening the controls on earthquakes in relation to fracking companies?

Claire Perry: I can absolutely confirm that I am not considering weakening the monitoring controls on seismicity.

T5. [907099] **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Minister will be aware that there has been a remarkable revival in the UK extractors and mining sector. What can he and the Secretary of State do to make sure these ventures are environmentally sustainable and command local community support?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): My hon. Friend is very well informed on matters to do with minerals, but this is topical questions, which require quick answers, so I would like very much to meet my hon. Friend and any other colleagues to discuss this issue in detail.

T6. [907100] **Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): Last year, Shepherds Bush post office was moved out of the town centre into the back of a WHSmith store. We were promised that it would remain a Crown post office, but now it is one of the 74 that is going to be franchised. We also have three branches that are suspended, one for four years. Will the Government do anything about the running down of the post office network?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I have outlined, a number of stores are going into franchise agreements. It is important that we have a post office network that is fit for purpose and serves consumers as they currently are being. As Post Office Minister, I take that very seriously, but I am always happy to meet with the hon. Gentleman to discuss any particular concerns in his constituency.

T10. [907104] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): As we embark on a new nuclear future, it is vital that we have a workforce that is able to deliver the skills and capability. What action is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that young people in particular get the training and opportunities for a career in this wonderful industry?

Richard Harrington: I thank my hon. Friend for this question because it is absolutely relevant to our nuclear sector deal, which concentrates very much on the development of skills particularly for young people. I was most impressed on a recent visit to Hinkley Point C by how many young people are in training, particularly the increase in the number of young women involved in nuclear, and I know that will continue.

T7. [907101] **Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): When will the Secretary of State be able to announce a sector deal for the ceramics industry? He will know of the benefits that can be brought to both Stoke-on-Trent and the industry with that deal, and if he is unable to give a date today, will he meet me so we can progress this issue, so that the next time I ask him in the House he can give me a date?

Richard Harrington: I have met several times with the industry to discuss a ceramics sector deal, and it is developing. I will be very pleased to meet the hon. Gentleman, as he knows, and with other colleagues with constituency ceramics industry interests.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, our high streets face unprecedented challenges. Will he therefore join me in challenging the sharp practices of Smart Parking, which operates in the Westgate shopping centre in Basildon? Its charging and fining regime is damaging the viability of shops and fining thousands of people who have all tried to do the right thing.

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and it is one of the issues we will be looking at with the Retail Sector Council. There is already the review by John Timpson into our high streets, but we need to keep track of this area. My hon. Friend will, as a local MP, champion the cause of his constituency, and I, as Small Business Minister, am acutely aware of the challenges facing our high streets.

T8. [907102] **Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): The Minister will have had time to consider Universities UK's excellent proposal for a global graduate talent visa to reform the uncompetitive visa we currently have for international students. Now that he has had time to consider it, will he support those proposals?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government are considering the Migration Advisory Committee proposals in full, but there is no cap on international students coming to study in this country. The university sector is one of the most successful sectors in this country and this Government will make sure we continue to support it.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Given that the new generation of diesel engines are up to 90% cleaner, what can the Secretary of State do to help ensure that consumers are not penalised unfairly by vehicle excise duty and company car tax bands?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend is correct in making the point that the next generation of diesel engines are very much less polluting than their predecessors. The road to zero strategy makes it very clear that diesel will continue to have a role for some years to come, and for some journeys it will be a particularly appropriate choice. My right hon. Friend will understand that the overall tax regime is a matter for the Chancellor.

T9. [907103] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): The all-party group on steel and metal-related industries has written to the Chancellor ahead of the Budget calling for specific measures to help our steel industry. Will Ministers support these calls and when can we have a proper, much-needed sector deal for steel?

Richard Harrington: I am delighted to tell the hon. Lady that I am in regular communication with the steel industry about a sector deal, which is developing thanks to Jon Bolton, who is chairing it, and to Gareth Stace, the chief executive of UK Steel. I am optimistic that this will develop in a way that will please the hon. Lady.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes! The voice of Taunton Deane.

Rebecca Pow: Preliminary talks are under way in Taunton Deane on the establishment of a digital geospatial centre, to maximise the expertise of the UK Hydrographic Office, which makes the world's shipping maps. Is not this exactly the kind of unique high-tech enterprise that will open up job opportunities, and exactly the kind of worldwide collaboration that we ought to be including in the industrial strategy?

Mr Speaker: Very exciting, I must say! Let's hear from the Minister.

Mr Gyimah: I agree, Mr Speaker. This is incredibly exciting and forward-looking, and the Department will be happy to give it every support it can.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The UK is at the top of the global league for start-ups, but it is languishing at the bottom for scale-up. Is it not true that this is a black hole in the industrial strategy, because that is where productivity gains could be made? Why is the Secretary of State not acting on this?

Greg Clark: It is quite the opposite, and I am surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman say that. If he has read the industrial strategy, he will know that the commitment to scale-up is very prominent. I made reference earlier to the Made Smarter Commission that Juergen Maier is leading. Its purpose is precisely to diffuse the technology that the bigger firms have to those that are growing and scaling up.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): In this Green GB Week, will the Minister join me in recognising the work being done by the major oil and gas companies, through the oil and gas climate initiative? They are voluntarily making huge efforts and investments towards a lower carbon future.

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is a strong defender of that industry, which is vital to the UK economy. He will know that those companies have set out their own pledges and that they have set out how they see world changing fundamentally. They are also investing heavily in the new technologies that they want to be part of the future.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Department's consultation on limited partnerships closed on 23 July. Scottish limited partnerships continue to be used for dirty money, to the absolute discredit of the country. When will the Minister do something about this?

Kelly Tolhurst: We acknowledge the reports that limited partnerships, particularly Scottish limited partnerships, have been misused. That is why we have consulted on proposals to tackle the issue and to modernise the law. In June 2017, Scottish limited partnerships were brought within the scope of the register of people with significant control, and since then there has been a fall of 80% in the registration of new partnerships.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): From this side of the House, I echo the calls for a steel sector deal. Would my hon. Friend like to visit the Corby steelworks to see for himself the difference that that would make?

Richard Harrington: I would be delighted to make that visit.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The chief executive of Jaguar Land Rover has said that a bad or no deal Brexit would cost the company more than £1 billion a year and threaten its future investment in the UK. Can the Minister explain how that can be avoided if the UK is outside the customs union?

Greg Clark: It can be avoided by having a good deal based on the White Paper that was published earlier in the summer and that the motor industry has strongly endorsed.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I think we will have one more. I call Jim McMahon.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have been desperately trying to catch your eye. We have had a number of comments on post office relocations and closures. Will the Minister make it absolutely clear that relocating a post office to WHSmith does not save the services within it? Many have been massively downgraded at the point to which they have been relocated.

Kelly Tolhurst: As I have already outlined, we are committed to delivering a postal network that services the needs of our communities. If the hon. Gentleman has concerns relating to particular post offices, will he please contact me?

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well, Sir Edward—blurt it out, man!

Sir Edward Davey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I bring to the Secretary of State's attention the power that he has to mutualise Post Office Ltd to allow sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, and their customers, to have a share in their own Post Office? Will he look at this, because it would bring greater sustainability to the post office network?

Kelly Tolhurst: That is something I am more than happy to look at in my new role, but it is something that you could have done yourself—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, Mr Speaker! It is something that the right hon. Gentleman could have done when he was a Post Office Minister.

Mr Speaker: Well, anyway, the House is consumed by a state of jollity, and that is always much to be encouraged. Finally, I call Mary Robinson.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): As increasing numbers of high street banks are closing, post offices offer a potential solution for communities suddenly left without

a branch facility. However, sub-postmasters are not yet able to carry out the full range of transactions that customers expect. What can the Minister do to help our post offices, which are vital to the survival of our high streets, to perform the banking functions that have been recommended?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend is right that post offices are now so valuable to our high streets. There are lots of opportunities for post offices to develop further in providing services to their community. As the Minister with responsibility for post offices, I will do whatever I can to facilitate that.

Universal Credit

12.40 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind) (*Urgent Question*): We hope the length of time it took the Minister to get to his place is reflected in the roll-out of universal credit.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman but, at this stage, all he needs to do is to ask that the Minister makes a statement. The right hon. Gentleman will get his full opportunity ere long.

Frank Field: I always make that mistake. I apologise, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: A thought for these new young Members. It is very difficult for the right hon. Gentleman but, in due course, when he is a bit more experienced—

Frank Field: I am just starting my career as an independent, but you are right, Mr Speaker.

The urgent question is: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement on her Department's proposed changes to the roll-out of universal credit.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): I note the precise wording of the urgent question. I have a great deal of respect for the right hon. Gentleman, who cares deeply about welfare matters and is an excellent Chair of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions. He, his Committee and the whole House have a right to hold the Government to account, and that includes the Department for Work and Pensions.

I do not wish to be unhelpful. However, some of the matters to which the right hon. Gentleman may allude are the subject of speculation in the media. There has been a great deal of speculation about universal credit over the past few days, and I cannot and will not comment on speculation.

When it comes to the roll-out, we have long said that we will take a slow and measured approach to managing migration, which is why we will continue to take a test-and-learn approach, acting on feedback and improving the system as it rolls out.

Universal credit will be in every jobcentre in the country by December 2018. People making new claims to our benefits system now apply for universal credit, rather than being put on the old system. Next year, we will start the wider process of moving people from the old benefits system on to universal credit. The process will begin later next year in a measured way, with no more than 10,000 people moved over, to ensure that the system is working well for claimants and to make any necessary adaptations as we go.

We have said for a long time that the managed migration process will take place from 2019 to 2023.

Frank Field: I think I am grateful for that answer. I will be more grateful if we get answers to my five questions, which I will put in the two minutes I am allowed.

Will the Government commit themselves to ensuring that everybody who is transferred from the existing benefits on to universal credit is not made worse off,

does not lack income and does not face hunger or destitution? First, to that end, will the Minister guarantee that existing benefit payments will continue to claimants until they pick up universal credit?

Secondly, on debt recovery, a welcome rumour has been given to the papers of a reduction in clawback from 40% to 30%, but that is only on the advance people might receive to prevent hunger and destitution; it does not cover all other debts. People can still be left with no money. Will the Minister guarantee to the House that nobody will face a situation where their debt repayments cancel out their benefit payments?

Thirdly, will the Minister implement the Select Committee's recommendations to ensure that those brave people who have chosen self-employment to try to free themselves from poverty are encouraged, not discouraged?

Fourthly, for mothers already on universal credit who find work, will he guarantee that their childcare payments will be made up front, and not a month in arrears?

Fifthly, given that this benefit is designed for people on monthly payments and not for poorer working people who get their income on a daily or weekly basis, will the Minister wish me luck when I meet the Secretary of State this afternoon to discuss our need for a citizens bank, which will help people manage their money, once all those reforms are in place, and ensure that none of them faces hunger, destitution or losing their home?

Alok Sharma: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments, and perhaps I may go through them in turn. He raised the overall issue of managed migration. As he knows, we have made our draft proposals available to the Social Security Advisory Committee; they have been public and people can see them. We have received recommendations from the SSAC and in due course we will publish our feedback on those. As for ensuring the position of anyone currently on benefits when they are transferred across, we have made it very clear that transitional protection is in place for those individuals. We have also said that the 500,000 people on severe disability premium will be protected. As he knows, earlier this year we also implemented £1.5 billion of extra support. I say not in anger but in sorrow that Opposition Members did not support those proposals, and I hope that when it comes to managed migration, they will. On debt recovery, he talked about a "rumour" and I am not going to comment on rumours, but, as he knows, maximum deductions are currently 40% of the standard allowance. On self-employment, we are indeed helping people; as he knows, from 2017 we introduced a new enterprise allowance, and we are making sure that we are giving support to people to help them to develop their business plans and to grow their businesses—as a party that is the champion of entrepreneurs, that is absolutely the right thing for us to do. He will of course know that up to 85% of childcare costs are recoverable under universal credit, and that is an important improvement that has been made. I am sure that he will find his meeting with the Secretary of State extremely useful.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: There is heavy pressure on time, with two further urgent questions to follow. There will of course also be a debate on this important matter tomorrow.

It may not be possible to accommodate everybody, but the chances of doing so will be better if we have pithy questions, to be exemplified by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg).

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The aim of getting the withdrawal rate of benefits down from more than 90% to 63% is enormously laudable, but can my hon. Friend ensure that people do not lose out in the transition?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; under the legacy benefits system, some people did face effective tax rates of 90% and that system also disincentivised people from work. As I have said, those on legacy benefits that we manage migrate across will of course receive transitional protection.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Universal credit is causing severe hardship for many people claiming it, and over the past two weeks conflicting statements from the Government have caused real confusion over the impact it will have on people who are required to move across to claim it in the next phase. First, we were told that austerity is over and then that families on low income are in danger of losing up to £200 a month as a result of transferring to UC. Next, the Prime Minister said that nobody would be worse off, but the Secretary of State contradicted her the following day by confirming that in fact some families would be worse off. So will the Government now publish their impact assessments of that next phase? How many households currently claiming legacy benefits will be worse off between now and 2023 as a result of making a claim for UC?

Yesterday, the Secretary of State met criticism of UC with accusations of scaremongering. So can the Minister tell us: are Citizens Advice, the Child Poverty Action Group, the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers, the Residential Landlords Association, the National Housing Federation, the Resolution Foundation, the National Audit Office, two former Prime Ministers and more than 80 organisations representing disabled people scaremongering? From these Benches, we again call on the Government to stop the roll-out of UC now.

Alok Sharma: It is interesting that the hon. Lady talks about confusion. Let me be absolutely clear: there is no confusion on the Government Benches; the confusion is on the Opposition Benches. The shadow Chancellor talks about abolishing universal credit and others talk about reforming it. There is no clarity at all from the Opposition. They oppose everything but they have the solution to nothing.

When it comes to hardship, as I just said we introduced an extra £1.5 billion, but the hon. Lady did not vote for or support that. When it comes to protecting people, I have already made it clear that we will have transitional protection and that there will be protection for the half a million people on severe disability premium. I do not know what the hon. Lady wants, but if she wants to go back to the legacy benefit system, she should know that 700,000 people in this country are not getting the benefits that they require. That is £2.4 billion of underpayment and that will change under universal credit. Finally, the hon. Lady talks about Citizens Advice; I hope that she will welcome the partnership we recently announced with Citizens Advice to help the very vulnerable.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): More women in work, youth unemployment hugely down and record low unemployment not seen since the 1970s; what role has universal credit played in the delivery of that success?

Alok Sharma: I was in the House in 2010 when the Conservatives had to come in to sort out the mess left by the previous Government. Labour Members told us that as a result of our policies, there would be a million fewer jobs, but there are more than 3 million more jobs. They should welcome today's jobs figures. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that unemployment is at its lowest level since 1975, youth unemployment is at a record low—it has more than halved since 2010—and wages are outpacing inflation for the seventh month in a row.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The House is in quite an excitable state. This is a matter of the utmost seriousness and there is passion, which I respect, but I am keen to accommodate as many people as possible. I call Mr Philip Hollobone.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The roll-out of universal credit reaches Kettering tomorrow—

Mr Speaker: I beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon. This is the trouble when there is a lot of noise. It is everybody else's fault, not mine. [*Laughter.*] No, it is my fault and I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. I shall come to him. I call Neil Gray.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

In spite of what the Minister has just said, which I think was a return to the flat-earth rhetoric referred to by the BBC's Michael Buchanan, it appears that the Secretary of State is finally starting to recognise what her predecessors failed to recognise: the fundamental problems with universal credit. Of course, just delaying the process, or reducing the clawback rate, as has been rumoured, will not fix the misery that is being faced in areas where universal credit has already been rolled out, such as Airdrie and Shotts, or in those areas progressing to roll out, such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen.

Yesterday, the Secretary of State hinted to me that she has made requests of the Chancellor for additional funding in the upcoming Budget. In that regard, the Chancellor should really be sitting with the Minister, listening to proceedings on how to make universal credit work. It appears that moves are afoot to change universal credit. If the Minister will not comment on rumours, why will he not be straight with the House now and tell us what the plans are? Does he not agree with the many concerned expert groups listed by the shadow Secretary of State that have called for a halt to the roll-out, dramatic and fundamental intervention in the Budget and a full review of universal credit thereafter?

Alok Sharma: As I have said and suspect I will have to keep saying, I am not going to comment on rumours. The Secretary of State was clear yesterday that matters relating to the Budget are for the Chancellor and the Prime Minister. Indeed, the Chancellor will be here in a

[Alok Sharma]

couple of weeks and the hon. Gentleman can ask questions then. I have already set out our plans for managed migration. If the hon. Gentleman is keen for universal credit to work properly, he should support the measures that we have introduced and will be bringing in to support the most vulnerable. The shadow Secretary of State talked about the £1.5 billion; the debate was on 13 March this year and she did not support the £1.5 billion for the most vulnerable.

Mr Hollobone: The roll-out of universal credit reaches Kettering tomorrow. Some 530 local households currently receive universal credit, but 7,700 households on legacy benefits will qualify. Will the Minister assure my constituents that all the staff training and systems are in place at Kettering jobcentre to ensure a smooth migration?

Alok Sharma: When we actually do roll out universal credit—as I have said, it will be completed across all jobcentres by the end of the year—we absolutely ensure that full training is given to our work coaches. Of course, local Members of Parliament are invited in to have discussions with jobcentres. I have been with colleagues to several jobcentres where universal credit is about to be rolled out and they have been satisfied with the roll-out process. On managed migration, that will take place from 2019 to 2023 and we will make sure that we get our processes absolutely right.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Universal credit rolled out in Wirral at the beginning of the year, and in the first six months of this year there was a 34% increase in food bank use in the Wirral area. That is more than 30 tonnes of extra food needed, and the people who work in the food bank tell me that that is a direct result of the universal credit roll-out. If everything is so wonderful, why is this happening and why are a Conservative ex-Prime Minister and a Labour ex-Prime Minister warning the Government that they have to change this system?

Alok Sharma: If the hon. Lady was so keen to help her constituents, she would have voted for the extra £1.5 billion of support, but she did not. Labour Members cannot get away from that. Members cannot call for help for their constituents—for all our constituents—and then not deliver when it comes to the votes. As the hon. Lady knows, the all-party group on hunger published a detailed report on this issue and concluded that there are myriad complex reasons for the use of food banks. It cannot be attributed to a single reason.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): The Minister referred to moving people from legacy benefits on to universal credit; will he look into doing that for vulnerable people, rather than relying on them to make a new claim and risking there being a gap in their benefit receipts if they do not understand the process?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I am having a series of discussions with key stakeholders, as are the Secretary of State and others in the Department. We will make sure that we get the process absolutely right so that the vulnerable are helped.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Please excuse my voice, Mr Speaker; I am not very well today. But I am not nearly as badly off as my constituent, a woman who was sexually assaulted, as were her children, and had to be moved to my constituency for her safety. I think that we can all agree that she would be considered vulnerable. Because of the change to her circumstance, this single, working mother is now £300 worse off. We are hearing today about what the Minister will do for people on managed migration, but what will he do for people who are forced on to universal credit through changes of circumstance that are not their fault?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Lady knows, support is available in the system. I am sorry to hear about her constituent's predicament. Of course, the whole point of universal credit is that it is a welfare system that also assists people into work. We have analysis that has been published that makes it very clear that under universal credit people get into work faster, stay in work longer and earn more.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I welcome the move to a system of benefits that no longer traps people out of work. A month into universal credit's roll-out in Mansfield, staff at my local jobcentre are happy with the way things have progressed. Will the Minister confirm that under universal credit a million people who are disabled will see their regular income increase because of the new system?

Alok Sharma: I am pleased to hear that universal credit is rolling out in Mansfield and working well. I get a similar message when I go up and down the country. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: 1 million disabled households will on average receive an extra £110 per month as a result of universal credit.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Why does the House have to rely on rumour and leaks to find out what is going on with universal credit? When will the Department for Work and Pensions release an impact assessment and an equality impact assessment, so that we can all see for ourselves what is happening with universal credit and what the Government will do to put it right?

Alok Sharma: As I said, we are reflecting on the Social Security Advisory Committee's recommendations and will respond in due course. Of course, as we lay the regulations before Parliament, there will be opportunities for debate. The hon. Lady should be patient. We will publish the full plans for the next stage of the roll-out of universal credit, including managed migration, in due course.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I strongly welcome the Minister's commitment to continuing "test and learn" as part of the roll-out of universal credit, as it has delivered several substantial improvements to UC over the past year and a half. As part of that process, will he consider extending the repayment time for advances?

Alok Sharma: As my hon. Friend knows, it is now possible for someone to get a 100% advance of their estimated first payment up front on the first day. Advances are interest-free and repayable over 12 months. As I said,

I am not going to create policy at the Dispatch Box. Policy decisions will be put out in the appropriate manner as they are made.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What message does the Minister have for beleaguered DWP staff? A trade union briefing sent to MPs yesterday tells a sorry tale of staff having to deal with so many telephone calls that universal credit claims are not being maintained and payments are being delayed.

Alok Sharma: I wager that I have been to rather more jobcentres than the hon. Gentleman, and I invariably hear from jobcentre staff that things are working well. However, where we can improve, we do, and staff can feed back about improvements. That is what the “test and learn” process is all about.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Universal credit was rolled out in Torbay last month, and I have so far seen a reduction in casework from those who have experienced housing benefit delays, for example, and those who have received demands for overpaid tax credits. Will the Minister outline how he is monitoring the roll-out in Torbay and how he will ensure that it continues to be a success?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is assiduous at talking to local jobcentres and acting on his constituents’ behalf. We, of course, have a process whereby jobcentres can feed back information on some of the key metrics, which we monitor regularly.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Given that no lessons whatsoever seem to have been learned from the roll-out of full service universal credit since last year, how on earth would just slowing down the roll-out stop the misery, deprivation and even destitution that millions are facing?

Alok Sharma: We are learning as we go along, which is what the “test and learn” process is all about. I hope that the hon. Lady will appreciate the roll-out of the landlord portal and the ability to upload childcare costs. The changes we are making are helping the very people whom require that help: her constituents and mine.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome how universal credit is encouraging and enabling people to do more work, but will my hon. Friend assure me that those for whom work is a real challenge, such as single parents of pre-school children, will have sufficient income under universal credit?

Alok Sharma: As I have just said, 85% of childcare costs can be recouped under universal credit, which is an improvement on the legacy system.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I welcome the reports of imminent reform. Ministers can justify the five-week delay in universal credit only in cases where people have just left a monthly paid job. Yesterday, he told the House:

“The five-week wait has no savings implications for the Exchequer.”—[*Official Report*, 15 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 395.] Will he therefore now scrap it?

Alok Sharma: As I said both earlier and yesterday, the reason why we ensured that people can get 100% of their advance up front and an extra two-week run-on of housing benefit was to help them with their cash flows. The vast majority of people in this country are paid monthly, and the whole point is that we are replicating the world of work.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On 5 December in my constituency, people on UC live—about 660 people—will transition to full-service UC. As claimants move to full-service UC, will the Minister confirm that they will see no change in their benefits? Will he also confirm that he will meet specialists, such as those from the charity Mind, to ensure that there is support for disabled people before full migration from legacy benefits?

Alok Sharma: As I said, I am in the process of meeting stakeholders, and I have indeed met Mind, as have other colleagues. We will of course ensure that we do everything that we can to take care of the vulnerable.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Yesterday, I raised an issue affecting a constituent who lost her regular universal credit payment because two months’ wages, paid on the last day of consecutive months, were taken into account, but the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), dismissed my question. Will Ministers now investigate that anomaly, which is affecting countless people, and put the matter right?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman can write to me, or I am happy to discuss that particular case.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: A sentence from Bexhill and Battle.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the Minister give all the work coaches a big pat on the back? They will be disappointed as they listen to this type of spectacle, but they work incredibly hard to turn people’s lives around.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is right. Work coaches across the country work incredibly hard, and I wish that Opposition Members would sometimes praise them, rather than denigrating the system.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ooh, this is difficult. Blaenau Gwent or Darlington? I call Jenny Chapman.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): The right choice, Mr Speaker.

The Minister’s tone this afternoon is very abrasive, and he does not seem to be listening to genuine concerns from Members on both sides of the House. We understand that the Government may want to save some announcements for the upcoming Budget, but I would have thought that the extent of concern about universal credit from across the country would have led him to make some solid announcements before then so that we can reassure our constituents.

Alok Sharma: I have no wish to be abrasive, and if I have been, I of course apologise. However, the appropriate time to talk about any financial measures is at the Budget, as I have said. Such matters are for the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, and there will be an opportunity in a couple of weeks' time for Members to raise their points of view when the Chancellor comes to the House.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): We hear today that Britain has just seen the strongest growth in wages for nine years. We should make real work pay through stronger real wages, not by going back to the bad old days of unsustainable growth in the benefits bill.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is right. Regular wages are up 3.1% this year, and I agree that we now have a system in place whereby work pays. The analysis that we have published shows that people get paid more under universal credit.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Universal credit is due to be rolled out in Barrow just three weeks before Christmas this year—the worst possible time—and there is currently no certainty that debt relief will be provided for the area. Will the Minister rethink and postpone the roll-out?

Alok Sharma: The roll-out in Reading, which I represent, took place prior to Christmas last year. There were no issues, and I very much hope that things will be the same in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, but I am happy to have a discussion to ensure that he is talking to his jobcentre and that he gets the comfort he needs.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): There is strong support for the principles and intent of universal credit among not only Conservative Members, but my constituents. However, the Minister can be assured that if more money or further changes to universal credit are required, that will also receive the support of Conservative Members and my constituents.

Alok Sharma: As I have said, we are taking a “test and learn” approach to universal credit. We make changes when we are required to do so, and I have talked about some of the changes that we have made. My hon. Friend mentions money, but as I have said, the proper time to have any such discussions is at the Budget, and such matters are ultimately for the Chancellor and the Prime Minister.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Minister will recall that I have invited him several times to meet my local housing associations, which expect universal credit to be rolled out in December. When will he come to Glasgow to hear the message that he needs to halt the roll-out of universal credit and fix it?

Alok Sharma: I apologise if I have not been to Scotland yet—I hope I will put that right in near time—but I have been going up and down the country to jobcentres, talking to people, and I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that universal credit is working.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Universal credit replaces six complex benefits, some of which are mutually exclusive. My hon. Friend the Minister has confirmed

that 700,000 people do not claim the benefits that they are entitled to. When universal credit applies to those people, how much on average will they gain?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is right: people have been underpaid benefits. On average, households will gain £285 a month. Under the previous system, 1.4 million people spent a decade trapped on benefits instead of being helped into work. That is changing under universal credit.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): During yesterday's Work and Pensions questions, I raised with the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work cases of my constituents who were not in receipt of transitional protection during a change of circumstances. The Minister told me I was wrong. I double-checked those cases with the Library and with others—I have dozens of similar cases—and it was not me who was wrong but the Minister. I think that there is a desire that such people will get that protection, but they do not at the moment. If Ministers do not know their policy, how can the rest of us have confidence in universal credit?

Alok Sharma: To clarify, what will happen under universal credit, once we pass the regulations—*[Interruption.]* What will happen under managed migration, when we pass the regulations, is that anyone who is currently—*[Interruption.]* If I may explain, anyone on legacy benefits who is moved across to universal credit will have transitional protection.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): The principles of universal credit are sound. Only a small number of people have come to my office to challenge it, and when there have been challenges, the Government have clearly listened. Will the Government continue to listen to issues raised by Members and look to refine the system to make sure that we get this absolutely right for people?

Alok Sharma: We are a listening Department in a listening Government, as we have shown with universal credit.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Universal credit is due to be rolled out in Redcar and Cleveland on 28 November—just before Christmas, as my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) said. Will the Minister guarantee today that none of the 11,000 households that are due to be transitioned, of which 6,000 include children, will be financially worse off? If he cannot guarantee that, will he stop the roll-out now?

Alok Sharma: Universal credit is a new benefit that simplifies the system. Ultimately, this is about having a system that helps the most vulnerable, that is fair to the taxpayer, that is sustainable and, importantly, that helps people into work and to get better-paid work. That is precisely what we are doing through universal credit.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for securing this important urgent question. There has been movement from the Government on the gig economy for the self-employed, which pleases me because I have advocated that for a few years, including when I was in the coalition.

There has also been movement on making rental payments to private sector landlords, which again I am pleased about, as it was something I advocated. In that spirit of positivity, will the Minister acknowledge that if the Chancellor were to replace the work allowance money that was cut in 2015 by the previous Chancellor, it would make a substantial difference to the success of universal credit?

Alok Sharma: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman outlines some of our positive changes, which prove that “test and learn” works. I am sorry to disappoint him once again, but those are matters for the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, and we will hear more about the Budget at the appropriate time.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I secured a debate on universal credit 18 months ago to highlight the misery it had caused in Newcastle, as a pilot area. The misery continues: rent arrears in social housing have doubled; private landlords will not accept universal credit claimants; and the city council has spent £750,000 supporting vulnerable claimants. What is the point of a pilot if the Government continue to roll out the misery regardless?

Alok Sharma: On rent arrears, the hon. Lady may have seen the report produced by the National Federation of ALMOs—I believe it came out in July—which stated that, of their tenants moving on to universal credit, 76% were already in arrears. That was before they moved on to universal credit. We introduced changes with the extra £1.5 billion to help people moving from housing benefit with their cash flow, giving them a two-week run-on, which does not have to be repaid. It is possible under universal credit to have alternative payment arrangements with payments made directly to landlords.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Has the Minister also seen the research that was published yesterday by the Residential Landlords Association, which found that two thirds of private landlords are concerned about universal credit tenants falling into arrears and that the average arrears owed has doubled in the last year? What urgent action will he take to resolve that problem?

Alok Sharma: As I said, we are rolling out the landlord portal for social housing, which is working. It is also possible for alternative payment arrangements to be put in place for tenants of private landlords—that is part of the system.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Universal credit full service reaches Ceredigion in December. Further to questions asked by other Opposition Members, does the Minister share our concern that, just when it will be needed most, our constituents will have limited access to support, as services will be reduced over the festive period?

Alok Sharma: Again, I am happy to discuss the hon. Gentleman's concerns with him and his jobcentre staff to make sure that he gets the assurances that he wants.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Minister failed to answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), so I will

ask it again. When universal credit is rolled out in Sheffield next month, will he guarantee that none of my constituents will be worse off?

Alok Sharma: I repeat my previous answer: it depends on people's individual circumstances. This new benefit system is ultimately about making sure that we help people into work. I have to say that, under the last Labour Government, many people were trapped on benefits, but that is changing.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The National Audit Office says that there is no way of measuring outcomes of the universal credit roll-out, yet the Government and Government Members peddle the myth that universal credit somehow magics people into jobs. Will the Minister therefore explain why 930 more people are now registered as unemployed in my constituency compared with a year ago—a 54% increase?

Alok Sharma: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is referring to the claimant count, but people both in and out of work receive universal credit. I encourage him to look at the universal credit business case that we produced, which shows that, as a result of the universal credit roll-out, another 200,000 people will be in work.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Wolverhampton Homes, which runs council housing in Wolverhampton, reports that 67% of universal credit claimants are in rent arrears and that those rent arrears are going up by £60,000 a month. Will the Minister call a halt to the roll-out until the problems of debt, stress and, possibly, impending homelessness are addressed?

Alok Sharma: We have put in support for individuals—I have talked about that. Of course, also very importantly, we now have this partnership with Citizens Advice, which is a respected, nationwide, independent organisation. It is there to help and assist the most vulnerable.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The two-child policy limiting the financial support to low-income families has already affected 400,000 children, making their families £4,000 a year worse off. When it is eventually rolled out through universal credit, some 3 million children will be affected. Will the Minister commit today to scrapping this abhorrent part of the wider welfare policy?

Alok Sharma: Universal credit is a welfare system that is about being fair to the most vulnerable people and to taxpayers, and being sustainable. The reason for that policy is that taxpayers face similar choices. It is important to say that we have exemptions in place, which will include kinship carers.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): If the system is such a success, will the Minister explain why everyone—whether constituents or those from advisory services—who came to my special surgeries at the start of this month were so concerned? Is not it the fact that the austerity that is hard-wired into universal credit has been an ideological choice for years? Will the Government therefore now make the choice to pause universal credit in Glasgow and elsewhere until these issues are sorted out?

Alok Sharma: I would be happy to hear from the hon. Gentleman about where he has found that his constituents have issues getting on to universal credit, and I will take up those individual cases.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Can we take it from the Minister's answers to the questions of my hon. Friends the Members for Redcar (Anna Turley) and for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) that he is admitting to the House that people are being made worse off as a result of universal credit?

Alok Sharma: I have said that under universal credit we have a system that is finally delivering for the most vulnerable and for taxpayers, that is sustainable and that—above all—is helping people into work. That means that people get into work faster, they stay in work longer and, really importantly, they earn more.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Yesterday, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), promised the House that, under managed migration, vulnerable people would be guaranteed a face-to-face interview. When will trials of that approach start so that we can all test and learn whether the Government are getting it right?

Alok Sharma: We are of course talking to the key stakeholders, particularly those who deal with the most vulnerable people, and we want to ensure that we put in place processes to support them. We are thinking very deeply about this matter.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): How many families will see their universal credit incomes fall by up to £200 a month?

Alok Sharma: As I have said, we have a system of universal credit that is about being fair to the most vulnerable and taxpayers and that is sustainable. The hon. Gentleman will know that changes made previously were voted on in the general election in 2015 and in this House in 2016. The key thing is to ensure that we are supporting the most vulnerable people. Under managed migration, we will give protections to those who are migrating across from legacy benefits; 1 million disabled households will gain and half a million people on severe disability premium will also be protected.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The DWP has no process in place to identify people with high support needs and instead relies on claimants to self-identify. What will the Minister do to ensure that disabled claimants who experience difficulties making a claim will not be left without the support and finance that they need?

Alok Sharma: People will get one-to-one support under universal credit. They have an opportunity to have a discussion with their work coach and develop that relationship, meaning that they can be signposted to the support that they need. It is working.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Universal credit was introduced with three principles: it was supposed to simplify the system, but more than 300,000 people will be paid late this year through no

fault of their own; it was supposed to save money, but it costs three times as much to administer; and it was supposed to get people into work, but the NAO states clearly that the Government “will never be able to measure”

whether they have achieved that goal. What went wrong and who has taken responsibility for this failure?

Alok Sharma: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman talks about employment on the day that we have reached a record low level of unemployment since 1975. The policies of this Government are clearly working: 80% of first payments are made fully and on time; in some cases, that figure gets up to 90%. It is important that we get the right information from people to be able to verify their costs. If we are able to do that, payments are made.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Despite the Minister's responses today, universal credit is causing chaos, hardship and unnecessary suffering to people in my constituency as they seek to access essential support. Will he accept my invitation to visit my constituency to discuss the challenges of universal credit with my constituents so he can explain to them why he believes that universal credit is working?

Alok Sharma: I do visit jobcentres in different parts of the country. If the hon. Lady would like, we could have a discussion with the people in her jobcentre who are delivering this service; I am happy to arrange a call together with her.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Now that the Minister has confirmed that some people will be worse off when universal credit rolls out in Sheffield on 7 November, will he make it clear to the House exactly who those people will be?

Alok Sharma: People's individual circumstances determine what they get under any benefit system. The point of the urgent question was to talk about the whole process of roll-out and managed migration. As I said, when people migrate across under managed migration, they will receive transitional protection.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am happy to call all remaining colleagues wishing to pose a question, as long as their standing up signifies their acceptance that they will ask a single-sentence question.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Speculation, rumours, confusing—mentioned by the Minister earlier. Was that the “Dancing Queen” speech about austerity being over?

Alok Sharma: I apologise; I did not hear the hon. Gentleman's question clearly. I think he talked about rumours, which I will not be commenting on.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Five years after the start of the universal credit pilot in Inverness, Highland Council has had a £2.5 million bill for administering universal

credit, paid by every single household in the highlands. When will the Minister respond to Highland Council's request—and mine—to pay that money back?

Alok Sharma: There is a new burdens policy in place, and the DWP has paid out to local councils. I believe that the figure for 2017-18 was around £13 million. If the hon. Gentleman forwards me the correspondence, I would be happy to look at it.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Last Wednesday marked World Mental Health Day. The Mental Health Nurses Association stated in its letter to the Secretary of State that universal credit

“will make matters much worse, especially for those living with mental ill health.”

Given the stress, uncertainty and poverty caused by universal credit, is it not time to scrap the roll-out?

Alok Sharma: My ministerial colleagues and I have regular discussions with key stakeholders, particularly those representing the most vulnerable. We will continue to do that, and we will work with them to ensure that the managed migration process delivers for the most vulnerable.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): It is reported in today's *Daily Record* that South Lanarkshire Council has warned its employees that because they are on four-weekly pay and will get two payments in November, they stand to lose their universal credit over Christmas and will have to reapply. What will the Minister do to fix this shambles?

Alok Sharma: I am happy to have a discussion with the hon. Gentleman on the particular case he raises.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What will the Minister do to address the fact that too many applications for vital alternative payment arrangements are being delayed, ignored or even lost by the DWP, totally undermining their purpose?

Alok Sharma: If the hon. Gentleman has individual cases of constituents facing these difficulties, he should bring them to me. I cannot react to general comments, which we hear quite a lot from the Opposition. When Members have specific cases, they should bring them forward and we will deal with them.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I will be as brief as I can. For all the reasons outlined by my colleagues, the roll-out should be stopped and people should not lose out, especially given that a lot of people have been driven into the hands of money lenders as a result of the roll-out.

Alok Sharma: As I have said, we will be bringing forward the managed migration regulations later this year. If the Opposition want to support people and ensure that they are protected, they should vote for those regulations together with us.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Someone making a claim on 5 December, the day that universal credit starts at Shettleston jobcentre—not Bridgeton, as

the Minister found out yesterday, because he has already shut that jobcentre—will receive no money until 9 January. Is the Minister happy to be known as the Grinch that stole Glasgow's Christmas?

Alok Sharma: I have never been described as a Grinch before. The hon. Lady ought to be encouraging her constituents—clearly this discussion is had by work coaches when claimants come in—to talk about the advance that is available for people. *[Interruption.]* Well, it is interest-free. Also, as I have said, those on housing benefit get two weeks' run-on.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Some 72% of universal credit sanctions in Scotland hit those aged under 30, one in five of whom are 18 or 19 years old. As full-service universal credit rolls out at Springburn jobcentre in my constituency from 31 October, will the Minister at least suspend all sanctions until after Christmas?

Alok Sharma: Sanctions are implemented only once there has been a detailed process, and there is an opportunity for individuals who are facing a potential referral to explain to decision makers why there are mitigating circumstances.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Universal credit comes to Castlemilk jobcentre in December. The Minister will know that one, because he tried and failed to close it down. Can he guarantee that there will be no more closures or changes to jobcentre provision in the city of Glasgow?

Alok Sharma: We have reconfigured the jobcentre estate, as the hon. Gentleman knows. He will also know that part of the reason was that we were paying for 20% of space that we were not using. We now have a jobcentre estate that is fit for the 21st century.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The Minister has answered a number of questions about double payments in a four-week period. Christmas is coming, and the majority of part-time workers who claim universal credit will be double-paid, so their universal credit will then be affected in the next payment period. These are not individual cases, although they are individual people. This is a system fault and it should be put right for this Christmas.

Alok Sharma: As I have said, universal credit adjusts depending on the amount of money that people are earning. In periods when they are not earning a salary, obviously their universal credit payment would go up.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Can the Minister assure those in my constituency—a vast area of 7,000 sq km, with 23 islands and only five jobcentres—with limited connectivity that they will not be penalised as they are unable to access their online journals?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Gentleman will know, it is possible to phone jobcentres, and in cases where people are vulnerable, it is also possible for home visits to be made.

Frank Field: May I thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker? Huge numbers of people will know after our proceedings that they have not been deserted by their MPs. Thank you very much.

Mr Speaker: Well, it is a pleasure. My job is simply to facilitate the House in discussing in this place what people are discussing in the Dog and Duck, around the dinner table and in the workplace.

Frank Field: And in the DWP.

Mr Speaker: And in the Department for Work and Pensions, as the right hon. Gentleman pertinently observes. I am very grateful to him for what he has just said.

Clinical Waste Incineration

1.33 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to update the House on clinical waste incineration across the NHS.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): Yesterday evening, the hon. Gentleman, in a point of order, repeated claims made by Healthcare Environmental Services regarding incineration capacity, and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) raised a point of order on the capability of Mitie to deliver waste management services for the NHS and on TUPE arrangements for staff employed by Healthcare Environmental Services. I would like to clarify why the statement that there is sufficient incinerator capacity is correct, and why the claims made by the company, which is currently subject to criminal investigation, should not be taken at face value, as appears to have been the case yesterday.

With regard to incinerator capacity, there have been quotes from Environment Agency and NHS Improvement officials, cited in the *Health Service Journal* in May and August 2018, suggesting that there is a shortage of clinical waste incinerator capacity. By the time of my statement on 9 October, far more due diligence had been conducted on the claims made by Healthcare Environmental Services. Analysis carried out by NHSI identified 2,269 tonnes of incinerator capacity in October. The trusts served by Healthcare Environmental Services produced 595 tonnes. The analysis shows that there is sufficient incinerator capacity for clinical waste and that the statement made to the House was therefore correct. The issue is whether HES is willing to pay for that capacity. The fact that Mitie has secured 1,000 tonnes of incinerator capacity demonstrates that it is available.

The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford questioned whether Mitie was capable of delivering waste management for the NHS. The Mitie contract was put in place rapidly on 5 October to ensure continuity of service following trusts exercising their step-in and then termination rights to end their contracts with Healthcare Environmental Services. Over that weekend, Mitie visited the NHS sites to understand their business needs and the frequency of collections required, and responded immediately to trusts where waste needed to be collected. It also located bins on those sites so that the collections could start. Putting a new contract in place so quickly clearly means that there needs to be a phased approach to Mitie providing 100% of the service previously provided by Healthcare Environmental Services.

Mitie is working closely with NHSI to ensure that the needs of the trusts are being met, and regular collection schedules are in place at sufficient levels to maintain all patient services safely. The trusts also have additional contingency storage in place on site, with the waste being collected correctly stored so that the NHS can contain its services. This storage contingency will remain in place until Mitie meets 100% of the waste collection frequency required by the trusts. There is no risk to public safety through the action taken by the trusts.

As regards TUPE, Mitie has written to Healthcare Environmental Services and its legal representatives to request complete information, to assess the situation with regard to the potential transferring of employees and to minimise disruption for those employees. Mitie has also set up a dedicated helpline and email address to support Healthcare Environmental Services staff at this uncertain time.

It continues to be the case that there is no risk to public safety through the action taken by these trusts and that all NHS trusts have been able to continue to provide operations in line with meeting our key objective.

Jonathan Ashworth: All we are asking for from the Minister is full transparency. Last week, he told the House with great confidence that

“the suggestion in some quarters that this is an issue of a lack of capacity is simply not valid.”—[*Official Report*, 9 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 39.]

Subsequently, we read in the *Health Service Journal*, as he mentioned, that NHS Improvement had concerns about capacity back in August and acknowledged that there were “national market capacity issues”. He has told us today that due diligence has been done since then. Why did he decide not to reveal in his statement last week that concerns were raised with him back in August? Was he aware when he came to the House and made his statement that these concerns had been raised in August? He tells us that extra due diligence has been carried out. Can he explain what that extra due diligence actually is?

The Minister has tried to reassure us again today that there are no public health implications to the measures that have been put in place since HES lost these contracts. Can he therefore explain his view of the various allegations currently circulating on social media, with photos and videos suggesting that waste is not being picked up from a health centre in Keighley, that hospital staff in Leeds are shifting waste in inappropriate overalls, that hazardous waste at Dewsbury is being stored in inappropriate shipping containers and that up to 15 trusts across Yorkshire are storing waste illegally? Has he checked each and every one of those allegations? Can he tell us what his inquiries have revealed about them? If he has not looked into each and every one of those allegations, why not?

Can the Minister assure us that incineration sites to which tonnes of waste from HES facilities are now taken are big enough to safely manage this waste, that the drivers transporting the waste are suitably qualified and that the incinerators now being used are designed to deal with hazardous waste? Last week, I asked him to give us a cast-iron guarantee that there is no risk to public health at any of those sites, or where the waste is currently being incinerated. Will he give us that absolute guarantee today? All we want from the Minister is complete and utter transparency. We have not had that so far.

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman seems to be spending a lot of time on social media and not looking at the data on what is being done. There was a time when Opposition Members were used to the complexity of legal agreements and contracts and would have understood that mobilising 17 NHS contracts and maintaining NHS operations on those sites requires a

significant amount of work. It takes time for Mitie to mobilise that contract—[*Interruption.*] If he gives me a moment, I will address directly the different concerns that he raised.

The hon. Gentleman’s first concern was that a statement given in October, with up-to-date information based on the work done leading up to it, was in some way incorrect because it did not pick up on early discussions within NHSI, which was only notified on 31 July. Obviously the concerns raised by HES about a lack of incinerators needed to be looked into. Having been looked into, those concerns were found not to have merit. The evidence for that is the fact that the new supplier, Mitie, has been able to secure 1,000 tonnes of incinerator capacity. If the hon. Gentleman’s central charge is correct, he will need to explain how Mitie has been able to find available incineration capacity when HES was unable to do so.

The hon. Gentleman asked when I was notified. I was not notified of the internal discussions among officials in August; I was not dealing with the issue at that point. The issue is what the House was informed of when the statement was made.

On the allegations on social media, I have not checked every single tweet that the hon. Gentleman has looked at, but the fact is that of the 17 trusts, three have had the stock of waste on their sites cleared and 12 are due to have theirs cleared by the end of the week, with two remaining, as Mitie mobilises from around 80% of service delivery now to 100% in the coming weeks.

The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford has made some legitimate points about TUPE and about Mitie scaling up, which I am sure she will come on to. Those points were not addressed, surprisingly, in the shadow Secretary of State’s comments, but I am happy to pick them up in due course. One of the advantages of Mitie is that it should deliver greater resilience, because it is not looking to deliver all the elements of the contract in the way that HES is. It is bringing in other firms, such as logistics suppliers and disposal firms, so there will be greater resilience in the contract, but we can address any specific concerns that the right hon. Lady has, given her constituency interest.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I thank the Minister for his clear words. I remember just how emotive the whole issue of incineration can be, because I was a news reporter at the time of the foot and mouth and BSE sagas, and it is something that worries the public. Can I have an assurance from the Minister that there is an industry-wide agreement that there is enough capacity everywhere to deal with incineration?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to identify the concern there has been following comments on social media and certain media reports about incineration and the nature of this clinical waste. As I said in my statement, I am happy to confirm that there is sufficient capacity, as Mitie has demonstrated. It is worth reminding the House that just 1.1% of the waste under discussion is anatomical, and many of the media reports do not reflect that.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The business concerned, Healthcare Environmental, is based in Shotts in my constituency. Waste incineration—where and how

[Neil Gray]

it happens—is always an emotive and controversial issue, and it is imperative that we get strong regulation right. But it appears that the UK Government have influenced—shall we say?—that regulation to deal with an issue that the company claims was contained and it had a plan to deal with.

Can the Minister confirm whether special dispensation has been granted to a municipal site in Slough that apparently does not have a licence to deal with hazardous waste, to incinerate this waste in a way that would otherwise have been inappropriate? Can he confirm that the waste has been handled by unlicensed individuals and been moved against normal regulations? Can he clarify what role the Cabinet Office has had in this issue and whether the UK Government have had any relationship with Healthcare Environmental's competitor, Stericycle? The focus last week was on Healthcare Environmental, and now the focus appears to turn to Government actions. With 400 jobs under threat across the UK and 150 in my constituency, is it not time we had an independent inquiry into this whole mess?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is right to recognise that there is a significant impact in Scotland, given the services that HES supplies, and it is worth reminding the House that HES is still trading and clearing waste from a number of NHS sites. However, given that it has been subject to a series of actions by the Environment Agency and is subject to a criminal investigation, it is worth treating HES's claims with a degree of caution.

The Environment Agency is of course an independent agency, so it is for the Environment Agency to look at how waste is being processed, and a strict legal framework applies to that. The specific concern about Slough has not been raised with me, but I am happy to take that away and write to the hon. Gentleman.

The Cabinet Office has been in active discussion with the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care, as have Scottish officials, who have worked very constructively with officials in England. This has been seen as an issue that affects Scotland as well as England, and it is one on which officials have worked collaboratively.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Can my hon. Friend reassure patients who might be concerned that their operations have been delayed in any way, shape or form by this whole fiasco that at no point were any members of the public put at risk by the treatment or non-treatment of this particular sort of clinical waste?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on that. The key risk in respect of this supplier was that the NHS's ability to continue to perform operations would be affected if it could not clear its clinical waste. I am happy to reassure her that all 17 trusts affected have been able to maintain their services, which ultimately is the key issue for patients and our constituents.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that the staff are being offered TUPE transfers? I have heard from constituents who have been told that they are not, and clearly it is

completely unfair for staff to be stuck in limbo like this. Can he say whether he has considered breaking up the contract and treating incineration separately, what the additional cost of the new contract might be and which part of the NHS is paying?

Stephen Barclay: The right hon. Lady raises an important point. I am happy to meet her to discuss these issues, given her constituency interest. I understand that she met members of staff on Friday. I very much urge HES employees who are listening to the debate to phone Mitie's dedicated helpline and provide their details. The key issue is that Mitie has requested information from HES that it has not provided. To assess whether TUPE legally applies and the work patterns and issues of the staff involved, Mitie relies on HES providing information that, to date, has not been provided. The key issues in giving reassurance to staff are for them to contact the helpline and for HES to provide the information requested.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on the measured way in which he is dealing with this unpleasant situation. Can he confirm that the Environment Agency will suspend HES's remaining permits if enforcement action does not return it to full compliance?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Environment Agency is an independent body, so it will be for the Environment Agency to reach a decision on whether such a suspension should be raised. I can reassure the House that the issue is subject to great scrutiny at present and that the Environment Agency is looking at it very closely.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It seems to me that there are two ways of looking at such issues. Factoring in numbers, statistics and logic is one way and leads to one conclusion, but when we think about human decency and human dignity it becomes something entirely different. The public's confidence in the methodology is absolutely paramount at this stage. First, does the Minister recognise that, and secondly, can he tell me what he is doing to restore that public confidence?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I very much recognise that. The emotive nature of the topic and the way in which some of the headlines have been written do cause alarm. We are being very strategic. First, we are ensuring that our key priority, which is continuity of service in hospitals, is maintained. Secondly, we are ensuring that a supplier is mobilised as quickly as possible. He will recognise that to mobilise a supplier over so many contracts, where those contracts are not uniform—there are different legal provisions in them—is a complex issue. Thirdly, where there is an interregnum with regard to contingencies and waste that needs to be stored on site, we are ensuring that that is done in the safest way possible and that the waste is then cleared at the earliest opportunity.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the reassurance that there is enough capacity in the incineration system to deal with this issue, but will he confirm that the delays caused by

Healthcare Environmental Services have not had an impact on the capacity for patients to receive the treatment that they need?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the issues we have experienced with the supplier have not affected the NHS's ability to maintain its service. That has been our key objective throughout, and that continues to be the case.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that, after the NHS trusts had terminated their contracts with HES, a new contract was given almost immediately?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the key issues was to have alternative provision in place as quickly as possible so that we were not in the situation of waste being stored on site beyond the absolute minimum. It is a tribute to officials in the Department and in the NHS, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and elsewhere that a quite complex set of legal arrangements has been mobilised in such a short period to ensure that services are maintained.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): While the backlog is being cleared, will my hon. Friend confirm that any waste will be kept in a secure and safe fashion? Will he also be more exact about when he thinks the backlog of waste currently in the system will be cleared?

Stephen Barclay: There are two different components to that. There is the waste on sites, such as at Normanton, where HES has allowed a degree of waste to be stored, but I think my hon. Friend's question is driving at the waste on hospital sites. As I said in my statement—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) waits for the reply, he will hear that the stock on those sites is being cleared. Perhaps he has been busy checking social media again. The bulk of the sites will be cleared by the end of the week; there will be two remaining beyond this week. We are very much focusing on that issue.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that, had he not taken action, the failure of Healthcare Environmental Services to dispose of the clinical waste properly would have presented a serious risk of clinical waste backing up in hospitals and other healthcare facilities? Owing to his taking effective action in a timely way, that has been avoided and healthcare delivery has not been interrupted.

Stephen Barclay: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. There has very much been a Government-wide effort to ensure that waste did not build up, for the reason he mentions—the ability of the NHS to maintain its services and continue to operate if clinical waste could not be removed from the site. There is a varying degree of contingency capacity on different sites, so certain hospital sites would quite quickly exhaust that capacity if it was not cleared. That is why, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said, the ability to mobilise the contract quickly was so important.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will the Minister assure the House that good governance will be in place to ensure that the new provider can dispose of the waste very safely?

Stephen Barclay: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. There are lessons to be learned from the HES contract, and I am keen that we do so, but as I commented earlier, the contract with Mitie—through the use of different logistics firms and different waste sites—will actually build greater resilience into the arrangements for clearing clinical waste.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Building on that point, will my hon. Friend ensure that there is an overarching review of local processes to make sure that failings of this sort by a contractor cannot happen again anywhere in the country?

Stephen Barclay: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that reassurance. It is important, where a supplier has got into such difficulties, that we learn the lessons and ensure that they are part of contract procurement moving forward.

Bullying and Harassment: Cox Report

Mr Speaker: Before calling the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) to ask his urgent question, I wish to make the following brief remarks. Having read with care the report by Dame Laura Cox and having also lived through the MPs' expenses scandal, I am persuaded by at least two of her fundamental recommendations. Without seeking to pre-empt what the House might ultimately decide, I firmly believe that the only possible way to resolve this matter is the establishment of a body that is both entirely independent of and external to Parliament to hear and adjudicate on all allegations of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct, including deciding how far to investigate past misconduct. Whether the allegations involve MPs or staff, the same entirely independent body should be in complete control of the process from start to finish. As I have said before in this Chamber and to the Leader of the House's cross-party inquiry in my oral evidence last December, independence and transparency are the best guarantors of a process that will both be fair and command general confidence.

1.57 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Leader of the House to make a statement on "The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff Independent Inquiry Report".

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): May I thank the hon. Gentleman for his urgent question? I am genuinely pleased to have an opportunity to share some initial views with the House. I welcome Dame Laura Cox's report, and I want to thank her and, in particular, all those who have come forward to tell their stories to this inquiry. Over the past year, we have all been shocked and appalled at the reports of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in Westminster, and I am determined to stamp it out. The findings in this report are undeniably worrying, and they reflect poorly on the systems in the House of Commons.

In all the work I have done to create a new, fair and transparent complaints system for Parliament, I have been clear that everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and respect. I am so sorry to hear of the experiences highlighted by Dame Laura's report of members of Commons staff, and I speak to them directly when I say, "You deserve so much better". It is vital that the House leadership now responds fully and promptly. In my role as Leader of the House, I have been determined to do all I can to put in place the right procedures and services to begin the process of culture change through the new complaints process. However, as Dame Laura points out and as I made clear in my statement in July, culture change will not happen overnight. It is an ongoing process to overturn entrenched attitudes to the way things are done round here.

Last November—almost a year ago—the Prime Minister asked me to convene a cross-party, bicameral working group, including staff members, to develop our independent complaints and grievance policy. The initial scope of the working group was not to include House staff, as it was understood that the policies in place, such as the Respect policy, were sufficient and robust enough to

deal with any complaints made by House staff. Subsequent reports came to light through the media, however, that strongly suggested that that was not the case.

As a result, at my instigation, the external members of the House of Commons Commission, without further reference to any elected Member, appointed Dame Laura to conduct a fully independent inquiry into the alleged bullying and harassment of House staff and the effectiveness of policies such as Respect and Valuing Others. Her report is the result of that inquiry. To clarify the current position, the independent complaints and grievance policy has been up and running since July, and all staff have access to it, including House staff and those making historic allegations. We have set up two independent helplines—one to deal with allegations of bullying and one to deal with allegations of sexual misconduct.

The new scheme delivers a behaviour code that applies to everyone who visits or works in Parliament. We have a new HR advice service for MPs' staff, and House staff have access to an employee assistance programme. We have also implemented a significant new training offer, as well as an induction scheme for staff joining Parliament for the first time. The complaints procedure provides full confidentiality for all complainants, and I am pleased that Dame Laura recognises the importance of this. I have been absolutely clear right from the beginning that this is the start, not the end of the process. The ICGP has reviews built into it at six and 18 months, and Dame Laura's inquiry report will be central to shaping those views.

Colleagues may be aware that the House of Commons Commission has called an urgent meeting for Monday to consider this report, and as I have said, the House leadership must now respond fully and promptly. It is imperative that we make Parliament a modern, professional and safe place to work—where everybody is treated with dignity and respect.

John Mann: When I raised the expenses scandal 12 months before *The Daily Telegraph* exposé, it did not go down well in Parliament. With the child abuse inquiry and the Westminster strand, the ongoing response of the political parties is to put a lawyer and QC into the inquiry to protect the interests of MPs past and present. In the sexual harassment scandal, people have gone public making serious allegations, but they have been left in limbo for more than a year. Now we have this. Paragraph 30 refers to

"a culture that is as embedded as it is shocking."

That sums up the report. Paragraph 141 says that it is well known that there are "serial offenders" currently in Parliament. Paragraph 160 goes through the 15 different forms of harassment and bullying behaviour. Paragraph 161 goes through the impact of that. Paragraph 419 pleads for "the active support" of MPs, which says rather a lot.

Will the Leader of the House guarantee that all three of the simple recommendations made by Dame Laura Cox will be implemented? Further, because I am aware what the problems are, will the Labour party and every other Opposition party guarantee their unequivocal public support today for those three recommendations so that they can be pushed through speedily and effectively?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman because this is an issue that he has pursued. He and I have discussed this a number of times, and he is gravely

concerned about the allegations of bad behaviour that has taken place and a bad culture that has existed in this place for far too long. I pay tribute to him for all the work that he has done in this area.

This is a matter for the House, and as Leader of the House I will do everything in my power to stamp out all forms of bullying and harassment. I would say to all hon. Members—those who attempted to turn a blind eye or allowed it to go on under their view—that as we all know, for evil to succeed good men need only do nothing.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Dame Laura Cox says in her inquiry report that

“many consider that there is still no genuine understanding that things need to change.”

She says that a shocking culture of fear and deference is driven right from the top of the House of Commons—behaviour that we simply would not tolerate elsewhere. The new grievance procedure is welcome, and my right hon. Friend is to be applauded for what she has done to put that in place, but it is not enough, and Dame Laura says that. She makes it clear that there is a need for a culture change, too, which directly requires a change in the management of the House of Commons.

As we have just heard, very senior management are the people who will decide what happens next as a result of the report. Will the Leader of the House explain how the brave staff who have spoken out can be reassured that action will be taken, because the House of Commons has a duty to lead by example—to be an exemplar employer. The report makes it clear that there needs to be a complete change in leadership at the most senior level, including you, Mr Speaker, as chief officer, if we are, in Dame Laura’s words, to “press the reset button”.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend cares a great deal about these issues. Again, she has been closely involved in the progress of the new complaints procedure and has had a hand in shaping its direction. She will know that all those involved in the working and steering groups across the political parties throughout the House worked tirelessly to reach an arrangement in which we would be in a position to change the culture of Parliament. She is exactly right to highlight the fact that that is what is needed. I am sure that the hon. Members for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), and for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), and all those involved in the working group will take the same view as I do that we have to change the culture of this place. It is absolutely vital that we do that. It is not going to happen overnight, and we have to continue to lean in and accept the recommendations in Dame Laura’s report and do everything that we can to ensure that this place mends its ways and becomes not just an exemplar but a role model for other Parliaments around the world so that they can learn from our experiences.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her response to the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), and you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question. I, too, thank Dame Laura Cox QC OBE for taking the time to work on this important issue and for her comprehensive report. It is never easy for an institution when the spotlight is quite rightly shone in this way.

Hon. Members should know—the Leader of the House touched on this—that the terms of reference were drawn up by the non-execs on the Commission, Dame Janet Gaymer and Jane McCall, and hon. Members did not have sight of that, nor did we have sight of the report before it was published.

Two hundred people who are currently working or have previously worked here came forward to speak to Dame Laura Cox, and it must sometimes have been difficult to raise these issues. This 155-page report needs to be looked at carefully. Dame Laura said that this has been

“an inquiry, not an investigation.”

At paragraph 23, she said:

“Disputed allegations require due process and a fair hearing for both sides in order to determine the facts”.

She said that she was

“not in a position in this inquiry to determine or re-open any individual complaints.”

I was a member of the Governance of the House Committee that was set up to review the structures of the House. Being able to speak to Members of staff at all levels was helpful in determining changes. Like the Leader of the House, I see those changes as an ongoing process. Does the right hon. Lady consider that having an ongoing staff panel with trade union representatives would be helpful?

A process of change has already taken place. In paragraph 63, Dame Laura says that, as Professor Sarah Childs noted in “The Good Parliament” report, which was commissioned by you, Mr Speaker, in 2016, diversity also plays an important role in making Parliament a more diverse place.

Dame Laura did criticise the decision of the working group to implement a new code of conduct without waiting for the outcome of her inquiry. She said that implementing a new code of conduct should not have been rushed and went on to say that

“it is more important to get it right than to get it done in haste, in accordance with self-imposed deadlines”.

The independent complaints process is to be reviewed in January 2019. Can the Leader confirm that the Cox report can be fed into that process, and, if so, how? The report states:

“Delivering fundamental and permanent change will require a focus and a genuine commitment on the part of the leadership of the House.”

The Commons Executive Board will meet to review and discuss its contents, and, as the Leader said, a meeting of the House of Commons Commission has also been convened. The Leader also touched on the fact that in some places it is reported that there are only three members of the Commission. In fact, every party has a role to play on the Commission.

Does the right hon. Lady agree that we should look at other organisations for best practice to ensure there is an independent and robust system for dealing with complaints in a timely way, as Dame Laura set out in her introduction? We need to heed Dame Laura’s suggestion that we need to take time to consider this very important report. Her Majesty’s Opposition will continue to work on a cross-party basis to tackle this issue and to ensure new procedures are as robust and effective as possible to protect everyone working in, and visiting, this House.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. She was an absolutely core and integral part of the working group, as, likewise, was her hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) on the steering group. They know as well as I do that this was the result of an enormous amount of cross-party collaboration to come up with the right ideas, to hear from all those who work in this place who have had bad experiences and find out what they would like to see changed. We had a trade union representative on the steering group who had very useful input. We have had staff members at all levels. We have always sought to take soundings from right across the House.

I will answer the hon. Lady's specific questions. On whether we should have an ongoing staff panel, she will know that the review after six months, which will begin in January, will include staff members. Likewise, the review after 18 months will include staff members. It will be for that second review to decide how frequently subsequent reviews should take place. The hon. Lady says that Dame Laura criticised the introduction of the scheme before the publication of her report. She will know that the working group agreed that we would not delay further on the grounds that, as her hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) pointed out in his urgent question, people had already waited for almost nine to 10 months before they could come forward. With no clear date for Dame Laura's report, it was not right to wait still further. Nevertheless, Dame Laura's report will absolutely be fed in as a key piece of evidence to the review at six months, which, as I say, starts in January.

The hon. Lady asked about whether we will be looking at other organisations. She will know that we did look at other organisations all the way through the process of putting together the complaints procedure, and we will continue to do so.

This is a matter for the House. All hon. Members who have an interest in bringing forward further recommendations and suggestions should be aware that every party has a representative on the working group or the steering group. They should let their views be known so that they can be taken into account to get the best possible arrangements.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): This is a disturbing report, which identifies a number of unacceptable behaviours. Page 64 lists some of them: taunting, mocking and mimicking; deliberately belittling in front of other Members; making offensive personal comments about appearance; belittling someone's junior status; and making lengthy and humiliating tirades of criticism and abuse in front of colleagues. How can we encourage Mr Speaker to stop this behaviour?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will know that there are differing views about the implications of Dame Laura's report. She is essentially urging all hon. Members to allow senior management to consider not only their own views on their own involvement, but what action needs to be taken by senior management to ensure that change is forthcoming.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this very important urgent question.

Quite simply, Dame Laura's report should shame and appal all of us who work on the parliamentary estate. It is a devastating litany, with details of bullying, an inbuilt patriarchal culture and almost out of control gender-based power relationships. It is all about this place. Historical patriarchy practically oozes out of the walls. Centuries of deference is a feature of nearly all our political discourse. I support your call, Mr Speaker, for an independent look at this, but we have to build into that a look at the total culture of this place in the way we do our business. The way we do our business could not be more ripe for the issues Dame Laura identifies. As she says, the issues go all the way to the top in the way that this House is managed. We should simply say that we are no longer prepared to put up with that and that it should be addressed effectively.

I served with the Leader of the House on the grievance working party group. I actually believe it is an excellent piece of work. Does she agree, however, that we have to do much more to make it a reality and a feature of this place? Do we need to advertise it more? Do we need to say to people around this estate and House that this is now available to them and that they should come forward and use it? It is an effective behaviour code, which can go some way to guarantee behaviour in this place. We now have two particular routes through which complaints can be raised. We must get this up and running and working properly.

The one thing we did not address was the culture and environment of this place. Does she agree that the six-month review will look at how we do business in this place? It is no longer acceptable. We have to change the way power relationships are built in this House and the way we do our business. The way we address each other makes these types of issues more of a reality. Will she work with all of us in this House to tackle effectively the culture of this place and make it a place where we all do our business here with dignity, respect and equality?

Andrea Leadsom: I am truly grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He really contributed enormously and very collaboratively to the work we did on the complaints procedure. I am glad that he, like me and the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), is pleased with the work we did.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out that there is a long way to go before we can say "Job done." What we have done is start on a journey. We are by no means at the end of it. What we have done is ensure that people can come forward, with the confidence that their name will not be splashed all over the newspapers, to make a complaint and to get it dealt with seriously and sensitively. Where there is a very serious allegation, they can be supported where necessary—even to go to the criminal justice system. All those features are incredibly important.

All hon. Members will be pleased to know that the complaints system is working well. I have mystery shopped it, if that is the right term, to see how it is operating. It is operating well. It has been going for only three months. In a further three months, there will be the opportunity to review it thoroughly to see what more can be done. I absolutely assure all hon. Members that I will play my part in facilitating that.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Given that the current senior management of the House of Commons are so criticised in Dame Laura's report,

who can be trusted to take ownership of this important issue? How can those deemed to be the problem themselves ever possibly be part of the solution?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue that is incredibly important and at the heart of this. Dame Laura makes some very specific recommendations for senior leadership to consider, but at the same time, she points out her concerns about how that can be facilitated when certain members of the senior leadership are themselves potentially part of the problem. The starting point for that is the urgent House of Commons Commission meeting that will take place on Monday. Commissioners there will want to consider very carefully what can be put in place to ensure that we can look at the recommendations independently and in a way that enables us to report back to the House on actions taken.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): The report makes it clear that there is a small number of sitting MPs who are reported to engage in bullying and harassment on a regular basis. It is also clear that this is a long-running issue, so does the Leader of the House agree that we should scrap any limits on how far investigations can go back and get on with making this a workplace to be proud of?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman raised that point. He will be aware that when the working group looked at the issue of historical allegations, we were really keen—unanimously—that the new procedure would be able to look at all historical allegations. However, the internal legal advice that we took suggested to us that it would not be possible to create some kind of system that looked back and judged behaviour that happened a long time ago on the basis of something that had just been agreed. We checked that with external counsel, who indeed confirmed that the further back we go, the more problematic it is. I see that, in her report, Dame Laura challenges that advice. I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman raised that point, because it is something that I will be very pleased to add to the list of things for the review that will start in January.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): The old adage is that the fish rots from the head, and the leadership failings that have been highlighted in this report are extremely worrying. I say to my right hon. Friend that the important thing is that nobody need fear being able to call to account those who—however senior they are—have failings. If this report has identified senior leadership failings, I consider that the comments from my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) should be taken into account. No one should be involved in this process who has potentially been linked to being part of the problem.

Andrea Leadsom: I take what my hon. Friend says very seriously. In this place, we are all aware that a number of issues are “matters for the House”. That is quite a tricky concept, because nowhere in the workplace are things simply a matter for all those who are involved in that workplace. So we have some unique challenges in trying to deal with Dame Laura’s recommendations, but deal with them we must. As I have said, the starting point will be the House of Commons Commission meeting on Monday, after which we will have a clearer way forward in what is not a matter for me, as Leader of

the Commons, but a matter for the House. I, as Leader of the Commons, will make sure that I facilitate whatever the House decides.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): There is a great deal in the report that is shocking, but in truth, there is very little that we should really regard as surprising. The Leader of the House is right when she says that culture change will not happen overnight, but we know from our experience of reforming our expenses system—in the most difficult and painful way possible—that we can in fact change the structures and procedures and that, through these structural and procedural changes, we eventually do change the culture. The root cause of both instances is the sense of entitlement that informs so much of what is done in this place. That is what has to change, and it has to change urgently. When the Leader of the House looks towards the Commission meeting next Monday, will she give me an undertaking that she will go to that meeting with a plan and a timeline for the implementation of the three very clear and straightforward proposals, which my party supports and which should be taken forward by the House as a whole?

Andrea Leadsom: First, the right hon. Gentleman is exactly right about the importance of culture change and about how changing the structures and processes, and getting rid of that sense of entitlement will lead to the change we want to see. I just point out to all hon. Members that the complaints procedure has a number of investigations under way already. There will be consequences for those who are found to have behaved inappropriately, whoever they are in this place. There will be consequences, including—whoever they are—the potential for their livelihood to be taken away from them. That was an absolutely core point behind the complaints procedure. None of those things has come to pass as yet, because it is still very early days. It is only once we see those complaints followed through to their logical extent that we will start to see that people find that there are consequences of the way that they indulge their own behaviour. That is when we will start to see the culture change.

In response to the right hon. Gentleman’s specific request for a guarantee from me, what is really important is that the review that will start in January—only a couple of months away now—will take into account very clearly Dame Laura’s recommendations and deal with and address them, because it will be caught up with the overall review of how the complaints procedure is working. The House Commission will absolutely undertake to address and draw some conclusions from Dame Laura’s recommendations, but it will be brought into the review of the entire complaints procedure, where we will actually see actions forthcoming.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the independent Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards has the right to initiate inquiries. Does she consider that, in the light of this report, it would be appropriate in some cases for the commissioner to initiate inquiries into some of the historical allegations that have been referred to, perhaps with the assistance and advice of Dame Laura Cox? In the light of that, does my right hon. Friend consider that the Standards Committee should rethink its position on the seven-year rule?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend, as a very experienced member of the House Commission, proposes some very sensible and practical ways forward. I am grateful to him for his suggestions and I think that we should consider them at the House Commission on Monday.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I have twice worked for bullies and it is absolutely miserable: one moment you are being lauded with praise and the next moment, you are being cut down to size. You get shouted at and face all sorts of abuse, but the bully does not think that they are bullying you, because they say that at the end of the week, they are always nice to you and give you praise at some point. But that is part of the bullying pattern. My anxiety in all this is that that is the bit we just ignore. We let the bullies continue in their act of denial. How on earth are we going to change that culture? I have a lot of respect for the work that the Leader of the House has done on this issue, but the report criticises the whole Commission and the House processes. I am not sure that it really can be the Commission who takes the next step forward; I wonder whether she would look at a way of making sure that more Back Benchers are involved.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman describes bullying extremely well and I am sure that that will resonate with all hon. Members. I say again that I have seen far too many instances of people standing by, witnessing such things taking place, and I urge all hon. Members to never let that happen again. As I just tried to explain, it is never easy in this Chamber to explain what “something is a matter for the House” means. I understand his point—we want Back Benchers involved—but I say, as I always do: seriously, my door is always open. I am really keen to hear from people. I could point to lots of hon. Members in the Chamber who have come to talk to me about the process during the complaints procedure. It was an entirely cross-party piece of work. There was an open request for people to come forward with ideas, and that request and invitation remains open. However, in terms of the practicality of how we have a review that starts from nowhere, with a group of Back Benchers, I think that it needs to start with the House Commission discussing how we take this forward, and then the House Commission will potentially need to report back to Back Benchers with some ability for them to feed in their thoughts about whether they agree, or do not agree. I need to think about this process.

I say again that this is not a matter for me as a member of the Government. It is for me as the Leader of the House to work with the other commissioners. It is not for me to overrule them; I am only a member of the Commission. Their views are equal to mine, and between us we need to find a way forward, but I hear what the hon. Gentleman says: it needs to be open to all Members to give feedback and also—this is really important—to others working in this place. It cannot be about only us; it must also be about House staff, Members’ staff and so on. It is a large consultation, and we do not want it to take forever, but I absolutely accept his point.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): This is a sobering report, and I am pleased that the Leader of the House will take swift action. It is very apposite, too, because today in Geneva, the President of

the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, both of whom happen to be women, have presented a new report on sexism, harassment and violence against women in Parliaments in Europe. Sadly, based on extensive interviews with parliamentarians and parliamentary staff in 45 European countries, we find that this is a common pattern across many Parliaments. Will the Leader of the House undertake to read that report and its recommendations? Perhaps those two important organisations, of which we are proud to be members, might be among those from which she takes advice.

Andrea Leadsom: As she often does, my right hon. Friend gives a really good, much-bigger-picture perspective, and she is absolutely right to do so. I have attended a cross-Commonwealth meeting of women politicians to talk about violence against women in politics, and the numbers are shockingly bad. She is absolutely right to highlight that report, and I will of course be delighted to read it. I have already had the pleasure of meeting the Llywydd in Wales and the Presiding Officer in Scotland, both of whom are interested to hear about the progress of our complaints procedure and what lessons they could learn. It was a good opportunity to share ideas.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): May I suggest that these proceedings are not the time for Members to indulge in a bit of bullying of their own? There should be independent processes, not innuendo.

I warmly welcome the report. The Leader of the House will recall that, as a member of the steering group, I repeatedly argued that we should be able to investigate historical allegations, and the legal advice was clear that bullying and sexual harassment had always been unacceptable. External counsel did not rule that out, and I am delighted that Dame Laura makes the same point, so may we have an explicit guarantee from the Leader of the House that she will personally support the idea that historical allegations, with no endpoint, should be part of our investigation? I take on board what she says about different Commission processes, but people want to know now that she and everyone else understands this and will treat it with the urgency it deserves.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady was fully engaged with the working group and will know that we unanimously wanted to be able to investigate historical allegations. I absolutely undertake that the recommendation from Dame Laura and her challenge to the advice we received will be fully taken into account in the review in January.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): As a relatively new Member of the House, may I say that I am enormously proud to serve in it? It is obviously deeply distressing to read the report. Politics, especially British politics at the moment, is a stressful place to be in, and where there is stress, that can enhance bullying and harassment. Will the Leader of the House consider how we can reduce stress levels, especially thinking about last-minute questions and changes to the agenda that put unnecessary stress on politicians and their staff? Can we look at how that is perhaps better dealt with in other Parliaments to find out whether there are ways in which we can try to decrease the stress?

Andrea Leadsom: As my hon. Friend will be aware, a number of new ideas have been presented to Parliament for MPs and their staff—courses on mindfulness, for example—and various all-party groups focus on trying to de-stress this place and make it a little more relaxing and enjoyable, despite the complexities of daily life. She makes a serious point, however, about changes to parliamentary business, and my heart is with her, but understanding as I do how new business can crop up and urgent matters arise, I know that it is difficult always to stick to agendas in a changing political environment. On a best-efforts basis, however, we will always try to give the House as much notice as possible.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I feel totally and utterly maddened by this. I am not here to defend anybody—including you, Mr Speaker. I have spoken to hundreds of the people involved throughout this process, and the neither right nor honourable—in my opinion; he probably is not either anyway—Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) has probably spoken to none of them. Some of us do not care who is the offender; it is the victims we care about and we will not use this for political gain. Nothing fills the victims with more dread than when people play with their feelings, so I say to him don't do it—don't do it for them; you are speaking only for yourself.

I personally think that the management of this place probably needs a massive overhaul, although I will not point the finger for the sake of newspaper headlines. But the fact of the matter is that nothing I have heard today fills me with any hope that politics will be taken out of this and that the same 12 people—we all know exactly who they are and how they are getting away with it—will not be walking around here for the next 20 years. What will the Leader of the House do about it?

Mr Speaker: Before the Leader of the House responds, I want to say one thing. It was important that the hon. Lady was heard fully, but everybody in this place is honourable, and I am certainly not suggesting that the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) is not an honourable Member. He has put his view, about which I have made no complaint, the hon. Lady has put her view, and the Leader of the House will respond.

Andrea Leadsom: I think my response is, “Let's all treat each other with dignity and respect,” but if the hon. Lady knows of 12 people who are walking around abusing people, she should report them. There is now somewhere to report them to, and she should do so.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I have encountered instances of disgraceful behaviour, and perhaps our constituents could be forgiven for believing that we are constantly going at it with knives, but overwhelmingly hon. Members behave perfectly properly. As for being treated like demigods, all I can say is that that experience is not general. I ask the Leader of the House therefore to hold on to a sense of proportion as she deals with these problems.

Andrea Leadsom: I am truly sorry to hear that my right hon. Friend is not treated as a demigod. I can assure him that I am not either, and I absolutely keep a

sense of proportion in all things—that is the only way to survive in this place. He makes a very serious point, however, which is that, as Dame Laura points out, the issue is the few. The vast majority of Members of Parliament, as well as members of House staff and MPs' staff, are neither victims nor bullies. We should share a common interest in ensuring that we eradicate this entirely from the Houses of Parliament. I say again that my ambition in the time that I hold down this job is to take the journey towards being a role model for all Parliaments around the world. I will do everything I can to see that happen.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank Dame Laura for her important report, in which she emphasises the importance of not just transparency and information—for everyone in the House—but independence. As we have heard, however, if we are to have confidence in that independence, it is not just the operation of the policy but, I am afraid, its formulation that must be independent. The notion of politicians adjudicating upon themselves also comes into the formulation process. If we are to get rid of the perception that individuals are using this process to further their political agendas, it is important that we take senior political figures out of the formulation process. I also agree with those who have questioned the notion of the Commission being the main driving force.

Andrea Leadsom: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, and I have listened carefully to what has been said by other Members. I will give it serious consideration. The hon. Gentleman, and indeed all Members, will appreciate that there are limited options for kicking the process off if it involves no elected Member—that does make it tricky—but I will give the matter some thought and see what can be done.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Dame Laura makes it clear that heads must roll, and she identifies some candidates, but can we ensure that this does not become a witch hunt? The House managed the expenses scandal appallingly and needs to take early action in this instance, but can we ensure that appropriate action is taken, including, where necessary, the re-education of Members in how to behave, how to manage staff and how to manage their own anger?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One of the targets of our complaints work was to set up a significant offer of training for use as part of the sanctioning process. For example, someone who was bullying someone else might receive training in what constitutes bullying and harassment. Someone who was guilty of unconscious bias, or perhaps some sort of unmeant discrimination, might be sanctioned by being forced to undertake relevant training. Also available is a wide range of optional, voluntary training in how to carry out appraisals, how to lead an office and so on.

My hon. Friend is entirely right to say that the training offer needs to be there. We cannot expect people to learn these things through osmosis. Hon. Members have said that we need to do more to communicate with each other about the offer and encourage its take-up. We have a good employer standard, which will be on offer to those who have taken up the training. As we see greater understanding throughout this place—not

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

only among Members of Parliament, but among chiefs of staff in their offices who may employ interns or junior researchers—it will be important for us to take steps to professionalise the House so that everyone knows what is expected of them.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): This is a very shocking report, and the obligation to show leadership in responding to it falls on every single one of us. That leadership obligation is explicit in the standards in public life to which we are all obligated. As others have noted, Dame Laura herself says that it is more important to get processes right than to introduce them “in haste”, and it is a matter of deep concern that in the same paragraph of the report she goes on to say that many now regard our very new processes as already “unlikely to deliver coherence or restore confidence.”

Dame Laura spoke to many people in preparing the report, but has not had an opportunity to speak to the Committee on Standards, and in particular to our lay members, who have also warned that introducing policies in haste would be a mistake and said that her report should have been awaited. May I therefore urge the Leader of the House to ensure that we draw on the reputation, the expertise and the integrity of those independent Standards Committee members, who have a considerable amount to offer?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady may be aware that the working group did actually consult widely and at length with the Standards Committee, and its views were taken very much into account. Significant changes were made to the report as a result of its input, and the review that will start in a couple of months will give it an opportunity to provide further input. At all stages throughout the process of establishing the independent complaints procedure, care was taken to involve all those who work in this place and have a vested interest in upholding good standards in public life. I know that the hon. Lady looks forward to chairing the Committee, but it would be a shame if it did not wish to continue to work with the independent complaints procedure, which carries cross-party support and has been up and running for only a few short months. I think that there is a great opportunity to do something transformational for Parliament, and I hope that the hon. Lady will engage with it.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I speak as someone who has been in this place for just over three years, although frankly it feels like 30 at the moment—I had black hair when I started.

May I make two observations? First, we are all business owners, but many people who come to the House have no experience whatsoever of being a business owner. The Leader of the House mentioned training, and also the availability of voluntary training. Does it not behove us, as an institution, to ensure that new Members undergo extensive compulsory training, with parliamentary business constructed so that that training can take place without any need for people to disappear?

Secondly, Members take a solemn Oath. That was one of the proudest moments of my life, and I experienced it a yard from where I am standing now. Should we not

add to that Oath the words, “We respect all staff working for us and in this place,” and should we not be reminded of those words by information and signs, as happens in our local NHS, so that the message gets through and we change the culture?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has made two very good points. Compulsory training for new Members will be introduced after the next election. It was decided that there was no consensus in favour of compulsory training for those who were already Members, but it will certainly be in place after the next election. As I have said, a good employer standard is available for those who opt to take on training. As it beds in, it will become much more the norm, and I look forward to that.

My hon. Friend also suggests some sort of pledge on how we treat one another. There is already a behaviour code, which can be seen in a number of areas. That will be rolled out still further, including at the entrances to the Palace and Portcullis House, and all the entrances where members of the public come into this place, as well as bathrooms, restaurants and so on, to make it clear to everyone the code by which we are all expected to abide. Again, as that becomes more familiar, it will become much more lived by. It will be something of which people can remind each other, and something that they can think about when they see someone behaving inappropriately.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), I was one of the first Members to call for independent regulation before the expenses scandal erupted and during it. I think that independent regulation and external adjudication will be the only way forward. I agree with you about that, Mr Speaker.

Is it not clear from some of the contributions that we have heard that some Conservative Members, at least, are motivated by personal animosity towards the current Speaker, who is not in a position to answer back? At a time when our country faces what is probably its most serious constitutional and political crisis for a generation, we need a Speaker who is prepared to stand up for Back Benchers and to stand up for this House against an over-mighty and overbearing Executive, particularly when they are at least threatening to drive through a Brexit that would be completely intolerable to a majority of Members.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is not only not taking part in this in the spirit that is intended, but casting aspersions on the Deputy Speakers, who also stand up for Back Benchers, stand up for what is right for our country and are perfectly good at taking the Chair. I do not understand why he should feel that the future of this great nation relies on one individual, which is what he seems to be suggesting.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This is indeed a vitally important issue—it is so vital that an external body might be called for—but may I urge colleagues and the Executive not to conflate it with any campaign to get rid of the Speaker?

There is a good reason for me to say that. In centuries past, the Executive, and other forces in Parliament, tried to remove Speakers. It is vital to the independence

of the House of Commons, and the independence of independent-minded Back Benchers, that the office of the Speaker is inviolate. That does not mean that he can behave badly or, for instance, do anything criminal, but he should not be the subject of a political campaign, because if that happens, Parliament, and the independence of the House of Commons, will suffer. Will the Leader of the House therefore assure me that when she meets the Commission on Monday, there will be absolutely no pressure on the Speaker from the Executive, and that we will deal with this as an issue, not in terms of personalities?

Andrea Leadsom: The House will have heard what my hon. Friend has to say. As I have said all the way through, what the House Commission will be doing is reviewing the recommendations in Dame Laura's report and taking action as it sees fit. That is not a matter for me; that will be a matter for the House Commission.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): People who are subject to harassment in any workplace in any organisation have the right to a rigorous and professional process that treats people with dignity. The same is true for staff of the House of Commons. Here we are also in a public and a partisan workplace. How can the Leader of the House reassure the House that people who experience harassment will not have the public and partisan nature of this place used against them? If they think their allegations will be used against any specific individual or for a political agenda, it will put them off coming forward.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, and I remind all hon. Members that the point about the independent complaints procedure is that individuals can come forward in confidence: their name is kept confidential, as is the name of the person they are making allegations about. Only in the event that the complaint is upheld and it needs to go to the Standards Committee, rather than be dealt with by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards herself, could the perpetrator's name ever come out into the open. That is the whole point of the complaints procedure. From all the evidence that we took from victims, it was clear that they would not come forward, rightly as the hon. Gentleman says, if they were going to be re-victimised by some sort of partisan attack on them or by the media spotlight and so on. So, very importantly, it was at the core of the process that the complainant's confidentiality should be protected.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Far from expecting my staff to treat me like a demigod, I regard them as absolutely essential; none of us could be MPs without our staff and we could not function in this place at all. They make us look good, frankly—[*Interruption.*]

Chris Bryant: They are not available today.

Rachel Maclean: No, they are not.

The point I want to make to the Leader of the House is that this should not just be about avoiding bad and negative behaviour; it should also be about a culture where people can thrive and reach their true potential, as in any other workplace. What are her thoughts on that point?

Andrea Leadsom: My own recipe is that we have cake-eating Thursdays—and homemade cake on occasion, which is a highlight of the week. My hon. Friend makes a really important point. It is vital not only that people are not bullying each other, but that they are treating each other with respect and creating a happy and enjoyable workplace that inspires people and enables them to learn and grow and expand in their own role. I agree with my hon. Friend that it is essential that we take that into account.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I have never worked in a workplace—in some of them I have been responsible for HR policies and procedures—where there would be open discussion about individual allegations of the type we have seen here. It is so important that we remove individual and specific complaints, which do not appear in the body of this report, from a discussion about the process. Does the Leader of the House agree that we need to make sure, consistent with the point made by the new Chair of the Standards Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), that all historical allegations can be dealt with under the existing legal framework and principles of accountability in public life, and, secondly, that we bring genuine independence not just when things go badly wrong and people feel compelled to make formal complaints, but so that members of staff, or indeed Members of this House, feel that they can consult HR about having difficult conversations and about raising problems early enough that they never become a source of stress, anxiety or distress?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. In looking at this new complaints procedure, we were seeking to achieve culture change and prevention, so he is right to point out the importance we gave to establishing an HR support service for members' staff, so that they could find out whether something that was happening was fair, and what they should do about it. The next step would be mediation, to explain to their boss, whether their MP or the chief of staff or whoever, that what was going on was not right—prevention rather than straight to public allegations, when everyone is embarrassed and it is horrible for the victim. The hon. Gentleman is right that there needs to be a step change—victim or complainant-centred, with proportionate measures to try to change behaviour, so that the situation does not immediately become a case of "Right, you've complained about me, so either you're leaving or that's it," which was frequently raised with us. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman's direction of travel, and it is vital that wherever possible we improve the culture and focus on prevention.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I echo the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), and row in behind the sentiment of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), just before he leaves the Chamber. The House of Commons Commission has a bit of a reputation as a sort of hybrid of the Magic Circle and the College of Cardinals. It needs to be able to fish for its members in a wider and deeper pool. It is drawn from too narrow a base of Members of this place and therefore, if it is to command the respect of this place and those who take an interest in its proceedings, that needs to be looked at as a matter of some urgency.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. When I was first asked to serve on the House Commission because of my role as Leader of the House I was told, “That is what you do when you’re Leader of the House.” A review some years ago looked at how the Commission was made up. Parties are represented, but those appointments tend to be made through the usual channels. My hon. Friend makes an interesting point; it is clearly something we need to look at and I will be very interested to consider it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. It is important to be clear. I hear what the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) has said and express no view on that, but the present composition is determined in accordance with statute, so it has not just happened by happenstance or because a particular individual has a given preference. *[Interruption.]* No, I am sure the hon. Gentleman is certainly not suggesting that. It is the result of law, and law can of course be changed.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Leader of the House and others have spoken about the critical change of culture we need to achieve, but as we know, the problem is rarely with those who engage; it is actually with those who do not. Does the Leader of the House agree that every MP, whether they are here or elsewhere on the estate or around the country, should today take personal responsibility for that change in culture and lead the way by undertaking training, whether compulsory or not, in harassment and bullying? Furthermore, can she say when such training will be available and does she agree that the details should be published so that those who do not engage are publicly encouraged to do so?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her contribution to the work on the independent complaints and grievance policy; she was very engaged with, and extremely helpful in, the final stages of establishing the complaints procedure. I agree that we should take steps to encourage everybody to undertake training. This is not just about MPs; there are other managers of staff in our offices who would benefit, and indeed welcome, that. My own chief of staff was trying to get on to a staff training course for two years and was waiting for more people to sign up—need I say more? I have certainly said that as soon as new comprehensive training is available I would like myself and my team to be some of the first experimenters with it, and I will certainly undertake to make sure the whole House is updated on when those new training programmes are available.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I worked at *The Daily Telegraph* during the expenses investigations and, regardless of changes in personnel, what changed the culture in that instance was a change in the fundamental structures with which this House had worked apparently happily for many years. Does the Leader of the House agree that in this instance, regardless of any personnel changes, we also need to change some fundamental structures if we are to change the culture?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. The complaints procedure that we have established is a means for anybody who works here to make a complaint, but it does not address the specific points in Dame Laura’s review about the structures of the House of Commons. He makes the point that it might be necessary to make further changes to the way in which the House of Commons is managed to improve and support the work of the independent complaints procedure.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): This is a deeply dispiriting report containing some profoundly serious comments. I do not know about other Members, but I was shocked to hear that 200 or more people had come forward to express their concerns. First, will the Leader of the House reassure me that she will not be subjected to any pressure from the people who I fear are exploiting this issue to serve their own personal or political agendas? That might be uncomfortable to say, but it has been evident in the newspapers and here in the House today. Secondly, does she believe that there needs to be a greater measure of independence in whatever way we take forward these processes in future?

Andrea Leadsom: Firstly, I can certainly give the hon. Gentleman the reassurance that I will not be pressured by anyone in any direction. I think that I have evidenced that throughout the work of the working group in setting up the complaints procedure. Secondly, he is exactly right to say that we will need to consider again how the structures in this place work, but as I have said, that is a matter not for me but for the House.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The report suggests that the health and wellbeing service does not have the recognition that it deserves. It is a valuable resource for all of us on the estate, including those affected by bullying and harassment. Does my right hon. Friend believe that it should be expanded, promoted and properly resourced?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right to suggest that the health and wellbeing work that goes on in this place is excellent, and that it is probably not as widely known about and appreciated as it should be. I will be presenting to a significant group of House staff in the near future about all the measures we have put in place with the complaints procedure in relation to training and support for staff and about the health and wellbeing support that is available. I completely agree that we need to do more to communicate this more widely, and there is a plan for further broad communications over the coming months.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The allegations in the report are clearly shocking, but as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, they are, sadly, unsurprising. I wholeheartedly agree with the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) and the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) about the importance of taking politics out of this process. We cannot have personal agendas being pursued. Does the Leader of the House also agree that it is unhelpful to the victims and to the integrity of all our processes for these matters to be discussed in such ways in the media and for briefings to be given, not least

because they draw undue attention to certain aspects of these issues while not drawing attention to the many cases that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) mentioned, which we all know are going on in here and which are not being discussed? Does the Leader of the House agree that having this matter debated through the media is extremely unhelpful?

Andrea Leadsom: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that if he is aware of appalling things going on, he should make the complaints procedure aware of them. He should support people to go to the complaints procedure—[*Interruption.*] He says that he has done that, which I am very pleased to hear. I thank him for that. This should be about making Parliament a place where people can come and work in the knowledge that they will be treated with dignity and respect. This is about making this a better place for all those who have no voice in this Chamber and who do not have the power of a Member of Parliament or a member of the senior House staff. It is for them that we are doing this. We are trying to make this the best place to work, and it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that that happens in everything that we do as individuals. It is also about everything that we walk past. You know, if you are walking past a problem, don't walk past it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I join those who are expressing concern that the House of Commons Commission is not the appropriate first step for the consideration of this report? My right hon. Friend is the Leader of the House, not just the leader of the Commission, and she has rightly said that this is a matter not for her but for the House. It seems to me to be a sensible first step for her to make Government time available for a debate about, and a vote on, the recommendations in Dame Laura's report. During that debate, members of the House of Commons Commission could be present to contribute and to gauge the mood of Members. After that debate, there would be a clear set of recommendations decided by Members, which the Commission could then act upon.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a really sensible suggestion, and it is something to be taken into account. He might wish to suggest it to the House of Commons Commission spokesman, the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake)—I am glad to see him in his place—who will be able to raise the matter on his behalf at the meeting of the House Commission on Monday. In the first instance, however, it would be helpful for the Commission to consider the recommendations and to set a framework for at least a debate in this place.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This report is so stark that we cannot ignore it. Serial offenders and serial predators are still walking around this place with apparent impunity, and we cannot allow that to continue. What kind of message does that send

to the victims, and what does it say about our ability to tackle these unacceptable behaviours? I have not seen the legal advice given to the Leader of the House's group about why historical allegations could not be investigated, but it seems pretty clear from this report that there is no reason why those allegations should not be dealt with. Please may we have confirmation that that will be changed as soon as possible?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman sets out very well the fact that we are all appalled by the contents of this report. As I have explained a couple of times, the steering group received advice that it would be problematic to try to measure historical allegations under a behaviour code that had only just been introduced and that to do so could result in a legal challenge that could undermine the whole new complaints procedure. We took external advice, and we were advised that the further back we went, the more problematic this would become. Dame Laura has challenged the advice that we received, and I have already said that we will look at this again as one of the items for review at the six-month review of the complaints procedure, which will take place in January.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will no doubt be aware that I have spoken publicly about being bullied for seven years as a teenager. I had two nervous breakdowns and one episode of hospitalisation as a result of bullying, so I say without making any kind of partisan point that I find it abhorrent that Conservative Members have used this report to pursue their own agenda and used the issue of bullying to bully the Speaker. As a victim of bullying, I find that appalling, as will all the victims who have come forward to the Leader of the House and to other Members.

May I plead with the Leader of the House not to forget our constituency-based staff? There has been a lot of discussion about what happens on the estate and in the House, but can we ensure that, for example, HR staff can visit our constituency offices, just as representatives of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority do? There are only 650 of us. We are a small profession in that respect, and I ask the right hon. Lady not to forget those members of staff. She has also talked about putting training for Members on a statutory footing, although there was no consensus on that. I would be her first volunteer to take such training and, frankly, we should all be made to take it.

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who has spoken out very bravely in the Chamber on a number of occasions about his own experience of being bullied as a teenager. He is absolutely right to raise this issue, which will help other people to feel that they can come forward. He says that he would be the first to take up the offer of training. Perhaps he and I could do the first course together; it would be a great pleasure to do so. He is absolutely right to say that we need to take this incredibly seriously, and I can assure him that we will definitely do that.

Cold Weather Payments

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

3.9 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report annually on the representativeness in respect of relevant postcode districts of weather stations designated for the purpose of calculating cold weather payments and to conduct a study of alternative methods of calculating cold weather in each postcode district; and for connected purposes.

This Bill seeks to improve cold weather payments to take better account of the location of vulnerable people. Some vulnerable people get a one-off payment of £25 towards their heating during periods of cold weather when the temperature is below 0° C for seven consecutive days, or forecast to be so. Those who qualify are older people, people with a disability and families with young children who are on certain means-tested benefits and who live in particular postcode areas.

However, some vulnerable people are missing out because of how the areas where the weather is sufficiently cold to trigger the payments are defined—that is, by postcode. That is hitting people in upland areas of my Arfon constituency and, I have no doubt, in other upland areas across Wales and England.

Several broad questions about the scheme have always troubled me. Yes, £25 is worth having, but is the payment enough to make a real difference? Must it be paid retrospectively? That is a key issue for anyone on a low income who has to buy their energy up front. And why is there a cut-off date of the last day of March? The weather can be very hard in April and even May, particularly in upland areas.

The subject of the Bill is how the Department for Work and Pensions decides whether it has been, or will be, sufficiently cold for a qualifying period in a particular area. I note in passing that cold weather payments were devolved to the Scottish Government by the Scotland Act 2016, and the system is currently being reviewed for improvement. I will look with interest at how the Scottish Government modify decision making to take proper account of their topography.

What is the problem for Wales and England? At present, help is provided to people on two conditions, according to their vulnerability and their postcode. People's vulnerability is established by the benefits they receive—their vulnerability having already been verified in assessing those benefits—but their inclusion in a particular geographical area is a potential problem, as geographical areas are defined by postcodes, which do not necessarily reflect topography or weather conditions.

My Arfon constituency is a case in point, as it is bundled together with neighbouring Ynys Môn. Arfon includes a fair chunk of mountainous Eryri—Snowdonia, in English—and the clue is in the name. Ynys Môn is the island of Anglesey: flat, coastal, and basking on its western face in the gulf stream as it heads north. Readings for the relevant temperature are taken not in upland areas of around 200 metres above sea level, such as Deiniolen, Rhosgadfan and Mynydd Llandygai, but at Mona on the western side of the island.

In fairness, there is variability in the Arfon constituency itself—constituencies are not a particularly good definer, either. Most people in Arfon live close to the sea, and

Arfon means “upon Môn” or “next to the sea.” But for other vulnerable constituents, the payments are a postcode lottery.

I have had invaluable expert advice from Dr Graham Bird of the school of natural science at Bangor University in preparing the Bill. He notes, for example, from data collected at the university's Henfaes research centre at Abergwyngregyn that the temperature difference between sea level and 200 metres above sea level can vary from 0° to as much as 4.3°, with an average of between 1.5° and 2.5°.

There are no long-term weather station records from within Arfon, but records from stations for over 20 years at Capel Curig and Cwmystadrlllyn, at similar elevations of 200 metres, show winter temperatures 1.6° to 2° lower than on Anglesey. Finally, a snapshot over 21 days in October 2017 showed temperatures at Capel Curig up to 3° lower than at Mona at 1 pm and 2.3° lower at 7 pm. Dr Bird therefore concludes that

“there is a strong argument for saying that the temperature data collected on Anglesey is not particularly representative of upland areas of north Gwynedd or neighbouring west Conwy.”

In response to my Bill, the Department for Work and Pensions has said:

“The scheme links postcodes to the weather stations that provide the most stable and accurate readings for average temperatures.”

I have no doubt that the readings at Mona are stable and accurate, but are they representative of all the postcode areas designated to that station? The Department has also said:

“Each year we review the scheme, seeking expert advice from the Met Office, taking into account representations from MPs and the public.”

My Bill calls for a report on that review that can be discussed publicly. The only reports that we found in researching the Bill were from 1996 and 1997. The 1997 report suggested using individual readings from all 600 postcode areas and incorporating a wind chill factor. Those suggestions were rejected on the grounds of increased complexity. An annual report would allow us all to engage properly in an informed and open debate on the system's future.

Lastly, my Bill calls for consideration of alternative decision-making systems. I have thought long and hard about this, but I am a layperson. I do not know for certain what those alternative systems might be and how they might work. I will look at any changes in Scotland with interest. I note that, at present, the Department uses information from only about half the 200 available Met Office weather stations. Perhaps using more stations or alternative stations could be debated following the report's publication.

Cold weather payments have been the subject of debate in Wales and elsewhere over the past few days. I am grateful to the sponsors of my Bill and Dr Bird, and I am grateful for the public support of the older people's commissioner for Wales, Age Cymru and the Bevan Foundation, and for the support of individual constituents in Arfon and across Wales and England. I am also grateful for the two positive meetings I have had with the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), and for the concern that he and his officials have shown.

I realise that the prospects for change this year are slim, but I trust that the Minister will do all he can and act as soon as possible. Refining the system would not lead to a bonanza for cold, poor, vulnerable people, but the figures from Arfon suggest one or two extra payments per winter, which is worth striving for. There is no time to lose, as the bitter twist to this tale is that each winter there are about 30,000 excess deaths, many of them traceable to poor heating, or even no heating at all.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Hywel Williams, Debbie Abrahams, Neil Gray, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Jim Shannon, Caroline Lucas, Dr David Drew, Albert Owen, Douglas Chapman, Liz Saville Roberts, Jonathan Edwards and Ben Lake present the Bill.

Hywel Williams accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 273).

RATING (PROPERTY IN COMMON OCCUPATION) AND COUNCIL TAX (EMPTY DWELLINGS) BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO.2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No.83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 23 April 2018 (Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill (Programme)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement at today's sitting.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Wendy Morton.*)

Question agreed to.

Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill

Consideration of Lords amendment

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is involved in the Lords amendment. If the House agrees to it, I will cause an appropriate entry to be made in the *Journal*.

I must also inform the House that Mr Speaker has certified that the amendment relates exclusively to England. If there is a Division, it will be subject to a double majority.

Clause 2

HIGHER AMOUNT FOR LONG-TERM EMPTY DWELLINGS

3.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I beg to move, That the House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

It gives me great pleasure to speak in support of the amendment. As previously discussed in this House, this Bill takes forward two important measures that featured in the Chancellor's Budget speech of last November. The first fulfils the Government's promise to end the so-called "staircase tax", giving welcome relief to businesses. The second, which is the subject of our deliberations today, addresses the issue of long-term empty homes, doubling to 100% the council tax premium that local authorities can charge on homes that have been empty for two years or more.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): Is the Minister aware that in my constituency the number of empty properties has been driven down by a third by the existing empty homes premium? I am delighted to see this measure, because it will reduce the number of empty homes in my constituency, which is currently at 400—that represents a village the size of Great Bowden. That means far less pressure on development and a better use of our housing stock.

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and for his support for the measures in this Bill. I also pay tribute to his local authority for the sterling work it has clearly done, as have so many others across the country, in tackling this blight of empty homes. I am particularly grateful to him, because I know he has another housing-related debate coming up in short order and so I am privileged that he has made time to speak in support of this measure. I wish him well in his further debate later this afternoon.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend is promoting a very welcome measure. Is he able to give the House any indication of the quantum of properties that lie vacant for more than two years and would therefore accrue this additional council tax? Will he add some indication of the potential uplift in revenue to our local authorities, which certainly need it?

Rishi Sunak: If my hon. Friend will bear with me, I will be grateful for that little bit of patience and I will go over all the facts and figures of the current policy later in my speech. I hope he will find what he is looking for in that section. If he wants to come back to me for more detail at that point, I would very much welcome a further intervention.

Simon Hoare: I am not known for my patience.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You also should not test ours. *[Laughter.]*

Rishi Sunak: As my hon. Friend mentioned, this measure will strengthen the incentive for owners to bring long-term empty properties back into use. Hon. Members will recall that this Bill received widespread support when it was considered by the House earlier this year. I am very pleased to say that that cross-party support continued through the debates in the other place.

Before we turn to the detail of the amendment, I thought it would be helpful to recap the purpose of this clause and the background to the policy in general. Our housing market is not working as we would want. Young people are often struggling to get on to the property ladder—struggling to enjoy the same opportunities as their parents and grandparents.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I absolutely support the measures the Minister is putting forward. Does he agree that in a town such as Redditch, which is growing rapidly, we need more housing? We struggle to expand, however, because we just have not got the room. It is therefore right that we are bringing more empty homes back into use to meet the housing need of our young people in our growing town.

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is absolutely right to say that the Government are doing many things to increase the supply of new housing, and I will come on to discuss those, but that we must also do better with the housing we already have. That is what this measure will enable us to do.

Today, the average house price in England is almost eight times the average income, whereas it was four times the average income in 1999. Costs are also rising for private renters, who spend, on average, more than a third of their household income on rent. The Government are committed to boosting housing supply to ensure that hard-working people have a secure place to call home. The Government and the tireless new Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), are taking end-to-end action across the entire housing system to address these issues, releasing more land for homes where people want to live, and building them faster and cheaper.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The UK is going through a housing crisis. Does the Minister accept that one of the best ways of tackling the social housing crisis is to abolish the right to buy?

Rishi Sunak: The right to buy has helped thousands of young people, first-time buyers, up and down this country to get on to the housing ladder. I have seen the

measure transform people's lives in my constituency, as I am sure many Members have in theirs. It supports what this Government and the Conservative party stand for—allowing people to fulfil their dream of owning their own home.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Obviously, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am concerned about your latitude in allowing us to venture slightly off the topic—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Or not.

Eddie Hughes: Indeed, but I could not stay in my seat having heard that. Just this summer, the Government announced voluntary right to buy across the west midlands, which is a valuable opportunity and has been heavily subscribed. Members of the public in those homes clearly think it is a good idea.

Rishi Sunak: As always, my hon. Friend puts it well. He has the pulse of the people in his constituency; he knows what they want. We serve to fulfil their aspirations, and I am delighted that the interest in the new scheme has been so high. I look forward to seeing the fruits of that and welcoming all those new people into homes that they will own for the first time.

This set of reforms is putting us on track to see an average of 300,000 homes delivered per year by the mid-2020s, and we are making strong progress. Last year, 217,000 new homes were delivered in England, which is the highest number seen in all but one of the past 30 years. In 2017, the number of first-time buyers stood at about 365,000, which is the highest level in more than a decade.

Building new homes is undoubtedly a fundamental part of improving our housing market, but, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), we must also make more efficient use of our existing housing stock.

3.30 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Does the Minister agree that in addition to all the measures in the Bill, the Government must get their own house in order? Some 10,000 Ministry of Defence homes are left empty; does he not think it is slightly ironic that we are discussing this issue when the Government have so many homes that are not being put to use?

Rishi Sunak: I am not aware of the precise statistics for the Ministry of Defence, but in general we encourage all organisations and private owners to bring empty homes back into use. The Bill will apply to all homes. As far as I am aware, there is no statutory exemption for MOD housing, but I am happy to look into that and write back to the hon. Lady. As an MP who represents a constituency with a heavy military presence, with Catterick garrison on my patch, I know well the issues relating to serving personnel and their families having access to good-quality accommodation. I hope that there are few empty homes in my area and that they are all being well utilised. I thank the hon. Lady for bringing that issue to my attention.

It cannot be right that while many households are waiting to find a house to call home, thousands of properties stand empty, some for many years. Beyond

that, homes left empty for the long term can often be a blight on a neighbourhood, as well as sites of crime and antisocial behaviour. I am pleased to say that the Government's record in this policy area is strong. We have ensured that local authorities have powers and strong incentives to bring empty homes back into use.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Minister says that he is empowering local authorities, but the Government refuse to have a register of landlords. An enormous amount of paperwork is required for local authorities to chase landlords and get these backyards into use, or whatever the problem is that he says his Government are happy to see resolved. Will the Government help local authorities, as he suggests, and introduce a national register of landlords so that we can take the action that he describes?

Rishi Sunak: I will be careful not to stray too far from my brief, but the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), who has responsibility for housing and homelessness, is actively looking into appropriate regulation in the private rented sector and the potential introduction of a single housing ombudsman, among other things. I should point out that the Government introduced measures to tackle rogue landlords and, indeed, created a rogue landlord database and a new set of penalties to tackle the issue. I hope that the hon. Gentleman finds some comfort in that and will wait for my colleague's findings on the general regulation of the private rented sector.

Before 2013, councils could not collect any council tax from properties that were empty for up to six months, so the coalition Government at the time decided to support councils and ensure that they had the freedom, should they want it, to charge the full rate of council tax on such properties. That same year, the Government enabled local authorities to charge a council tax premium of up to 50% on long-term empty homes.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I strongly welcome the Minister's comments. There are a number of empty properties in my constituency that I would very much like to see come back on the market. Will the Minister tell us what effect the Government's action has had in this policy area? By what proportion has the number of empty homes come down since the Government made those changes?

Rishi Sunak: I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that the powers that were introduced in 2013 have been taken up by around 90% of all local authorities, all but three of which applied the full 50% rate. I am glad to tell him that the number of long-term empty properties subject to a premium has fallen by 9% among those councils that have used the power every year since 2013.

There are carrots as well as sticks. Our new homes bonus scheme gives local authorities the same financial reward for bringing an empty home back into use as for building a new home. We have allocated £7 billion in new homes bonus payments to local authorities since 2011. Following those interventions, the number of properties that are empty for six months or longer is down by a third since 2010, from 300,000 to just over 200,000.

It is worth touching on one or two local authorities that have done a particularly impressive job of tackling the scourge of long-term empty properties in their areas. Several years ago, Bolton had close to 3,000 empty properties, but now has fewer than half that number. Bolton Council offered interest-free loans to bring a long-term empty property up to a suitable standard for rental. The council has also introduced an online matchmaker scheme that matches empty-home owners with potential buyers and offers advice about how to rent out properties through the Bolton landlord accreditation scheme. Between March and October of last year alone, more than 300 long-term empty properties were brought back into use. The council has recently joined forces with Bolton College and the University of Bolton on a new pilot project to bring a rundown empty house back into use.

Kent is another example of a local authority on the cutting edge of tackling this issue. Several years ago, Kent County Council launched the "No Use Empty" programme to bring empty homes back into use. Loans available through the scheme are repayable over five years and then recycled for further use. The scheme has now administered loans totalling almost £20 million, unlocking investment from owners totalling a further £20 million, and has returned over 5,000 empty homes back into use over the past decade. Notably, the programme ran a £3 million project to deliver new homes on the site of a former pub in Herne Bay that had been empty for five years following a fire. The pub's conversion was undertaken in partnership with a local developer, which bought the property and applied for a loan from the "No Use Empty" fund to unlock the redevelopment. The project has now delivered 14 new apartments.

Rachel Maclean: I am delighted to hear of the good work that is going on in Bolton and Kent, but I am obviously much more interested in what is going in Worcestershire and in my local area. Will the Minister go on to discuss how my council can learn from the excellent examples that he describes?

Rishi Sunak: I am always willing to learn from and listen to local authorities up and down the country. My hon. Friend and I have corresponded on various issues that have been brought to my attention in Worcestershire, and it will always be a pleasure to meet her local authority. She could bring officials here or I could go and visit them.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): As my hon. Friend has been kind enough to pay tribute to the development in Herne Bay, which is part of the magnificent constituency that I represent, perhaps he would like to come and see the finished development for himself.

Rishi Sunak: I can see my diary filling up rapidly as the debate progresses, but I would be delighted to visit my hon. Friend and the successful redevelopment. Indeed, I will perhaps mention it to my hon. Friend the Housing Minister for when he is next in the area.

Neil O'Brien: I promise not to invite the Minister to my constituency—although I stress that he is always very welcome there. He tempted me to intervene with his mention of the pub that was brought back into use through the "No Use Empty" programme. Does he

[Neil O'Brien]

agree that this legislation is an example of a wider point that needs to be discussed: the reuse of our existing building stock more generally? Permitted development rights and other things that make it easier to reuse older buildings have taken the share of new properties coming on to the market through change of use from about 12% of supply to 20% of supply over the past couple of years. Does he agree that that is saving a huge amount of countryside?

Rishi Sunak: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an insightful point. He has great experience in this area. Indeed, he has published proposals relating specifically to this area, on which my hon. Friend the Housing Minister is engaging with him. More intelligent use of development rights and our existing stock can help play a part in solving the housing market problems that we see.

Graham P. Jones: I am interested in what the Minister says, and do not disagree with it, but I will say the same thing that I said when this legislation came around last time. It is great to talk about Bolton, a unitary authority, and Kent may have a progressive county council—I do not know—but my local district, Accrington District Council, only receives 15% of the precept with 72% going to the shire authority which, unlike Bolton, is not interested in reinvesting. When will we have a change in the law that allows district authorities to retain 100% of the extra precept on the council tax?

Rishi Sunak: Opening up a conversation about the redistribution of council tax is probably beyond the scope of this measure, but we encourage co-operation between local authorities, and there are good examples of that from across the country. Indeed, business rates retention is now working deliberately to incentivise local authorities across tiers to partner together, and we have found that that has unlocked conversations beyond the pooling of business rates to strategic co-operation on other matters, such as housing.

Graham P. Jones: Will the Minister come to Lancashire to encourage Lancashire County Council to give money back to Hyndburn and Chorley?

Rishi Sunak: I am always happy to visit all local authorities, and many of the authorities in Lancashire have submitted proposals to be in the upcoming 75% business rates retention pilots. I am pleased to see lots of local authorities in Lancashire working together, and I look forward to reading that application with interest in the light of those comments.

As we have seen, different areas, from Redditch to Lancashire, will have different housing needs and different numbers of long-term-empty homes, so it is absolutely right that decisions on whether to apply a premium, and the exact rate to charge, should be taken at local level, as they were before. Councils are acutely aware of the needs and demands of their areas. We recognise that local authorities will want to reflect carefully on the local housing market when deciding whether to issue a determination—for example, where a homeowner is struggling to rent or sell a property in a challenging

market. We are clear that the premium should not be used to penalise owners of homes that are genuinely on the market for rent or sale.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I also put on the record my support for these proposals. At a time of housing crisis, it is incredibly important that we bring more homes back into use, which is exactly what this measure will do. Will the Minister set out measures for similar situations in which retail premises are unused? Filey, in my constituency, has a shop—I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker; I am about to conclude—that has been disused for some time and is a blight on its street. What can the local authority do about that?

Rishi Sunak: It is always a pleasure to take an intervention from my constituency neighbour, who represents what is without doubt the second most beautiful part of the country. I must admit that I am not familiar with that particular shop in Filey, but I will be delighted to chat with my hon. Friend afterwards, to make sure that the full resources of the Department can supply him with as many options as he can supply to the local authority in question.

Eddie Hughes: Does my hon. Friend have any thoughts on empty dwelling management orders, which councils can use to take possession of a property that has been left vacant for six months or more? I understand that those are rarely used by councils in England.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that empty dwelling management orders exist as a tool for councils to take control of long-term empty properties that cause a social nuisance. I do not have the exact figures to hand, but he is right that those orders are not extensively used. However, they are a measure that local authorities should be aware of. The orders are a tool at local authorities' disposal and are one of the various measures that they can use to tackle this particular problem. I thank him for raising that option here today.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is vital that landlords bring properties back into use? They should not be penalised while carrying out genuine work to bring those properties back into use, but equally they should not take an extended period and say that they are doing work when no work is actually going on.

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend not only for his intervention but for all his work on the Bill, as both an individual and in his role on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. I am grateful for all his comments as we debated the Bill during its earlier stages. He is absolutely right, and the Government published guidance to that end in 2013—when the original premium was introduced—reminding local authorities to take into account the specific reasons for a property being empty. Hon. Members may wish to note that the provision we are discussing will not bring any additional properties within the scope of the premium; only properties that would already have been potentially liable might be affected by the higher premium.

On the flexibility and discretion raised by my hon. Friend, no property covered by an existing statutory council tax exemption can be liable for the empty homes premium. For example, exemptions are already in place for homes that are empty owing to the council tax payer living in armed forces accommodation for job-related purposes, or for annexes that are used as part of a main property. Furthermore, the council tax system already provides specific statutory exemptions for properties left empty for a specific purpose, such as when a person goes into care. On probate, such properties, where left empty, are exempt from council tax for up to six months after the granting of probate or after letters of administration have been signed.

I also say to my hon. Friend that section 13A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 gives billing authorities a wide power to reduce the council tax that a person or group of people is liable to pay. That can be reduced to such an extent as the billing authority sees fit. The power can be applied to situations pertaining to the status of a dwelling or the category of a person, and can be used in cases of hardship, fire or flooding. Together with the guidance that I will speak about more broadly in a moment, I hope that this reassures all hon. Members that councils and local authorities will have the flexibility and discretion that they need to treat each situation on a case-by-case basis.

Before I turn to the Lords amendment, I will recap some of the statistics on the operation of the current policy to ensure that everyone has the facts to hand as we reach our deliberations. As I said earlier, 90% of billing authorities have applied the empty homes premium, to around 61,000 homes—that we have data for—in the last year. All but three of those councils did so using the maximum 50% rate. Of the remaining 10% of councils that were not applying the premium, more and more are now starting to. We estimate that the empty homes premium generated around £40 million in the last year for local authorities, when we take into account individual local authority collection rates.

3.45 pm

Alex Burghart: I sorry to ask the Minister this question; it is ignorance on my part. How do councils ascertain that properties are empty? Might we need to give councils additional powers so that they can identify which properties are truly empty?

Rishi Sunak: That is a very thoughtful question. Every council takes a slightly different approach. An interesting method is to offer a temporary discount on empty homes for a short period of time, providing a financial incentive for homeowners to register their home as empty. Down the line, the council then has a list of properties that might become long-term empty. Of course, councils also require people to fill out forms, and there are civil and criminal penalties for filling them out with false or misleading information. Indeed, the authority also has other intelligence from the various other ways in which it touches an individual property. Together, councils can build up a picture of which homes are long-term empty, and apply the appropriate premium as and when necessary.

Hon. Members may be interested to know that the proportion of dwelling stock across the country that has been empty for six months or longer is about 0.85%,

with the lowest numbers being found in London and the south-east, and the highest being found in the north-east and the north-west.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for giving way again. One issue that has been brought to my attention as a local MP is the time that it can take the council to turn around the voids when one tenant leaves and another comes on stream. Will this provision affect the council's housing stock? I would be grateful for that clarification.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend raises a good point. Council housing is governed by a slightly different set of regulations, so it will not be affected by this particular measure. However, in general she is right to highlight that all local and public authorities have a duty to bring empty homes back into use as quickly as possible for the benefit of all potential residents.

I now turn to the Lords amendment, which makes a helpful improvement to the Bill. I am grateful to the noble Lady Pinnock, the noble Lord Shipley and the noble Lord Kennedy, who originally tabled this amendment in a cross-party spirit. I also thank the noble lords and ladies in the other place for all their contributions on the Bill. Having attended the debates and read through the Committee transcripts, I am grateful for the valuable experience and insight that all those who commented on the Bill brought to bear, as this has helped to inform how we have thought about the legislation. I am glad that there was wide cross-party support in the other place for this Bill and this measure in particular.

This so-called escalator amendment will allow local authorities to charge premiums of up to 200% on homes empty for at least five years and less than 10 years, and to charge premiums of up to 300% on homes empty for at least 10 years. I am sure that hon. Members will agree that the amendment is entirely in keeping with the spirit of the legislation, which is to strengthen local authorities' existing powers to tackle empty homes for the benefit of their communities.

Eddie Hughes: I completely agree that it is in keeping with this legislation. It seems crazy that in this day and age, when we have people who are desperate for a home, there might be up to 11,000 properties in England that have been vacant for over 10 years.

Rishi Sunak *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The Minister has now taken up 50% of the time. It is only an hour's debate, so I am concerned. We have a lot of Members in the Chamber, and I hope that he is not trying to take up all the time.

Rishi Sunak: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have tried to take any interventions that have come my way from all parts of the House, but I will take your steer and try to reach my conclusion in a slightly more swift fashion, if that will help.

I am sure, as I said, that hon. Members will agree that this amendment is in keeping with the spirit of the legislation and will enable local authorities to do more. However, we are not proposing to alter the provision on homes empty for at least two years and less than five years, as we have discussed previously.

Layla Moran: I thank the Minister for paying tribute to my colleagues in the House of Lords who led on this amendment. Does he agree that another issue is land banking? It is all very well if homes are being brought back into use, but we also have an issue of land that is often kept for a very long time. What does he intend to do about that?

Rishi Sunak: I agree that land banking should be looked into. The hon. Lady will be aware that my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) is currently looking at that issue. Interim findings have been published and more findings will be coming out shortly. I hope that she will be happy to wait for the findings of those reports.

Nor are we proposing to change any other arrangements for charging premiums. It will rightly remain a matter for local authorities individually to decide whether and what premium to charge. In making these decisions, local authorities should of course consider local circumstances, as we have discussed, as well as the guidance issued by the Government.

It is right that we target particularly the homes that are empty for excessively long periods in this way. To be sure, they are likely to be few in number—potentially 11,000, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes)—but where they exist, they can indeed be a nuisance and a blight on their community. Such properties may even become sites of crime and antisocial behaviour. It is right that local authorities are equipped with greater powers in these difficult cases, where a 100% premium may be ineffective. We are proposing that these higher premiums come into effect slightly later than the original measure, which was announced at last year's autumn Budget. This will give homeowners sufficient notice of the change. The 200% premiums will come into effect from 1 April 2020, and the 300% premiums a year later. The original proposal, of which people have had good notice, will come into effect from 1 April 2019, as planned.

We recognise the crucial importance of ensuring that premiums are applied fairly. That is why in 2013 the Government published guidance reminding local authorities to take into account the specific reasons a local property is empty, as indeed we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). In the light of this amendment, I can confirm that the Government will take a fresh look at the guidance with the aim of publishing revised guidance ahead of the introduction of the 200% and 300% premiums. This refreshed guidance will be subject to consultation, of course, and we will welcome the opportunity to benefit from the experience of local authorities, council tax payers and others when the time comes. In particular, we are keen to ensure that the guidance clarifies that premiums must be applied with due consideration to issues facing low-demand areas and cases of hardship. We expect to revisit the wording of the guidance to set out clearly the Government's expectation that premiums are not applied where homeowners can demonstrate that their properties are genuinely on the market for rent or sale and appropriately priced.

Another area we expect to consider is cases where homeowners, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East noted, are struggling to complete or afford renovations

that are necessary before the property can be occupied or sold on and where they can demonstrate progress and hardship.

I am delighted to bring forward this amendment, which has been termed the escalator amendment. I am grateful to all colleagues, the Select Committee and partners in the rating agencies for helping to get this amendment and this Bill to the House. By strengthening the incentive for owners of long-term empty properties to bring them back into use, this amendment will surely come as good news for local government, for families seeking a place to live and for the affected local communities as a whole. I commend it to the House.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): It takes a very good education to be able to talk at length without saying much at all.

We are at the end of a process as we reflect on the Lords amendment, which I should say is entirely in line with Labour's manifesto. If anything, it could have gone much further. While the Lords have suggested a 10-year period regarding the charge on empty properties, the Labour manifesto proposed that after a year, because we recognise not only that there are lots of people on the housing waiting list and many people who are homeless—sofa-surfing and on the streets—but that these properties are often a blight on their local communities. It is right that the owners of the properties are held to account, and a charge is one way of doing so. Of course we welcome the amendment, but we would have liked it to go much further.

We have heard in Committee and in the Chamber that the staircase tax was about listening to the interests of business and how the business rates system was adversely affecting them, but it is slightly odd that of all the issues that businesses are raising when it comes to business rates, this is the sole one that has been picked out for this place to address. There is absolutely nothing about the condition of our high streets and town centres, and nothing about business rates' impact on our pubs. There is no recognition that while we have rural rate relief for the last pub in a village, council estates are not given the same luxury for the last pub on the estate. Businesses are raising plenty of important issues.

Fundamentally, we see with rates the same thing that we are seeing with council tax: we are incrementally putting more and more pressure on what is a diminishing resource in many places. We have seen that with the revaluation, where the value shifted to London and the south-east, and certainly away from my region. The Conservative party has been in power for 10 years, through the coalition and more recently with the support of the Democratic Unionist party, and the housing shame in this country is a national scandal.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman says that the Government are doing nothing to tackle some of the issues on the high street. Is he not aware of the Government inquiry that is led by Sir John Timpson on the difficulties the high street is facing and what we should do about it? Is it not a sensible starting point that we gather some evidence before we decide what we should do?

Jim McMahon: If all we had was time, we could carry out an inquiry and a review every few months, but the fact is that that leads to almost no change. Our tax base

system is getting to a point where it will not be fit for purpose. How can we have a situation where someone's ability to get adult social care in later life will be predicated on their local authority's ability to raise money from a diminishing base of council tax and business rates, thereby putting more and more pressure on the communities that can least afford it? How can it be right that a child's ability to get the protection they need will be based on house values in 1991 when the Government walk off the pitch and end revenue support grant completely? How can that be fair?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. Will he set out his party's policies on rejuvenating the high street and replacing business rates?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The debate is not about business rates.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman raised it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I know. I have allowed Members to generalise. I do not want to narrow down what the shadow Minister has to say. I allowed the Minister to spread his wings—perhaps I was a bit too open in allowing that. I do not want to concentrate on just one area.

Jim McMahon: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will not abuse the purpose of the debate; I will stick to the Bill and the Lords amendment.

Many of these issues on council tax and business rates need not be party political. Most people recognise that high streets and town centres are at a point where they cannot take much more pressure. Most people recognise that council tax is taking on a disproportionate burden to fund local public services and, increasingly, people services, too. These are not party political points; they are self-evident when we see the condition of council budgets, and our town and city centres and high streets.

I have offered from this Dispatch Box to sit down with the Minister and work out where there is common ground and where we ought to be working together. I am afraid that all these offers of visits to constituencies around the country are taking away time that could be spent in this place working through some of these complex issues, in which have been ignored for so long.

Clearly, we are not going to oppose the Bill, in which very sensible steps are being taken. We support the Lords amendment, so we do not suggest opposing that either. However, we do want a bit more courage from the Department. There is a brand-new Secretary of State in place, who I hope has more access to the door of No. 11 than previously and can finally get a conversation about how we can properly fund local government services. We ought to be working together to find a long-term, sustainable solution to ensure that every man, woman and child right across the country gets the public services they need and deserve.

4 pm

Simon Hoare: It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon). I draw the House's attention to my interest, which I think is in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as a vice-president of the Local Government Association. The hon. Gentleman and I served—I will

not say with distinction, but we certainly served—on the Local Government Association resources panel for some years.

All Members will recognise that, as a result of our perfectly properly facing up to trying to repair the disastrous legacy that the Government inherited in 2010, the local government family has certainly faced a disproportionately heavy share of the burden. As we know, that has had an impact on our communities up and down the country. In my judgment, local authorities have acted perfectly properly. I served for 12 years as a district councillor, for seven of which I was running resources and the budget, and my then finance director, Frank Wilson, and I were always at great pains to find any way whatsoever to bring in extra money. We went down the back of every sofa, armchair and chaise longue to find coinage wherever it could possibly be hiding. When the Government presented us with an opportunity to raise perhaps a couple of extra quid, we grasped it like drowning men in a turbulent ocean.

I was interested to hear what my hon. Friend the Minister said about flexibility, which is of absolute importance. My understanding of both the Bill and indeed the Lords amendment is that this should not be viewed not as a revenue raiser for local authorities, but rather a spur to maximise housing stock accessibility. There cannot be a colleague in the House who does not meet people—at their advice surgeries or at other constituency engagements—raising the problems of accessibility to housing, the inability to get on to the housing ladder and the length of and delays in the planning process, all of which make a contribution to the difficulty of getting on to the housing ladder itself. Anything that can be done to increase access to existing housing stock has, in my judgment, to be welcomed very warmly.

If I may, I want to probe what the Minister said and to read into the record his very important comments about flexibility. Proposed new subsection (1A) in Lords amendment 1 reads:

“In subsection (1)(b)—

if anybody wants to buy shares in the man who makes the keys for the bracket signs, I suggest they do so now, because there are an awful lot of brackets in this measure—“(maximum percentage by which council tax may be increased)”.

The key word there is the conditional “may”. It does not have to be increased, and local authorities should view this as not merely a cash cow but, as I say, as a spur to increase accessibility. I hope that my hon. Friend will consider providing very clear guidance to local authorities—perhaps via the Local Government Association, but also directly to finance directors and leaders of councils—that they do have such flexibility.

My hon. Friend the Minister suggested one or two things. I am concerned about cases in which the clock is not reset when a property is sold. I appreciate entirely that there may be circumstances in which there is a paper transaction between brother and brother, or sister and sister, to try to dodge the additional tax, but I suggest that that is probably, given stamp duty and so on, a rather unlikely scenario.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I understand what the hon. Gentleman says, but does he not accept that there are cases in which people do not have any

[Mark Tami]

intention of selling the property? It might be on the market at inflated price, but if not, when someone tries to buy it, every obstacle is put in their way to stop the purchase.

Simon Hoare: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman, which is why I am rather pleased that the Minister may be writing guidance and setting out examples. The hon. Gentleman is entirely correct: whenever we create a system, someone somewhere will find a way of playing it. However, with the greatest respect, I do not think that that should preclude the authoring of guidance notes with examples and, indeed, the creation of those systems. However, he is right that we should always be alert to those who try to play the system.

I would like to give the House and my hon. Friend the Minister some examples to consider. If a building is in a conservation area or has listed building status, that can lead to a complicated planning process. If a house is incredibly run down and is not legally habitable, but someone buys it with a view to doing it up and putting it on the market, it would be perverse, if they were making an investment to make the house habitable but experience problems with listed planning consent and so on, for them to be double-clobbered with an expensive council tax bill.

My hon. Friend alluded to natural disasters.

Rachel Maclean: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Simon Hoare: I give way with great pleasure to my hon. Friend, a fellow Home Office Parliamentary Private Secretary.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend is making good points about flexibility and councils' powers. The Minister referred to instances in which people were in care. Does my hon. Friend have any thoughts on that, because that can often be a fluid and flexible situation?

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend makes a telling point.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We are drifting.

Simon Hoare: I was about to talk about flooding, Mr Deputy Speaker. Drifting and flooding may be linked.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Some might suggest a filibuster, but do carry on.

Simon Hoare: If anyone, Mr Deputy Speaker, were to suggest a filibuster, they would be challenging your authority, because we look to you to ensure that all right hon. and hon. Members remain in order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. You are drifting. Get on with it—come on.

Simon Hoare: Mr Deputy Speaker, you are robust.

Sir Roger Gale: I am enjoying it.

Simon Hoare: If I receive no other accolade in the House, to give enjoyment to my—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We are not here to discuss accolades. We are going to discuss the Bill.

Simon Hoare: Mr Deputy Speaker, I was about to talk about natural disasters such as fire or flood. A house that has been significantly damaged by flood may have to be rewired and replastered, meaning that people cannot move back in.

Kevin Hollinrake: Does that not reinforce the importance of local authorities using their discretion before levying extra charges on empty properties? They need to use their judgment.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend strikes at the beating heart of my argument and the importance of that three-letter word “may”. The word is not “shall”, not “would” and not “must”, but “may”.

What is entirely proper—this was implicit in my hon. Friend's contribution—is the discretion that local authorities, with their local knowledge, will have. It is not for the Minister and his bowler-hatted officials—I see all the bowler hats in the official Box—to be absolutely prescriptive. Local authorities will know some of the rogues and chancers in their area, and they will know if there is a difficulty in the planning process. They should—I have little or no doubt that, with the exhortation of our hon. Friend the Minister, they will—understand the vital importance of the word “may”.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am very much enjoying my hon. Friend's speech. A fire in Paignton on Thursday affected a number of residential properties, and does he agree that that is why the “may” is so vital? This cannot be just about people doing what they can to get the maximum revenue. It is about doing something to get a property back into use when someone is not taking the steps to do so, but not penalising those who clearly are making best efforts to ensure they get their property back into use.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In drawing on his extensive local government experience, he hits upon the very salient phrase “best efforts”. Most people in a locality will be able to see through those who are not using their best endeavours but merely trying to play the system. He references properties damaged by fire, mentioning one in his constituency. I think that we will all have had properties in our constituencies damaged to varying degrees of intensity by fire. That can, of course, lead to incredibly delayed and complex insurance claims, with all the to-ing and fro-ing that cannot necessarily be dealt with particularly swiftly. I would hope that where there is a clear *prima facie* case that there were delays in the insurance process, those, too, will be taken into account.

The hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) referred to people who are selling a house but deliberately set the bar too high so that they make it unaffordable. Of course, there are people who, because of historical claims for fire or flooding, will find it difficult to secure insurance and a mortgage so that they can buy a property. That is not a fault of the purchaser and it is certainly

not a fault of the vendor. I recently saw a house for sale in my constituency on which, because of the materials with which it was built, a mortgage cannot be secured. That is not the fault of the vendor, who has been trying to sell it for a considerable period of time. It would, I suggest, be an entirely unforeseen and unjustified consequence if that person were saddled with an onerously high council tax bill at a time when they were legitimately trying to dispose of an asset, but could not do so because nobody could afford to buy because they could not arrange a mortgage for it.

I hope that local authorities will not put into the “too difficult to deal with” box the civil law matter of a family that is rowing among themselves about who actually inherits a house, who has the right to sell it and who wants to inhabit it. We all know that where there is a will there is an argument and that sometimes where there is no will there can be a real cause for concern. Those are the areas of flexibility that our local authority officers and councillors need to be alert to and flexible about. I hope that the Minister can assure me that guidance highlighting the “may” and the need for flexibility and discretion will be pointed out to our local authorities.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived.

Overseas Electors Bill: Money

Queen’s recommendation signified.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I beg to move,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Overseas Electors Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.

It is a pleasure to bring this motion before the House. I will explain a little about the issues in the Bill. First, let me lay out what the Bill does: it seeks to extend the basis on which British citizens resident outside the UK qualify to participate in parliamentary elections by removing the arbitrary 15-year rule, which prevents British citizens living overseas from registering to vote.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) for his work in getting the Bill to this point and the effort he has put in to engage with Members across the House to ensure that it has support. I would like to take this opportunity to restate the Government’s commitment to the Bill and their desire to see it succeed. I am very proud to support this policy and this Bill. I would like to ensure that the financial element is set out clearly for the House, and I hope that this resolution will then allow the Bill to move forward to Committee stage.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I speak as a former Minister for the Constitution. Does my hon. Friend agree that although this is a private Member’s Bill, which has been promoted and taken forward excellently by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies), there was a manifesto commitment from the present Government to enfranchise overseas electors, building on their work dating back to October 2016? The whole electoral community has been fully engaged and consulted on the progress of this reform, which is absolutely crucial to enfranchising millions of overseas voters.

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I pay tribute to him for his work in stewarding this very important reform to this point. He is absolutely correct that that engagement has taken place because he did much of it, and I am very grateful to him for that. He is also absolutely right to remind the House of the Government’s manifesto commitment. It is one that we take very seriously and hope to see enacted as soon as possible for the benefit of British voters.

I would like to address the amendment to the money resolution tabled by the Opposition. It would limit spending under this legislation to £10,000 in any financial year. That limit would remain until the financial year after the Minister—perhaps me—lays before the House a report on spending incurred under the legislation. To put this far more simply than the amendment, that means that there would not be enough money to implement the Bill, and yet the Bill is about enfranchising British citizens. It is about ensuring and broadening participation in our democracy. It is about giving the vote to people

[Chloe Smith]

who do not currently have that right because they have moved abroad, but who are none the less British. It is an outrage that Her Majesty's Opposition are acting in direct opposition to these aims.

Let us start with a matter of principle: in no electoral system do the Government set out how much they plan to spend on registering electors and then register only that many accordingly. That is not how we run our democracy. The Opposition talk of the need to give a voice to the under-represented—it is a theme that they like—but here they are blocking measures that do just that. These measures enfranchise those who were previously registered or resident in this country, and overseas voters are one of the most under-registered groups of all, at about 20% of those eligible.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will the Minister explain to the House the consequences of agreeing the amendment?

Chloe Smith: I certainly will: the amendment would simply starve the Bill of the money that it needs to do its job. It is a blocking amendment, a wrecking amendment—it would do nothing less than stop the policy from taking effect. We think that the policy is important, because it starts from a matter of principle, and we think that the Government should support that principle with the necessary spending. Let us be in no doubt about what the amendment would do. I will offer three reasons why I think the amendment should be rejected: it is convoluted, unrealistic and incoherent.

To start with the first of those, the amendment is byzantine in its wording and unnecessarily confusing on an issue that really ought to be clear. Parliament has already agreed this policy, on Second reading at a level of principle, so nothing can be clearer than saying to our fellow British citizens that we think they ought to have the vote. This amendment sullies that principle by putting obstacles in its way.

Chris Skidmore: On my calculation, £10,000 spent on the potentially 3 million British nationals abroad who would be enfranchised by the Bill works out at 0.3p per elector. Are the Opposition really saying they value the votes of British citizens living abroad at 0.3p each?

Chloe Smith: In many ways, it is even worse than that. I think the Opposition are saying to overseas electors that their votes do not matter a jot and that they do not want them in our democracy, because they are trying to block a Bill that would enable them to participate.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): If the last two years have taught us anything, it is that overseas electors are keen to be involved in discussing the politics of this country. They are interested in our politics and feel loyalty towards our country. Is this not the moment to say to them absolutely clearly, “We value you; you continue to be British citizens; we want you in our democracy.”?

Chloe Smith: That is precisely right. Again, we should look at the principles involved in this policy question. We are talking about stopping the abrupt disfranchisement

of people after an arbitrary amount of time living overseas, which is a deep and terrible injustice to many people. I could mention to the House the case of Harry Shindler. He is war veteran who has fought for this country and who also happens to be one of the oldest members of the Labour party in the country, yet that party will not do him the courtesy of supporting his efforts to overcome this injustice.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Can I just check something? If I decide to go and live outside the United Kingdom, could I register to vote in Pimlico, where I currently rent a flat, and be an elector in that constituency?

Chloe Smith: Yes. I think it is basically the hon. Gentleman's deepest wish that he should live outside the UK. As I understand it, that is the point of the Scottish National party.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): May we return for a moment to my old friend Harry Shindler? He is 97 years old and has lived in Italy for much of his life, but he is stoically British. He fought at Anzio, where he watched his friends die, and has since sought to establish memorials to them, and he has been honoured for so doing. Furthermore, he is not one of the oldest members, but the oldest member of the Labour party. Can my hon. Friend suggest any reason why the Labour party would want to prevent that old man from voting?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We need to stick to the money resolution, as you should know better than anyone, Sir Roger. I want to get on with this, so please can we deal with what is in hand? I do not expect the Minister to be driven off course.

Chloe Smith: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for his question, but I will return to the finance matters in front of us.

I will explain why the amendment to the money resolution is unrealistic. The figure in the proposal, £10,000 per annum, is just 1% of the estimated cost of implementing the Bill. We have published a detailed impact assessment, which I am sure hon. Members will have read, and it outlines how much we expect the measures to cost. I am not backward in coming forward about the amount: we think it will cost £1 million per annum over 10 years. I will put that into context in a moment and explain why we think it is an appropriate figure.

If any Bill becomes law, it should be properly funded, so that is the starting point.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): In my time in the House, Oppositions have normally criticised a lack of money for private Members' Bills to carry out their objectives. It is highly unusual to try to limit the money to £10,000. When was the last time an Opposition did this?

Chloe Smith: As I understand it—you might know this better than I do, Mr Deputy Speaker—it was 1912; it was over a century ago.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think the hon. Gentleman actually knew the answer.

Chloe Smith: I suspect he did, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think it might be one of those facts that deserves to be more widely known from this Chamber: this was last attempted in 1912. It is a poor proposal to put to Parliament to suggest that a century-old device be used to block an important matter of principle.

The amendment is also fundamentally incoherent. It asks for a report on the operation of a policy that cannot be properly funded. What a waste of taxpayers' money that would be. What a waste of valuable resources it would be to produce a report that would merely confirm that we needed the money that we had said we needed in the first place, to implement the policy. It would serve no purpose, and I think that this is a rather dishonest amendment.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The Minister has talked about wasting money. On Wednesday, we shall have met 15 or 16 times to debate the private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), purely because the Government will not give us a money resolution so that we can progress with it. Does the Minister agree that if that money resolution were granted, it would save money in the long run?

Chloe Smith: No, because it is the simplest of consistencies to suggest that public money should not be wasted on a Bill that duplicates a measure that is already before the House. That applies to the Bill tabled by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), about which we have spoken in another place and which I do not think need trouble the House today.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Is the Minister considering changing the Government's position on extending the franchise to people under 18—for example, to 16 and 17-year-olds, who can give their lives for Queen and country?

Chloe Smith: As I think the hon. Gentleman will know, that matter is not in the Bill, so I will restrict myself to comments on the motion. It may come up in Committee, and I look forward to dealing with it then. What I will say is that those who are under 18 can go into battle only with their parents' consent, which is an important qualification.

Let me now deal with the issue of costs. As the impact assessment says, we expect that over the next 10 years the Bill will result in the processing of more than 600,000 additional applications to register, which will result in an increase in the overall additional costs. Let us also not forget that registration costs for overseas electors are a little higher than those for domestic electors. The approximate cost to an administrator to register a British national who lives in the UK is £1.76 per application, while under the current system it costs £3.82 to process an overseas application. That is because the process is subject to higher international postage costs and more staff time spent on verifying and processing applications. For those who left the UK more than 15 years ago, and who will be enfranchised under this policy, there will be a small additional expense owing to the need to manually check evidence of a previous residency or registration and review any attestations.

Those are the reasons why costs will be higher. The Government are, of course, committed to funding the additional costs that derive from the Bill under what is called the new burdens doctrine: in other words, we do not envisage leaving that burden to local government. Central Government want to assist, and will therefore also face upfront implementation costs, for IT changes and the administering of polls, which will total about £0.9 million.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): If someone leaves my constituency and lives abroad for 50 years, will that person still technically be in the constituency of Beckenham when they vote?

Chloe Smith: That is absolutely correct. I am happy to confirm that the intention is to maintain the way in which we currently represent voters who live overseas: they will accrue to the constituency in which they most recently lived.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I have a related question. Can the Minister confirm that there would be absolutely no way in which such a person could then migrate to another UK constituency?

Chloe Smith: That is correct. The application to register to vote would be tied to the constituency in which the person was last registered or resident. It should not be possible for any individual to say, "Right, I pick that one."

I have told the House how much it costs to process overseas voters' applications to register. There are also additional costs, comparatively speaking, associated with overseas electors taking part in polls, and that again is due to things like international postage, where the average cost is again a little higher than it is for domestic voters.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): On the question of additional cost, do we expect the numbers to rise if there is no deal on Brexit?

Chloe Smith: I suspect that question has almost nothing to do with the Bill and very little to do with this money resolution to it, but what I would say is this: now is the time, as we change our relationships in this world, to speak loudly and proudly about Britain around the world. Now is the time that we should reach out to our citizens—our people around the world—and say, "You are British, and we are proud that you are British and we welcome you into our democracy." That is what this Bill is doing; that is the principle that we on the Conservative Benches stand for. I look forward to hearing what those on the other side of the House stand for.

Let me give the House another important figure for context. The cost of putting this measure in place is £1 million, and the amendment suggests that that should be reduced to £10,000. For context, allow me to mention the cost of running a whole parliamentary election in the UK. We do not yet have the cost of the 2017 election, because not all claims have yet been settled, but the 2015 election cost almost £115 million, the 2010 general election cost £104.5 million and the one before that cost £71 million. The cost of parliamentary elections is increasing for other reasons, including more people choosing to vote by post.

[Chloe Smith]

Let us return to principle. What we are talking about here is a Bill that puts right an injustice, and that injustice is this: we think British citizens should not be abruptly disfranchised after they have lived for an arbitrary amount of time overseas. The amendment to the money resolution is no more than a shameful wrecking amendment that aims to stop people voting and stop people being enfranchised in this country, and it would cause chaos to the new scheme that the Bill aims to put in place.

We have set out in our impact assessment the costs that accrue to this policy in an entirely reasonable and justifiable manner. This amendment is neither of those things. I commend the money resolution to the House.

4.32 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out “any increase” and insert

“an increase not exceeding £10,000 in any financial year prior to the financial year after the financial year in which a Minister of the Crown lays before the House of Commons a report on the expected increases arising from the Act and any increase thereafter”.

Our electoral law and the franchise is one of the most important issues we can discuss in our democracy, and this money resolution will permit a serious alteration to our franchise. Under current provisions, British citizens who have moved abroad can apply to be registered as a special category of elector: an overseas voter. They must be registered in the last constituency in which they were entered on an electoral register before they moved abroad, and they may only vote in UK parliamentary elections. But the Bill will end the pragmatic and reasoned approach we have taken in this country. Our current 15-year limit to the duration for which an elector can leave the country serves to maintain the vital link between expats and their home country, a link especially pertinent in light of our departure from the European Union, but also one that, crucially, ensures that those elected to this House are representatives of the constituents we are elected by.

Make no mistake: as a modern, progressive socialist party, Labour remains committed to building a truly global Britain, championing our core values of equality, social justice and opportunity for all.

Sir Roger Gale: In passing, the hon. Lady might want to explain why she wants to prevent the oldest living member of the Labour party from voting.

Because I am a bear of small brain, will the hon. Lady help me and the House by explaining what is meant in the Leader of the Opposition’s amendment by “in any financial year prior to the financial year after the financial year”?

That is gobbledegook; what does it mean?

Jo Platt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and for mentioning Harry Shindler and highlighting his campaigning work on overseas voters. However, I believe that we as a party are striking the right balance. We are welcoming the extension of democracy while, crucially, upholding the integrity of our elections in this country. Globalisation has led to a broad section of British citizens living around the world and we should rightly celebrate their involvement in our democracy, but it is right that we should place reasoned rules on their involvement in our democratic process.

Alex Burghart: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jo Platt: I will not give way, as I want to make some progress.

Until 2015, the number of overseas voters registered to vote had never risen above 35,000. However, at the UK general election in 2017, there were a record 285,000 such voters—a jump of more than 800%—following the various overseas voter registration campaigns directed by the Government, who have clearly begun to politicise the overseas electoral mechanism. The Opposition will therefore continue to do what is right for the country by upholding the integrity of our elections. We welcome the rising levels of participation among overseas electors in recent years, but they have created heavy administrative challenges for local authorities. We have seen the failures of past Government implementations, and we do not need another Tory policy failure at the public’s expense.

The existing provisions for registering overseas electors under the 15-year rule already involve an extremely challenging and resource-intensive process for electoral registration officers. According to the Association of Electoral Administrators, significant staff resources are required to process and check whether overseas electors have been registered within a local authority area in the past 15 years. The AEA has estimated that it takes roughly two hours to register one overseas voter, and because overseas electors fall off the register after 12 months, the vast majority of registration applications occur immediately ahead of a general election, when the pressure on electoral administrators is at its most intense. We must also recognise the wider pressures facing returning officers and electoral registration officers.

Alex Burghart: I just want to come back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), because it is important, given that we are discussing the proposed amendment. Will the hon. Lady tell the House what is meant by

“in any financial year prior to the financial year after the financial year in which a Minister of the Crown lays before the Commons a report”?

Jo Platt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, which obviously refers to that earlier question, but I need to press on with what I have to say.

Following the 2017 general election, the AEA called in a new report for

“urgent and positive Government action”,

outlining 33 recommendations to improve the electoral framework in the UK.

Chris Skidmore: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I do hope that this is a point of order and not a means of preventing the debate from taking place.

Chris Skidmore: There is an amendment before the House whose text its proposers cannot explain. How can we possibly vote on it if they cannot explain what it means?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. This is an important debate and we need to get on with it. I do not want it to be disrupted by spurious points of order.

Jo Platt: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Following the 2017 general election, the AEA called in a new report for

“urgent and positive Government action”,

outlining 33 recommendations to improve the electoral framework in the UK. In a recent letter to the Cabinet Office, the AEA’s chief executive, Peter Stanyon, expressed his serious misgivings about a number of issues, including funding and added bureaucracy. He even warned that unless urgent action was taken there would be unnecessary and untenable risks at the next national polls. But what was the Government’s response to such a stark warning, made in that 2017 report? Peter Stanyon received no reply at all. It is extremely concerning that the Minister has shown no urgency in addressing these issues, particularly when we know that due to the shambolic state of her fragile Government, a general election could occur at any time. Perhaps the Minister will therefore be open with the House by publishing her response to the letter and outlining what steps she is taking to address those serious concerns.

The amendment in my name, and in the name of the Leader of the Opposition and others, would also guarantee that we received a report on the total cost incurred under the Bill. That reasoned approach is designed to protect those the Bill will affect the most. I therefore encourage Members on both sides of the House to support the amendment.

It is also important to remember that these administrative challenges have arisen at a time of unprecedented cuts to local government funding. A survey response from 250 local and electoral authorities that administered the EU referendum found that only a quarter of electoral officials said they had enough funding to support their work on electoral registration. In the context of austerity, local authorities have been forced to review their electoral services and oversee significant reductions in core service funding and staffing levels. Our amendment would protect local authorities from being held in limbo by the Government.

According to the AEA, there is a growing retention crisis, as those with vital skills and experience understandably leave the profession. To see the consequences of the Government’s policies, we need only look to the borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme, where two council officials were suspended after almost 1,500 people were unable to vote in last year’s general election. Investigations found that it was a result of

“inadequate performance by under-resourced elections office staff”.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly) described the issues on polling day as a “shambles.” Significant issues also occurred in Plymouth, where 6,500 electors were unable to cast their vote in the 2017 general election.

That does not only affect voters. We have seen that such pressures are also having a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of electoral administrators. Following last year’s general election, the AEA wrote that

“we have collectively been concerned for the health and well-being of all of our members”.

As a result, the AEA contracted the Hospital and Medical Care Association to provide members with free access to a confidential counselling service. Let us think about that for a minute. We have reached a point where free counselling is being offered to election teams in the aftermath of a national poll. How has it come to that?

The Government’s decision to abolish the 15-year rule without addressing those serious concerns is therefore irresponsible in the extreme, as outlined by the Electoral Commission:

“Increasing the number of British citizens overseas who are eligible to be registered to vote will add strain to already stretched resources of electoral administrators, in terms of volume and complexity of registration applications, requiring verification of identities and eligibility of applicants who have not lived in the UK for some time.”

Do the Government have an indication of how many of the estimated 5 million Britons living abroad would apply to be overseas electors in the run-up to a UK parliamentary election if the 15-year rule were removed? Do they have any idea of the strain that would put on already stretched public services?

According to the Cabinet Office:

“Most of the costs of the new policy would be incurred by the local authorities in the first instance”.

Local authorities are already left at breaking point by this Government’s austerity regime and have not received any further detail of their commitment on overseas voters, leaving local electoral registration officers in the dark about how they will cope with this extensive administrative task. It is extremely reckless to leave local authorities in this funding limbo.

In addition to all that, the Government are planning to roll out mandatory voter identification in polling stations across Britain, an extremely expensive policy that could cost up to £20.4 million per general election. Given their record, do they seriously believe they have the resourcing or the ability to deliver on both pledges?

The electoral community has also warned that the proposals leave the registration system wide open to abuse, an issue that appears to be of little concern to the Government. Under the new system, for example, overseas electors will need to prove their eligibility. Documentary evidence may be required to establish their connection with their registration address. However, supplying a single piece of evidence at a single point in time does not prove residency, particularly with regard to the definitions provided in section 5 of the Representation of the People Act 1983. For example, an overseas elector may invest in a property before leaving the UK but may not have lived there, yet they will have a solicitor’s letter confirming the house purchase and are likely also to have a local authority council tax bill—those are two pieces of evidence outlined in the Government’s proposals. In response to the Cabinet Office policy statement regarding overseas voters, the AEA also warned of the possibility of increased applications via this route in marginal constituencies. Not only is the likelihood of error extremely high, but we are now leaving our democracy wide open to potential fraudulent activity.

I wish to end my speech with a moment of unity. I am sure the Minister and Members throughout the House will agree that our country is famous for

[Jo Platt]

many things. For example, this House is rightly known as the “mother of all Parliaments”. Indeed, our whole Westminster model of parliamentary democracy is regarded by many as a beacon of democracy and has been adopted by countless nations around the world. At its heart are the rules-based procedures and courtesies that we abide by. One key example is that the Government of the day table a money resolution for any private Member’s Bill that has received a Second Reading. Until recently that was nothing other than a formality, yet this Government have completely dismantled that tradition and procedure.

Sir Roger Gale *rose*—

Jo Platt: I am about to finish, and I need to finish this point.

Having decided that they did not like the premise of the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), the Government took the unprecedented decision to refuse to grant a money resolution and, in doing so, prevent the passage of his Bill through Parliament.

If the Conservatives were serious about improving democratic engagement, they would give electoral administrators and our local authorities the resources they need to run elections effectively; they would concentrate efforts on registering the millions of adults in this country not currently on the electoral roll; and they would extend the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds. Instead we have a Government rewriting the rules when it suits them, yet again placing party before country. This debate is a timely reminder that only a Labour Government will build a democracy that works for the many, not the few.

4.46 pm

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Let me begin by saying how pleased I was that the Bill received its Second Reading on 23 February, without a Division, and I very much hope it will now move forward to Committee. An Overseas Electors Act would introduce votes for life, removing an arbitrary rule that bars British citizens who have lived abroad for more than 15 years from voting in a general election.

The Bill has been well supported throughout the House of Commons by the Government, and I have received a great deal of support from many Opposition Members as well. I was particularly pleased at the large turnout on Second Reading, given that it took place on a Friday. As I have said before, I have received particularly good advice from my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), who is in his place, and importantly from Opposition Members.

I wanted to intervene on the Opposition spokesman when she made one comment, but I was not allowed to do so; an accusation of politicising the debate was made, but I do not think anyone promoting a private Member’s Bill can have taken as much trouble as I have done to try to engage the Opposition and to depoliticise debate as far as possible. I resented the inference that was made. I did not intervene then, but I have had the chance to say that now.

The Bill addresses a crucial gap in our electorate, whereby currently only an estimated 1.4 million of the 4.9 million British citizens of voting age who live overseas are eligible to vote in UK elections. Those electors should be recognised as an integral part of our democracy, on a simple point of fairness. Many citizens who have moved overseas have a legitimate ongoing interest in the UK’s public affairs and politics. Many spent all their working lives in the UK and continue to have a direct interest in their pension rights. Many moved overseas to work, not having much choice, but will eventually return home to the UK on their retirement. Many have family connections that they wish to retain. Many want to retain the ability to communicate through the often unseen processes of maintained British influence all over the world, usually referred to as soft power, which is incredibly important.

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend raises a point that is close to my heart. A good friend of mine has been working in the charitable sector in Africa for 17 years and is now unentitled to vote. Does my hon. Friend find it outrageous that a British citizen who has gone abroad to work so hard has been excluded from voting here?

Glyn Davies: I certainly do. That is an example of why the Bill is important.

I know that others wish to speak, so I shall finish by saying that a detailed impact assessment has been submitted alongside the Bill. I refer right hon. and hon. Members to that impact assessment for a full overview of the costings.

4.50 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): When I was elected to this place, I did not think that I would take such a keen interest in money resolutions and the private Members’ Bills process, but it is with a degree of trepidation that I have found myself down the rabbit warren of parliamentary procedure. I speak specifically about my experience serving on the Public Bill Committee for the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill.

It was with a degree of surprise that I saw on today’s Order Paper that the House was to be asked to agree to a money resolution given that two other Members—namely, the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan Siar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—have introduced private Members’ Bills that the House has voted democratically to give a Second Reading, but the Government have chosen, in an abuse of their Executive power, not to grant money resolutions on those Bills. As a result, the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill Committee, on which I serve, is currently in parliamentary purgatory. We have met in excess of 12 or 13 times on a Wednesday morning to consider a motion to adjourn. Because we do not have a money resolution, we cannot consider the Bill clause by clause and line by line, nor can we consider any amendments.

There is certainly a case of double standards here. It is inherently unfair that the Government are abusing their Executive power to stonewall private Members’ Bills, but the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) has brought forward his Bill—which is further down the queue than the Bills of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton and of my hon. Friend the Member

for Na h-Eileanan an Iar—and it will progress on the back of the money resolution provided by the Government today.

The nature of this Parliament means that numbers are tight. The Government would do well to reflect on the tight parliamentary arithmetic. Their colleagues in the Democratic Unionist party currently seem to be holding a gun to their head and refusing to join them in the Lobbies. When the House divides in a few moments, we will see whether colleagues from Northern Ireland will join the Government in the Lobby.

Let me turn to the Bill. The right to vote is the bedrock of our democracy and no politician should get in the way of the public exercising that right, but I find myself somewhat in disagreement with the proposal from the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire. To be consistent, I take the view that the voting franchise should generally be as we had it in the 2014 independence referendum in Scotland: anyone living in the country should be able to vote. There should obviously be exemptions for those who work overseas, but the fundamental point remains that those who have the greatest stake in the nation's future should be able to vote. In my view, that means that everyone over the age of 16 who lives in the country should be allowed to vote. In Scotland, we have extended the right to vote to 16 and 17-year-olds and I shall vocally press the UK Government to do likewise.

If the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and the Conservative party as a whole wish to extend democracy, I politely suggest that they should start elsewhere. They should start by abolishing the House of Lords and introducing votes at 16.

Alex Burghart: In a hypothetical future referendum on Scottish independence, does the hon. Gentleman think that a Scotsman living in, say, Pimlico should be able to vote on the question of Scottish independence?

David Linden: In the 2014 referendum, the franchise was that those who lived in the country should be able to vote and our position now is no different. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman and I can discuss it and I can explain it to him so that he understands it better, but—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I remind the House that the debate should be about the financial implications of the Bill.

David Linden: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I have outlined a couple of options that the Government could pursue if they seriously wanted to extend democracy, but if they want to be the great champions of democracy, they should bring forward money resolutions for the two private Members' Bills that were given a Second Reading by this House, because a failure to do so would only reaffirm the Scottish National party's belief that this is a place of limited democracy and double standards.

4.54 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I understand entirely that this debate is about the money resolution and the amendment, but you will forgive me if I say that much of the Opposition Front-Bench spokeswoman's speech was devoted to the political implications of the extension of the vote to expat UK citizens. Such a device has not been used since 1912,

and it is being used quite cynically by the Leader of the Opposition as a backdoor way of trying to kill a piece of legislation that some of us have been working on for a very long time, and I make no apology for referring back to the case of Harry Shindler.

Harry and I have been working on this project for more years than I care to remember. Harry is 97. He is about as British as anybody possibly could be. He happens to live in Italy, where some of his family live. He fought at Anzio. He came back to the United Kingdom. He worked and he paid his taxes. He then went back to Italy, where he continues to spend his retirement working in the interests of his fallen comrades to ensure that their graves are properly looked after and that memorials are erected. Harry also happens to be literally the longest-serving member of the Labour party, but that does not stop us being good friends. It does not prevent us from making common cause, because Harry believes, as I believe, that people who are UK citizens, who have paid their taxes throughout their working lives, and who are receiving pensions, albeit while living in other countries, should have the right to vote.

The hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) said that we are proud to be one of the oldest democracies in the world. We are, but we also happen to be one of the oldest democracies in the developed world that does not give lifelong voting rights to its expat citizens, which cannot be right. I oppose the Opposition amendment simply on the grounds that this has nothing to do with democracy or with resources. If it had anything to do with resources—this comes back to the money—and if we were so concerned about the financing of the proposals, why are the Opposition proposing to give votes to 16 to 18-year-olds, who have mostly never paid a dime in taxation in their lives, while seeking to continue to deny the voting rights of expat UK citizens who have paid their way throughout their working lives?

David Linden: I left school at 16 years old and did not get to vote until I was 18, but I paid taxes during the two years that I was unable to vote in elections to this Parliament. That is a nonsense argument.

Sir Roger Gale: I know some such young people, but at most they could have paid two years' worth of taxes. Harry Shindler paid taxes for years and gave blood and fought for his country. I am afraid that Opposition Members are seeking to deny such people the right to be British and to vote as British, which I regard as an absolute disgrace—

4.59 pm

Three quarters of an hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the Deputy Speaker put the Questions necessary to dispose of the proceedings (Standing Order No. 52(1)(b)).

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 259, Noes 296.

Division No. 241]

[4.59 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena

Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian

Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brabin, Tracy
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Carden, Dan
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Jenny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crausby, Sir David
 Crawley, Angela
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Nic
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 De Piero, Gloria
 Debonnaire, Thangam
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 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
 Fellows, Marion

Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Ruth
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 P.
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Karen
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Linden, David
 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
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 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
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 O'Mara, Jared
 Onasanya, Fiona
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris

Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sherrieff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Stephanie Peacock and
Nick Smith

NOES

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
 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
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Dowden, Oliver
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 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
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick

Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 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
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 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
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Jack, Mr Alister
 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, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy

Leigh, Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 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
 Perry, rh Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Purslove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber

Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 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
 Stewart, Rory
 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
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
 Wendy Morton and
 Mims Davies

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 308, Noes 260.

Division No. 242]

[5.15 pm

AYES

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
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brake, rh Tom
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davey, rh Sir Edward
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline

Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Dowden, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
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
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon

Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jardine, Christine
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, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamb, rh Norman
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lloyd, Stephen
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Macleane, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Moran, Layla
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky

Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
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
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
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
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
Stewart, Rory
Stone, Jamie
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
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben

Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Wiggan, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mims Davies and
Wendy Morton

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Austin, Ian
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brabin, Tracy
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Carden, Dan
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Jenny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crausby, Sir David
 Crawley, Angela
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Nic

Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 De Piero, Gloria
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 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
 Fellows, Marion
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Ruth
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn

Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Karen
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Linden, David
 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
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa

Newlands, Gavin
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 O'Mara, Jared
 Onasanya, Fiona
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeter, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan

Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete

Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Nick Smith and
Stephanie Peacock

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Overseas Electors Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.

University of London Bill [*Lords*]

[Relevant Document: Statement on behalf of the Promoters in support of the Second Reading of the Bill.]

Second Reading

5.32 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am very pleased to introduce the Bill. It is an important and, I hope, uncontroversial piece of proposed legislation. I do so partly as a constituency Member of Parliament whose constituency includes one of the prestigious member institutions of the University of London, the London Business School, and as a London MP who recognises the huge importance of the University of London overall to the economy and cultural life of our city and to our international standing.

The Bill's primary purpose is to correct an historical anomaly and enable the various colleges and institutes that are currently members of the federal university to become universities in their own right, while also remaining a part of the University of London. The University of London was established by charter in 1836, although its history long predates that. It demonstrated an early commitment to diversity and to widening access by becoming the secular alternative to Oxford and Cambridge. The university's present charter has been supplemented by a number of Acts of Parliament that prescribe its governance arrangements. The current arrangements are enshrined in the University of London Act 1994. I will be referring to the 1994 Act in the course of my comments.

The university was created as a federal institution in which colleges provided the teaching in accordance with the curriculum determined at the centre. For over 100 years, the university was directly funded as a single entity, distributing resources out to the colleges, all of which were originally also governed by centrally determined regulations on academic and other matters. Over the years, that position has wholly changed. The university remains a federal institution with 18 members, all of which are self-governing and autonomous, and most of which operate under separate royal charters.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I graduated from University College London in 1991, when of course that institution was part of the federation of London University. I always thought it rather odd that, when UCL left and the federation continued because of the 1994 Act, the remaining colleges in the federation were restricted. Does the hon. Lady agree that the colleges being able to obtain university status, subject to this proposed legislation passing, will increase their global standing, which is even more important as this country leaves the European Union?

Ms Buck: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman; that is absolutely at the heart of the Bill.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): In my role as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Nigeria, we are trying to sell educational establishments in such countries. It is very difficult to sell the University of London, because people do not see it as a university; they see the colleges as having university status. Does the hon. Lady think that this will make my life easier?

Ms Buck: I believe that nothing is more important than to make the hon. Gentleman's life easier, so I am pleased to broadly confirm—I hope—exactly what he is saying. There is a fundamental lack of clarity internationally. Many people in this country understand the importance of the University of London's member institutes, which have fantastic reputations. However, particularly in the global marketplace for education, there is, as he describes, a lack of clarity about the overarching University of London structure and the institutes that are, in some cases, called colleges and schools. I went to the London School of Economics and some people will not understand the difference between that and a university, so the hon. Gentleman is completely right, as I will confirm even further as I work through my remarks.

The member institutes set their own academic criteria and in most cases have their own degree-awarding powers. In addition to the London Business School in my constituency, the colleges include University College London—called somewhat confusingly both a university and a college—King's College, the London School of Economics, Birkbeck and the newest arrival, City University, which joined the federation only in 2016. Imperial College, on the other hand, left the federation in 2007, having no other option at the time for it to achieve university status.

The University of London provides a range of opt-in central services to its member institutions, including the university library at Senate House, in which I spent many happy hours, the careers service and collaboration with the university on its international academy programme, which provides distance learning to over 50,000 students worldwide. Members pay an annual subscription to the university and terms of federation membership are prescribed in the university's statutes.

The key rationale for the Bill, as I said in response to interventions, is that it will facilitate the university's member institutions becoming universities in their own right. The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 changed the regulatory landscape for the higher education sector. It opened it up to new providers and shortened the process for obtaining degree-awarding powers and, crucially, for obtaining university title.

Without this Bill, relatively unknown higher education providers will be able to obtain university status while institutions such as the LSE, UCL and King's will not. The Bill therefore ensures that such institutions are not placed at a disadvantage in the increasingly competitive market for students and teachers. Branding can matter, even for institutions with reputations as high as those I have mentioned, and some of the member institutions have found that their status as a college can cause confusion. The term “college” can suggest that the institutions are subsidiary bodies of the University of London, when they are in fact self-governing, setting their own entrance criteria and, in the majority of cases, having degree-awarding powers. They are therefore universities in all but name.

The process for institutions applying for university status is governed by the Higher Education and Research Act. Any member institution seeking to become a university in its own right will need to apply to the Office for Students for permission. How does the Bill facilitate that process? The 1994 Act described the University of London member institutions as colleges, and as I have explained, that is increasingly unhelpful, so clause 2 would define membership of the federation as including

any University of London institution that has the “status of a university”. Not all member institutions will want or be able to become universities. Not all award their own degrees, for example, and that is a necessary condition of becoming a university. The definition of a member institution maintains the reference to an institution that has the status of a college under the University of London statutes. Whether a university in its own right or a college under statutes, all member institutions will enjoy an equal status within the University of London federation.

Twelve out of the 18 member institutions now wish to seek university status and are presently applying for such permission. As all 12 are long-established and high-quality providers of higher education, it is anticipated that the Office for Students will recommend to the Privy Council that the change of status be approved. The Government have insisted that Privy Council approval is dependent on the Bill obtaining Royal Assent, so to be clear: no member institution will be permitted to become a university in its own right unless the Bill is enacted.

I turn now to the provisions on the making of University of London statutes. These statutes set the objects and powers of the university and establish and define the powers of the university's institutions. To explain the procedure for making statutes is immediately to identify why reform is needed. The prescribed procedure involves two defunct bodies and a procedure requiring the active engagement of the college governing bodies, which have made it clear that they do not regard such a process as appropriate to the modern federal relationship.

The power to make statutes is conferred on the council of the university—a body that no longer exists. The drafter of the 1994 Act anticipated changes in university governance, and the term used in the Act to refer to the council also applies to

“such other body as the statutes may from time to time designate as the governing and executive body of the University”.

Since 2003, the governing body has been known as the board of trustees, and so, in accordance with the flexible definition of “the council” in the 1994 Act, statutes may be made by the board. That is not clear, however, from the 1994 Act. Furthermore, under section 3 of the Act, the text of any proposed statutes must be sent to the University of London convocation, as the association of graduates of the university, but it ceased to exist in 2003. The Bill will ensure that the terms used in legislation reflect the actual terms now used to describe the various University of London bodies.

The 1994 Act allows statutory consultees a very generous period of four months in which to make representations on proposals. If the governing body then wishes to proceed to make the statutes, it must pass two separate resolutions, with an interval of not less than one and not more than six months, and the statutes only have effect following approval of Her Majesty in Council. That is how University of London statute is made. Whatever the virtues of the system, swiftness is not one. The university regards the process as cumbersome and unnecessarily protracted, and the college governing bodies do not wish to continue with a process that once made sense but which is no longer appropriate.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Is it right to say that the view of the university is that the

[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

other encumbrances in the process are what cause the delay, not the Privy Council stage, which is a very quick stage?

Ms Buck: Absolutely. The cause of the difficulty is the combination of the length of the consultation and the notional involvement of bodies that no longer exist.

Quite simply, the ever-evolving relationship with 18 member institutions and the need to keep in line with the regular changes to higher education regulation mean the university needs to be able to refresh its statutes from time to time in a more dynamic way.

I want to be clear on one matter before I turn to the proposals for streamlining the statute-making powers. The university does not see the revision of the statute-making powers as an excuse to downgrade its obligations to consult. It is committed to undertaking effective consultation and understands this to be vital to the formation of statutes that command support and confidence. The Bill envisages that the initiative for making statutes will come from the board of trustees as the governing body of the university. Clause 3, however, also enables the collegiate council, which advises the board on all matters concerning the university, to submit its own proposals for consideration.

Ultimately, however, the board can reject the council's initiative, reflecting the fact that it is the supreme decision-making body of the university. Statutes cannot be made unless the board has consulted the council—assuming they did not originate from the council—a recognised trade union and other bodies that the university considers appropriate. The explicit requirement to consult the trade unions was passed as an amendment in the other place and reflects the university's commitment to ensuring proper consultation with all stakeholders.

I should emphasise again that all the member institutions were consulted on the Bill and have unanimously endorsed the proposal to legislate. As under the 1994 Act, the board does not have the final say. Reflecting existing arrangements, the Bill provides that the statutes will not be effective until approved by the Privy Council. The Privy Council's remit over the approval of university constitutional arrangements was restricted under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. Once section 56 of that Act comes into force, English universities established other than by royal charter—those limited by guarantee—will no longer be required to seek Privy Council approval for amendments to their governing documentation. If the requirement for such approval to amendments of statutes of chartered universities is also ended, clause 4(2) of the Bill allows for the alignment of that.

That, in essence, is the main reason for the streamlining of statutes and the ability of member institutions to call themselves universities in their own right. I hope very much that the House will support this important but, as I have said, hopefully uncontroversial legislation.

5.45 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): Last year, the Government passed the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 with the aim of opening up the higher education market. The Act enables high-quality providers of higher education

to gain degree-awarding powers more quickly, and also allows those with an excellent track record to achieve university titles.

I recognise, however, that existing legislation poses problems for the colleges in the University of London federation. Under the current rules, colleges that wish to obtain university titles will have to leave the federation altogether, which could undermine both its provision and its reputation. If, however, colleges remain under the current arrangement, their lack of university title may also undermine their prestige and standing, which could have an adverse effect on their ability to recruit students, particularly those from overseas. I therefore fully support this private Bill, which seeks to correct technicalities in existing legislation and allow the colleges of the University of London to become universities in their own right, while remaining part of the university's federal structure.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does that mean that Birkbeck College, for instance, will become “Birkbeck University, University of London”, or will it be “Birkbeck University”? How will we refer to it in future?

Mr Gyimah: That will depend on how Birkbeck chooses to refer to itself, but I anticipate that once this Bill gains Royal Assent, most of the University of London's prestigious colleges will apply to gain full university title, and they are very well placed to be successful. The colleges are already fully compliant with the financial sustainability, management and governance requirements that apply to all directly funded higher education institutions, and they also already have their own degree-awarding powers.

The University of London is one of the very few providers whose powers are set out in a private Act. The primary purpose of the Bill is to correct technicalities in the current Act, which disallows the colleges from applying to become universities in their own right. Given that it is uncontroversial—I hope—and long overdue, I expect it to be passed, with a significant number of colleges taking full advantage of the opportunity to gain university status.

I am very aware that the university and its colleges have already invested considerable time and expense in rectifying the existing situation. Any further delay in the Bill's progress will be a significant setback to them, and will become increasingly harmful. I therefore encourage the House to allow the Bill to proceed with all reasonable speed.

5.49 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who I gather is, according to the nomenclature, the promoter of the Bill. She cut through the thicket of a highly technical and somewhat convoluted selection of arguments with a crisp and concise message—the Minister has just echoed it—which is that at the moment, in technical and practical terms, there are significant concerns for the colleges concerned that, to use the old adage, they are neither fish nor fowl. For all the reasons that my hon. Friend set out and the Minister reiterated, at a time when it is so important that the international reputation of our existing universities and institutions is understood and held in high esteem, especially given

the situation in which we find ourselves with Brexit and other challenges from competitor countries with universities, our institutions must not be hampered or impeded with regard to the way in which they are understood by people not just in this place or even in this country, but internationally. That is an important part of the process.

I want first to declare a triple interest, albeit an historical one, in this debate. First, I am a former postgraduate of London University—from the Warburg Institute—which serves as a reminder that the University of London consists of not only colleges, but a number of separate institutions and institutes, many of which found themselves in quite a difficult position in the 1990s and 2000s when the changes that we know about began to take place in the relationship of the central university and the colleges. Secondly, of course, this took place some time ago, and, thirdly, to illustrate that, in the 1990s I was a member, by virtue of my editing the magazine *History Today*, of the board of the Institute of Historical Research. At that time, the debate about the relationship of the university to the various colleges, and what would happen to the university and its institutions, was a strong and fevered one. Thankfully, in the years since, there has been a coexistence—I suppose that that would be the word—between the central register of the university and the colleges, and that coexistence has brought about the uncontroversial Bill before us today.

I do not want to repeat the points made by my hon. Friend and the Minister about the technicalities of the Bill and the processes, but I do want to make one or two observations about the 1994 Act and where this new settlement might take us. In the promoter's statement of support for the Bill's Second Reading, we are told:

"The current arrangements are...unnecessarily cumbersome. The 1994 Act allows consultees 4 months in which to make representations",
and

"if the governing body wishes to take forward its proposals, it must pass two resolutions with an interval of at least one month."

That is all very true, but I believe that it has a broader relevance than simply today's technical debate, as it puts the onus on all the member institutions, when they are changing elements of their statute in the way my hon. Friend has explained will happen under the new set-up, to consult strongly with all their workforce—all their academic staff and students. The Minister will be well aware of the Opposition's concerns in this area in the light of all we said in the debates on the Higher Education and Research Bill with his predecessor, and the various exchanges that he and I have had about this area since.

The importance of giving the colleges university status cannot be overstated, and I understand the concern of all hon. Members and those involved with the colleges that they should not be hampered externally. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), citing his role as a Government envoy to Nigeria, was worried about this, which I can understand, but in defence of the central functions of the University of London, I would like to reassure him that the status of the university as a brand is still very strong internationally. I pray in aid of that argument the tens of thousands of graduate students whom I see every year at the enormous graduation ceremonies, which are often presided over by Her Royal Highness Princess Anne, the chancellor of the University of London. I do not think we should entirely set aside the brand value, if I can put it that way, of the University of London.

Clause 3 of the Bill refers to conferring a general power on the university's governing body—the board of trustees. The Bill was amended in the House of Lords, and I have taken the time to look at the evidence given to my noble Friend Lord McFall over two sessions in February and March this year, which was very interesting. In putting forward its proposals, the university made a number of claims about the existing process being unnecessarily cumbersome and protracted and the need to refresh its status in a more dynamic way. I pay tribute to the diligence of my noble Friend, because he pressed the university quite hard on the relationship between the university and the colleges. In particular, he was concerned that there should not be a sense of mission creep regarding to what needs to be done to establish that relationship. As a result of my noble Friend's probing, two amendments were tabled, one of which restored the right of the trade unions at the colleges and the university to be consulted—[*Interruption.*]

Bob Stewart: I am hoping that the hon. Gentleman can have a short break to get his cough under control. I should like to ask him, and indeed the Minister, how much these changes are going to cost. Has there been a cost analysis of the changes?

Gordon Marsden: That is a good point. I do not have the answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, but the Minister might be able to give him an indication. I would simply say that it is important that these processes are taken forward as economically and speedily as possible, which will obviously involve some degree of expense. I hope that no one would wish to see flights of enthusiasm for spending lots of money to promote new titles and logos, for example, especially at this time. That is not the official Opposition's view; it is just my personal opinion.

I shall return to the question of amendments having to go out for consultation by recognised trade unions. This needs to be widely and substantially understood, particularly by the heads of the colleges and particularly in relation to the two unions involved—the University and College Union and Unison. It is important that the workforce should be involved in the process.

The second change relates to the Privy Council, and I understand the need for that change. As a general principle, however, we remain sceptical about the diminution of the role of the Privy Council in the position of universities. Members of the other place made that point when the Bill was going through. This goes back to the old Bagehot definition of the monarchy: it is not the powers that it confers, but the powers it denies. The Privy Council has historically been a useful backstop against the flights of fancy of higher education administrators, and I will be sorry to see its role entirely extinguished. That said, I understand the reasons given in the Bill.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am with the hon. Gentleman on that. When evidence was given to the other place, every time there was a challenge that these new powers could be abused, the defence was that, ultimately, there was the safeguard that approval would need to be given by the Privy Council, yet clause 4 envisages a time when the Privy Council will no longer be able to exercise its power.

Gordon Marsden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I do not want to prolong the debate unduly on this subject, but the Minister will have heard what the hon. Gentleman said and my generic misgivings, which are not specific to the particular issue in the Bill. We remain not entirely persuaded that there is not a role for the Privy Council.

In paying tribute to my noble Friend Lord McFall, I repeat some of the things that he said in persuading the university to restore these points:

“the focus should be on what values our society expects to see reflected in our universities; it is not just value for money”—important though that is. He continued:

“In that context, I am very pleased that there will be the opportunity for the widest consultation on this Bill”—

I believe that that has been the case—

“so that it is transparent and we can see exactly what universities will be.”

Finally, I have a warning with wider relevance not just for the University of London but for the Government and other universities. The promoter’s agent, writing to the House of Lords Clerk on 27 February 2018 after the Lords Deputy Speaker had requested evidence that member institutions and trade unions were aware of the couple of procedural changes in the Bill, stated:

“We did not specifically draw the Member Institutions’ and trade unions’ attention to the effect of the Bill in reducing the size of the quorum”—

that would, of course, have made it a lot easier for the board of trustees to make alterations in statute without consultation—

“since it was not a matter we thought it necessary to highlight in the way that it was framed”.

I hope that I am not being unkind, but I detect a slight degree of administrative arrogance in the idea that people who are intimately involved, day by day, with the activities of the university should not be consulted. That way madness and disconnection lies. That said, we support this necessary and proportionate Bill.

6.3 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I will be brief. I merely wish to thank the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) for her opening remarks and for explaining the need for this Bill. She gave a good account.

I support the Bill. In this country, we are rightly proud of our universities, which are a symbol of our soft power that attract people from all over the world. As both the shadow Minister and the hon. Lady said, this is about attracting people from all over the world to share in the culture of our great nation. I am glad to see the Bill has attracted support from both sides of the House, and I look forward to seeing it complete its passage.

6.4 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): This debate would not have taken place had I not blocked this Bill going through on the nod on Second Reading, and the contributions we have had today show that it has been a worthwhile exercise. I do not believe Bills should go through this House without being discussed, particularly when they are opaque. When the Bill was

being debated in the other place, it was conceded that the foremost reason and key rationale for it was that it would facilitate universities becoming universities in their own right in London, and it was conceded that that was not clear in the Bill. If something is not clear in the Bill, how are we going to get to the bottom of it unless we start debating it? That is where the value of what we are doing this evening lies.

At the moment, there are 18 self-governing institutions within the University of London’s federal structure, a lot of which are, in many respects, regarded as universities in their own right. For example, if one looks at the 2019 university league tables, one sees that the London School of Economics is third, University College London, of which my late father was a graduate, getting first-class honours in Latin, is 10th—

Bob Stewart: Better than you then.

Sir Christopher Chope: Far better than me. King’s College London is 26th, Royal Holloway is 28th, Queen Mary is 38th, the School of Oriental and African Studies is 46th, St George’s is 52nd, Goldsmiths is 62nd and City, which has recently joined the University of London, is 66th. The college to which my hon. Friend referred, Birkbeck, is 125th. We are told that other colleges, beyond the ones I have mentioned, are aspiring to become universities in their own right. They may include the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, which this league table puts top of the arts and drama institutions. The question I would like to ask is this: what is going to happen to the other colleges within the federation of the University of London? They are probably not going to be in a position to become universities in their own right, and may not even aspire to do so. What is going to be done to protect their position? Obviously, they operate on the basis that they are part of the University of London, with all the prestige that that brings to their activities. A number of the 24 Russell Group universities are in fact colleges of the University of London—King’s College, LSE, Queen Mary and University College. A lot of these colleges are already seen as universities in their own right, so is it really going to make an enormous difference when this Bill is enacted? I am not so sure about that.

I was disappointed that the Minister did not address one of the hot topics of the moment, which is grade inflation. To what extent are these 12 new universities, instantly created as a result of this legislation, going to engage in grade inflation? A report was produced by Reform, and Tom Richmond, the senior research fellow who was its author, has said:

“Rocketing degree grade inflation is in no one’s interest.”

It continued:

“Universities may think easier degrees are a way to attract students but eventually they will lose currency and students will go elsewhere, even overseas.”

It went on to say:

“Restoring the currency of degrees would also mean better value for money for the £18 billion that universities receive each year in tuition fees.”

That report recommended that universities are stripped of their powers to award degrees and that final-year students should instead sit new national assessments for each degree course. The Bill will do quite the reverse by increasing the number of organisations that will be able to award degrees, with the perverse incentive that they

will want to be able to make their degrees easier and engage in the grade inflation about which so many people are concerned. I am interested to hear the Minister's response to that point.

Mr Gyimah: I thank my hon. Friend for pursuing this line of argument but suggest that he is making several leaps in his assumptions. The receiving of the university title, and in this case correcting an anomaly, do not in themselves entail the university lowering its standards. University standards are incredibly important, not only for new universities but for existing universities—indeed, for all universities. We can do a lot using the quality bodies, such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, to ensure that the problem of grade inflation to which my hon. Friend refers is dealt with, but grade inflation is not an argument against an institution gaining the university title when it does exactly the same work as another institution that has that title.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to the Minister for responding to my point with that long intervention. I shall not engage in a long argument about it, but he is talking about all 18 colleges of the University of London being able to become universities in their own right. Why are they going to want to do that? Currently, the collegiate council can deal with issues relating to grade inflation within the University of London. I am surprised that my hon. Friend the Minister does not think that that is an important issue with which the council should be able to deal. In itself, the creation of a new university obviously does not mean that it will indulge in grade inflation, but when a report has been produced that suggests that fewer, rather than more, universities should award degrees, the Bill seems to me to be going in the wrong direction.

Mr Gyimah: I remind the House that we are not talking about institutions that just arrived yesterday. All these colleges have already demonstrated fully, in practice, that they are compliant with the financial sustainability, management and governance requirements that apply to all directly funded higher education institutions. My hon. Friend should keep that in mind when he comments on these institutions and whether they may or may not indulge in grade inflation or should have the title of university.

Sir Christopher Chope: Obviously I always take such things into account, but my hon. Friend has not actually told me what the Government are doing to counter grade inflation in universities. From what he has said, it seems implicit that he regards it as a serious problem. If he wishes to intervene again, I would be grateful if he told me what he is going to do about it.

Mr Gyimah: I am trying not to be drawn into that particular issue because it is not germane to this debate, but a significant piece of work is currently being done on quality in higher education, looking into grade inflation, unconditional offers, the quality of teaching and value for money in degrees. All are important to ensure that we safeguard our world-class university system, but I have not dwelt on that because it is not the subject of the debate.

Sir Christopher Chope: It may not be the subject of the debate, but it would be very much a pertinent subject for each college that wishes to acquire university status in its own right.

Before I finish, let me refer to clause 4(2), which enables the disengagement of the Privy Council from having to approve what comes out of the collegiate council's consultation process. It seems to me that what was said in the other place—I referred to it in an intervention—was absolutely germane. We are talking about relaxing the control of the governing body over what happens within the University of London federation. If the safeguard against abuse of that relaxed control is the involvement of the Privy Council, why does the Bill also legislate to do away with that Privy Council involvement? It would be helpful if the answer to that was available now.

We could perhaps also be told at some stage to what extent the Privy Council's engagement in this process over the years has resulted in changes to processes that would otherwise have taken place without the approval of the Privy Council. Has the Privy Council's involvement been a pointless exercise, or has it brought pressure to bear to ensure that the only changes carried through are those that are sensible and in the best interests of all 18 members of the University of London's federal structure?

I fear that colleges in the University of London not becoming universities in their own right will have the consequence of putting tremendous pressure on the other colleges, which may be to their detriment. However, I have to accept that, so far, they do not seem to have complained about it, so all one can do in such a debate is to raise the issue and see what flows from it.

The Bill will now obviously go to an Unopposed Bill Committee, because there are no petitions against it. In recent Unopposed Bill Committees, pertinent questions have quite often been asked about private Bills. I hope that that process will be gone through again, and that, if the Bill needs to be amended in any way, that process will not be avoided but will be facilitated as a result of today's debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time and committed.

Middle Level Bill

[Relevant Document: Statement on behalf of the Promoters in support of consideration and approval of the Lords amendments.]

Consideration of Lords amendments

Clause 2

INTERPRETATION

6.17 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to consider Lords amendments 2 to 20.

Kevin Foster: This debate marks the end of a detailed process of parliamentary scrutiny of the Bill, which has both been welcome and led to significant changes and improvements to it. That process has been followed tenaciously by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who is in his place today and who I am sure will again give us the benefit of his thoughts on their lordships' amendments. It must be said that the Bill is better for the scrutiny it has had in both Houses, with its Opposed Bill Committee in the other place having been chaired by Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, a former Lord Chief Justice.

Today's debate focuses on the 20 amendments made by their lordships, resulting from the concerns raised in the Opposed Bill Committee, further to refine the Bill to ensure that its purpose is clear, that the powers it grants are proportionate and that the needs of all users of the Middle Level, including those who rely on it for drainage and for whom it is their home—that has been a particular issue of debate throughout the process—are properly considered. I have spoken at length with the promoters, and they support the Lords amendments and urge Members to accept them.

To give a brief history of the Bill for those who have perhaps not followed it quite as closely as I have had the pleasure of doing, it was originally introduced to the House in November 2016 and had its First Reading on 24 January 2017. It was debated on Second Reading on 29 March 2017, when my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch and I had the opportunity to debate it at some length. A motion to revive the Bill in the new Session of Parliament followed the general election and was agreed by this House on 17 October 2017, and the House of Lords agreed to the revival of the Bill on 25 October 2017. The Bill went before an Opposed Bill Committee of the House of Commons on 15 to 17 January 2018, and consideration of the Bill as amended in Committee took place in this Chamber on 28 February. On Third Reading, the Bill passed without a Division.

My gratitude goes to my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight)—sadly, he is not able to join us for this debate—who chaired the Opposed Bill Committee of this House and made some valuable contributions. In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch highlighted on Third Reading how valuable it had been to hear on Report the contribution of the Chairman of the Opposed Bill Committee, as it meant that we could further explore some of the issues that had been presented there.

The passage of the Bill in the other place has been slightly quicker, as there was no intervening general election to cause an issue with its consideration. Its formal First Reading in the other place took place on 1 March this year and its formal Second Reading on Thursday 22 March. It was then considered for five days in June by an Opposed Bill Committee, chaired by the eminent jurist Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd. He and the Committee brought a good level of scrutiny to it, ensuring that we have a very good Bill. I think that we can have every confidence in agreeing with their lordships today and then seeing this legislation enacted.

My understanding is that the Committee in the other place heard evidence from four of the seven petitioners against the Bill. Two of the petitioners had withdrawn their petitions and one was held not to have a right to be heard by the Committee, although I understand from speaking to the agents of the promoters that that person was still able to speak by providing evidence on behalf of one of the petitioners. To be clear, everyone has had a strong chance to put their views. Three of the petitioners had also appeared before the Opposed Bill Committee of this House.

The Middle Level Commissioners proposed amendments to the Bill in response to the concerns raised by the petitioners and members of the Committee. They also gave the Committee a number of undertakings that are not part of the Bill. However, I will turn to them in a few moments, because Members may find it helpful to know the reasons behind some of the undertakings given, as well as the reasons why they were given as formal undertakings to the Committee rather than incorporated as amendments to the Bill.

The amended Bill received formal Third Reading in the other place on 12 September this year, and we are now here to consider the Lords amendments. The promoter considers that the amendments do not extend or materially change the substance of the proposals in the Bill as earlier passed by this House, but they do provide some advantages.

Lords amendment 1 addresses a concern regarding small unpowered pleasure vessels. People may wonder what on earth that might mean. The amendment provides that vessels such as canoes and kayaks should not be included in the charging regime introduced by the Bill. However, when I speak about one of the other Lords amendments, I will explain that there may be a reasonable way—comparable with a similar system used on other waterways—to seek a contribution from those using the waterway for such purposes towards the costs of maintaining the waterway for navigation. This amendment is part of ensuring that the Bill is proportionate, and—to be blunt—to ensure that someone using a canoe or kayak does not find themselves being charged as if they were putting a pleasure boat down the waterway. It speaks to the socially inclusive nature of the use of the Middle Level; it is not just about those with large motor boats or significant amounts of money.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I am very conscious of what my hon. Friend says, and we want to encourage people to be active in their recreation. Have the commissioners considered a case whereby such vessels may be part of a commercial operation, with kayaks

being rented out or training taking place? Have they recognised that the Lords would not want such cases to be covered by this provision?

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for her intervention. Yes, that is partly why Lords amendment 7 allows an ability to provide some charge for a more commercial operation. It could perhaps be a block charge to British Canoeing for those who are using the waterway, so that people pay a membership fee to British Canoeing before they are able to use particular waterways rather than paying individual fees to each individual operation. I see some nodding from those in the Under-Gallery. It is about trying to avoid a situation where a person with a canoe finds themselves having to register as a boat user to get on the water and pay a fee as if they were a large operation. They will not be completely barred, but they will be in a different charging regime from the standard one for the major pleasure boats and crafts using the waterway.

As the Minister will be aware, the current system of regulation means that fairly large pleasure and commercial boats can use the Middle Level with absolutely no charge at all. That is severely hindering its development and opportunities. Most worryingly of all, the current legislation does not provide for a modern system of safety regulation. This Bill does, hence why the commissioners are very keen to get it in place so that they can ensure that there is a modern and recognisable standard of boat safety on the Middle Level.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Could I be quite clear about this, because I am slightly worried? There is no question, is there, of a family taking a canoe out having to pay when they go on these waterways? That would seem excessive.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his intervention. The Lords amendment that I have just briefly covered is designed to deal with some of those concerns. It would be quite common on other waterways to have a system whereby if someone was a member of the British Canoeing Society, that membership fee would cover the cost. The commissioners may also put in place some restrictions regarding, for example, children wearing life vests. I think most of us would feel that that would be a sensible form of regulation on the waterway.

The general intention of the Lords amendment is to recognise that the Middle Level is a key part of the local community. Many use it informally. Although we need to bring in a form of safety regulation, it is not intended to bring that into the main scheme, although, as on other waterways, there might be a requirement to be a member of a recognised organisation that then contributes to the upkeep of safety equipment and other areas. There would then not necessarily be an additional charge to go on the Middle Level.

Lords Amendments 2, 3 and 4 deal with some of the issues that were raised on the membership of the navigation advisory committee and how it would work. Lords Amendment 2 would be familiar to anyone who has served on a local authority, with the idea that one should declare any personal interest or any matters that would be relevant to one's decisions. Some of the petitioners raised a concern that the navigation advisory committee must fairly represent the users. In essence—the promoters may not thank me for saying this—it should not be the

case that, for example, the commissioners' mates or one particular group end up finding themselves on the navigation advisory committee.

However, the promoters were happy to accept the idea that relevant interests should be declared and that there should be clear processes for how that works. I do not think that any of us would see it as unreasonable that someone appointed to a representative body should declare to those they are representing what potential interests they may have that are relevant to their position on, in this case, the navigation advisory committee. They would not have to give a life story of their entire business affairs, but they would certainly have to declare anything that was relevant to their being on that committee—for example, what their interest is in the Middle Level, what they are doing there and how their business might operate. Those using the waterway for navigation could then satisfy themselves that there was a broad range of people represented there.

6.30 pm

Lords amendment 3 requires the commissioners to consult the committee on

“proposals for a protocol for the removal of vessels under section 15.”

As a consequence of the amendment, a similar consultation duty in clause 15 has been removed. The removal of boats is one of the most sensitive parts of the proposals, because some people are using the waterways as a home, and others have been using them for a long time, but I think all of us in the House accept that that power must be there. In these amendments, their lordships have struck the correct balance given the need to ensure safety, an effective navigation system, that the waterway is not blocked and that modern safety regulations are adhered to.

Amendment 4 is a very reasonable proposition from their lordships about what the dispute resolution process should be if the commissioners and the navigation advisory committee cannot agree on a matter. That process is set out in some detail, but for the purposes of time, I do not propose to go through each nuance. The fact that their lordships, and in particular the Chairman of the Opposed Bill Committee in the other place, felt that this was the right approach speaks volumes for why we should accept the amendment.

Lords amendment 5 relates to the continuity of navigation functions. A number of petitioners raised concerns in the Opposed Bill Committee in the other place that the Bill did not include specific maintenance duties for commissioners. The commissioners' view was that such duties were already imposed by the existing legislation that applies to the Middle Level—for instance, requiring them to maintain particular water levels in particular waterways. Clearly, for a waterway to be navigable, there needs to be a minimum draught, to guarantee that a boat can be taken along it.

Amendment 5 provides additional reassurance to navigation users that the Bill, once it becomes an Act, will not remove the requirement for the commissioners to exercise their current navigation functions under the existing Middle Level Acts. If the Bill had not been amended in this way, my clear instruction from the promoters is that the commissioners would have looked to ensure that places were navigable. After all, if a charging system is being introduced, the waterway has to be navigable if there is to be any income. They were

happy to suggest this amendment, and their lordships have made it to the Bill. Given that much of our debate, certainly on Second Reading, has been about the fact that much of the legislation affecting the Middle Level is incredibly elderly, it seems sensible to make clear in this modern piece of legislation that we still expect to see those standards followed. The amendment clarifies that point.

Lords amendment 6 clarifies a point about navigation income and how it relates to navigation expenditure. A number of petitioners raised concerns about the Bill's potential unintended consequence of obliging the commissioners to aim to secure that navigation income met navigation costs, which could make the charges higher—for example, if there were a small number of users, the commissioners might be obliged to instantly bill them the full cost. A new provision is therefore added to clause 4 to confirm that the commissioners are not required to aim to secure that the income from charges meets the annualised navigation costs they incur.

In practice, the commissioners do not expect navigation income to be likely to meet navigation costs unless the current levels increase significantly. This reform is not just about an exciting couple of debates for me in the Chamber; the point is to make a real difference on the ground. They hope that that difference will be to see more people looking to use and navigate the waterways, but they do not necessarily want that tight constraint, which might mean that in the first instance a small number of people are suddenly hit with a large bill.

Lords amendment 7, which I briefly referred to in my response to the Minister's intervention, provides that the use of small unpowered pleasure vessels on the waterway will not incur a charge unless it is agreed by the navigation advisory committee or a person appointed to act as an expert under the new dispute resolution process in clause 3. The amendment was made in response to concerns that users of small pleasure vessels such as canoes and kayaks should not be included in the regime introduced by the Bill—a position I fully support. As I outlined earlier, it makes eminent sense that they should not be in the standard charging regime, but, to touch on the Minister's point, it was felt that there was still a need to recover some of the navigation expenses from those using the waterways in this manner, while allowing the public to use and enjoy them.

As I have said in response to interventions, particularly that of my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), the commissioners say that if they are likely to exercise the power, they will recover the charges in a block charge to British Canoeing, whose membership fee covers charges for other waterways. I have to make it clear that there would be a process of negotiation with British Canoeing, but I cannot see any reason why, in principle, there would not be a readiness on the part of the commissioners and British Canoeing to look at a way of making the Middle Level a more enjoyable place and, through providing specific facilities, a safer place for canoeing, and one that would again show that the waterway is socially inclusive.

Amendment 8 relates to clause 9 on stranded, grounded and sunken vessels and vehicles. The clause has been amended by their lordships to make it clear that the new powers to remove stranded, grounded and sunken vessels from the waterways do not prevent the commissioners from using existing powers to remove vessels from the

waterways where that is more appropriate. The amendment is in response to petitioners' concerns that vessels could be removed when moving them to a different location on the waterways would be a more appropriate solution. The new wording provides an appropriate balance between protecting the interests of the owners of stranded, grounded and sunken vessels and the commissioners' duty to keep the waterways clear. It is also consistent with changes made by the House of Commons Opposed Private Bill Committee, which required the removal of vessels to be used as a last resort. I am conscious that there is a particular issue in relation to those who use a vessel as their residence. They will rightly want more protection than will those who have concerns about a pleasure craft that they only use for such a purpose.

Amendment 9 makes a minor change in relation to the confirmation of byelaws. I do not intend to talk about it, but I am only too happy to respond to interventions or further comments from colleagues present for this debate. The same applies to Lords amendments 10 to 12, which relate to the requirement for registration. We have debated some of these issues at length, and the amendments were included to reassure petitioners that if the commissioners refuse to register a vessel, the owner has the same opportunity to make representations and appeal against the decision as if the commissioners proposed to revoke an existing registration. That right was implicit in the Bill as previously drafted, but the amended wording makes it explicit.

The other Lords amendments are slightly more technical or set out other matters of interest. I will briefly highlight amendments Lords 14 to 16, which relate to how someone with a relevant interest in the Middle Level could, for example, challenge the accounts in the way a local government elector can in relation to their local council.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I am perplexed by the term “a relevant interest”. Will my hon. Friend elaborate on that, so that I can understand what a relevant interest might be?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his interest. The amendment responds directly to concerns raised by petitioners in the Lords Committee about how the commissioners would not be sufficiently accountable to navigation interests. It gives boat owners on the Middle Level the same right to scrutinise the commissioners' navigation accounts, and to challenge them if necessary, that local government electors have in relation to local authorities. In effect, boat owners using the Middle Level can act in the same way as a local government elector. I hope that answers my hon. Friend's question.

Lords amendments 18 to 20 are more technical in nature, and I do not intend to talk about them unless Members have a particular query. A number of undertakings have been provided, and I can certainly make them available to Members who wish to see them in more depth. I would flag up the third undertaking given in relation to the advertisement of byelaws. In effect, an undertaking has been given to advertise byelaws in the same way as traffic orders—for example, in the local newspaper or, in this instance, in a magazine of interest to boaters. That is not in the Bill because, as many of us would accept, 40 or 50 years ago the local newspaper was the obvious place to go to for relevant news and information. If we begin to codify that in legislation, it could become out of date.

A specific undertaking is given on the registration fee for static houseboats and the publication of the removal protocol. That is a particular issue, and it will be treated as if it were a byelaw. The final issue of note is the undertaking to return to a residential mooring strategy and looking at how we could use the Middle Level to provide more opportunities for residential use, but that is an undertaking to try, rather than a statutory “must”, because ultimately the mooring facilities are determined by the local council.

The Bill has returned to the House in an excellent condition from the other place. We should accept the Lords amendments, as they strengthen the Bill and make it a measure that the whole House can accept.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. For the sake of clarity, it might be useful for the House to know that it is perfectly in order for Members to speak on Lords amendments 2 to 20 as well as amendment 1, as they have been grouped. There is no real need for me to say that—I merely say it for the sake of clarity. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) has addressed amendments 2 to 20, and clearly I would have called him to order had that not been in order. He is rarely not in order. We are now debating Lords amendment 1, together with amendments 2 to 20.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I would like to thank the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for a full and detailed description of the Lords amendments. Although his constituency, and mine in Plymouth, are some distance from the geographical area in focus, the legislation has important consequences for that locality, so it is right that we give it due attention.

The Bill amends and updates the powers of the Middle Level Commissioners to regulate navigation on the Middle Level of the fens in Cambridgeshire and west Norfolk. The legislation that the Bill updates is over 150 years old, so the Bill brings the Middle Level into line with powers granted to the Environment Agency, the Canal & River Trust and the Broads Authority in Norfolk. The existing legislation dates from the 18th and 19th centuries, primarily the Middle Level Act 1862—who does not remember that gorgeous piece of legislation? The foreign policy mastermind, Henry John Temple, Third Viscount Palmerston, was in his second term as Prime Minister. A member of the now defunct Liberal party, he was grappling with the American civil war. Queen Victoria was on the throne. We had riots in Lancashire over the cotton recession. The new Westminster bridge opened in London, and criminal law was amended to make robbery with violence punishable by flogging. We remember that year well. Across the pond in 1862, Abraham Lincoln announced that he would issue an emancipation proclamation the following year—what a time to be alive. We had the Middle Level Act on top of that—indeed, our cup overfloweth.

Turning to the Bill, the Middle Level Commissioners provide flood defence and water level management to the Middle Level area and are the navigation authority for the Middle Level river system. I mention that, because many people will want to know what and where the Middle Level is. The Middle Level, the largest of the great levels of the fens, was reclaimed by drainage of

the land in the 17th century, and consists of over 120 miles of watercourses, 100 miles of which are statutory watercourses. If it were not for the operations of the commissioners and the local internal drainage boards, much of that fenland would be under water as it is below sea level, which would have a devastating impact on the 100,000 people who live and work in the Middle Level area.

The chief executive of the Middle Level Commissioners, Iain Smith, has said that about 1,500 vessels use their locks every year and that about 100 boats are “hiding” unlicensed on the waterway, so it is important to update the laws, enabling them to have better control of the waterways that they seek to oversee and ensuring safe navigation, as the hon. Member for Torbay set out.

The amended Bill originally intended to allow the Middle Level Commissioners to charge vessels to use the waterways; fine people for staying longer than allowed at moorings; check that boats using the waterways have valid insurance; remove sunken or abandoned vessels; temporarily close sections of waterways for works, or for events; and enter into arrangements with other navigation authorities for the mutual recognition of registrations and licences—all good stuff, the House will agree. We know that the additional income for the commissioners could make a real difference to the fenlands and the waterways. The Bill will bring the legislation covering the Middle Level into the 21st century in line with other navigation authorities, as set out by the Bill’s sponsor in his remarks.

6.45 pm

With the amendments made in the other place, I am pleased that we are now at a point where we, or, more importantly, the vast majority of the citizens directly affected, are largely happy with the Bill. I understand that the commissioners have consulted widely and thoroughly with interested parties, the substantial majority of whom were in favour of the proposed changes. I am grateful in particular to the peers in the other place for editing the Bill and tabling amendments based on the concerns of petitioners.

I know that additional concerns were raised. Some people did not feel that the Bill, as it originally stood, took into account the views of barge travellers and boat dwellers in the area, especially those on low incomes. I believe that the very real and genuine concerns of local people, especially about the impact of the proposed legislation on the poorest in the Middle Level community, have been reviewed with a sympathetic ear. The Bill is now in a much better shape. Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, who was on the Committee, said:

“it’s been improved and protects boat owners who use boats as their home and don’t have much money.”

The promoters should reflect on the fact that the interests of the poorest were left out of the original text.

I am pleased that there has been due scrutiny in the other place, whose new amendments, as set out by the hon. Member for Torbay, were made to build in safeguards for boat owners who are not very well off, live on boats permanently and were worried about evictions. The challenge will be how the powers in the Bill are used by the Middle Level Commissioners. I hope the concerns of the House about the impact of the Bill on those who live on boats, especially those on low incomes, will be remembered when powers are implemented and used

fully. As the concerns of the Official Opposition have been taken into account in the amended Bill, we will not be opposing it today.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate on this very important Bill. I would first like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who volunteered to take it on. It has required a lot of work and effort. I want to put on record that he has done a quite superb job, handling it with great expertise and enthusiasm. He has made really good progress with what is an important Bill. He would make a very good Minister and this is perhaps a trial run for when he takes his first Bill through Parliament.

I would also like to thank the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who has been very supportive. In the process, he has become very knowledgeable about the Middle Levels and, indeed, about many watercourses that are so important to the Fens.

I will be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wanted to put on record those two points, but also to say that I have a constituency interest. My constituency is right at the north-eastern end of the Middle Level, but it encompasses much of the constituency of my neighbours, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay). I do have an interest and represent a significant number of constituents who enjoy using the Middle Level and associated waterways. To them, this is a way of life. It is an incredibly important part of their leisure activities, and there are many commercial activities involving boats and pleasure craft, too. The Bill is important to update the way the Middle Level in particular is controlled and managed.

I would like to put on record the excellent work done by the commissioners and the drainage boards. As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport pointed out, without the oversight of the fens and without the management of the drainage systems in place—of which the Middle Level is obviously but one of a number—we would not have the incredibly successful farm land or all the other enterprises associated with food production and processing. As he also pointed out, a lot of houses are below sea level and simply would not continue to exist without this management in place. We should pay tribute to and salute the people who do it, very often completely free of charge on a pro bono basis. In addition, many constituents own boats, and from their point of view, having a well-managed system in place with fair and reasonable charging is incredibly important.

To make one specific point, under the new regime it is important that boats that are occupied—where people live on the boats in question—are treated fairly and with a light touch. That is incredibly important, because as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport pointed out, many are on relatively low incomes. This is very often not a lifestyle choice, but a choice that has been forced on them. They have contributed a great deal over the years to the whole atmospherics of the waterways in the fens and they should be respected and looked after properly.

I have looked at the amendments very carefully. I was very supportive of the Bill in the first place, but I shared the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who is sitting behind me, that it could be improved. Well, it has been improved. All the amendments have been well thought out. They are well crafted and well drafted. We now have a Bill that is absolutely fit for purpose and that can become an Act of Parliament that endures. It is one that my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay can be very proud of, because it will serve my constituents very well in the future. I very much look forward to seeing its success in the years to come.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Is it not good that we are having a debate about these amendments so that comments can be put on the record and people looking at the history of the Middle Level in future can say, “This is what these amendments were about.”? I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for introducing and explaining them and putting that on the record, because otherwise this might have gone through on the nod.

My hon. Friend referred to the amendments in such detail, so I shall concentrate on one or two of the undertakings, because they are an equally important part of the process. The undertakings are contained in a letter dated 13 July to Lord Thomas, who was the Chair of the Opposed Bill Committee on the Middle Level Bill in the other place. I shall start with the first undertaking, which states that the commissioners undertake

“to spend at least 25% of the annual income received from charges under section 5 on providing facilities on the Nene-Ouse Navigation Link which meet the current Minimum Standards for the Provision of Facilities for Boaters as published by the Inland Waterways Association, until the standards are achieved on this route; and will maintain those facilities until the Navigation Advisory Committee agrees that they are no longer needed (or an expert appointed to determine any dispute following the procedures set out in section 3 determines that they are no longer needed)”.

As you may recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, that issue took up quite a lot of debate during the Bill’s earlier stages in the House, and the undertaking that has now been given is very important.

I also refer briefly to undertaking (5) on the level of the registration fee for static houseboats, which limits the charges for residential houseboats. Undertakings (7), (8), (9) and (10) relate to the residential mooring strategy, which, again, my hon. Friend referred to briefly. He was saying that it all depends on the local planning authority. I hope that it does not, because undertaking (7) says that the Middle Level Commissioners are undertaking

“to prepare and publish a strategy setting out how they intend to exercise the powers conferred by section 15 with the aim of increasing the availability of residential moorings (including transit and temporary moorings) on the waterways”.

Undertaking (8) sets out

“that the strategy will include details of the steps that the Commissioners will take to...identify potential residential mooring sites to be put to the local planning authority...facilitate applications for planning permission for residential moorings”

and to

“provide residential mooring themselves, subject to obtaining funding and planning permission”.

In undertaking (9), they undertake

“in preparing the strategy, to consult the Navigation Advisory Committee...as well as the local planning authorities, and housing authorities”,

and in under undertaking (10), they undertake

“to keep the strategy under review, and revise...as necessary”.

Those are much more proactive undertakings than one might have thought from my hon. Friend’s summary, and they point to one of the big concerns from the outset, which was that the people using the Middle Level for the purposes of residential occupation felt they could be priced out or discriminated against. The undertakings in the letter, however, which have been incorporated into the amendments, are a significant improvement on what was there originally.

I do not need to undertake an exercise of self-justification. I am pleased to have been able to pursue this debate on behalf of the petitioners, as I can now see the beneficial results.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: It is a great privilege to contribute to the later stages of the Bill.

I am conscious that the Bill has been promoted by the Middle Level Commissioners. I am sure they will recognise the importance that Parliament attaches to scrutinising draft legislation that was not part of any party’s election manifesto, and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) was absolutely right to ensure that the Bill got the level of scrutiny he gave it. There has been a good response from the other place as well.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). In my first Parliament, I took a private Member’s Bill through the House and on to the statute book. It was also on a topic affecting rivers and similar: the Wreck Removal Convention Act 2011. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch was key to ensuring my Bill made good progress, and he has done the same during the various stages of this Bill.

The Bill matters because, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) pointed out, this is a really important part of the country, stretching from the area around Bedford through to north-west Norfolk. A mixture of things happen on the Middle Levels that are critical to the future prosperity of that part of the country and for which it is important that people can access our canals. They are our blue lungs, running throughout the United Kingdom, but particularly the Middle Levels. It is appropriate that the amendments, while recognising the need for future investment to ensure that these activities continue, seek to ensure that people who enjoy them do so in a measured and considered way, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay pointed out, there will be appropriate consultation on some of the changes.

I asked the question I did earlier partly to check that other users of the Middle Level would not be able to find a loophole for potential commercial activities simply on the basis of encouraging people into recreation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay answered my question very fully, and as he said, there were nods of assent from the appropriate people in the Under Gallery—that is a habit he will have to get used to if he is ever called upon to be part of Her Majesty’s Government. As you will be aware Madam Deputy Speaker, Ministers regularly look towards the Box to check that they are saying the right thing—and of course they always are.

I welcome the support of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). It is right that draft legislation that is not about manifestos gets the appropriate scrutiny. I am particularly pleased that, through the amendments to clause 9, we have ensured that the new powers will not prevent any environmental impact, or indeed any navigational impact from, for instance, sunken vessels, from being dealt with immediately. As for matters such as navigation functions, I think that the House has been reassured, and I am sure that it will support the amendments—and the Bill—this evening.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 20 agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, I propose to take motions 6 to 11 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

INSURANCE

That the draft Third Parties (Rights Against Insurers) Act 2010 (Consequential Amendment of Companies Act 2006) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 28 June, be approved.

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Data Retention and Acquisition Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 28 June, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

That the draft Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency Trading Fund (Amendment) (EU Exit) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 10 July, be approved.

That the draft Financial Regulators’ Powers (Technical Standards etc.) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 16 July, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Adult Education Functions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.

That the draft West Midlands Combined Authority (Adult Education Functions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

Childhood Obesity

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

7.2 pm

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Let me first declare an interest: I am currently taking part in a television experiment relating to obesity.

The United Kingdom is now the third most obese nation in the world. That is a shocking fact, especially when, as we know, the second biggest preventable cause of cancer is obesity. This is a crisis, and as always when there is a crisis, the innocent victims are the children. The obesity crisis that is hitting the UK is no exception: the victims are the vulnerable, the poor and the children.

I pay tribute to Andy Cook, the director of the Centre for Social Justice. The work of that prestigious organisation does not receive the praise or recognition that it should. A report produced by the CSJ, “Off the Scales”, provides an in-depth analysis of the obesity crisis facing the UK and makes a series of recommendations that complement the Government’s own obesity strategy report of 2016. However, the difference between the two reports is fundamental.

The CSJ report takes a holistic, headline view that is workable and suggests pathways towards the measuring of deliverable outcomes and progress. It highlights the success of implementing a joined-up cross-organisational and cross-departmental strategy to solve a problem that is costing the taxpayer more than £30 billion a year, and, more importantly, costing the lives of a future generation. It highlights some of the weak areas in the Government’s childhood obesity plan, which was published by the Department of Health in August 2016 and aimed to reduce childhood obesity rates in England over the next 10 years. It is a good plan, but it has little chance of making any impactful difference, as there is little in the way of joined-up thinking or leadership, or accountability, on the part of individual Departments.

Let me explain, in the starkest terms possible, why this issue is so important. For the first time ever, one in four children of the next generation will die younger than their parents. Nearly a third of all children aged between two and 15 are overweight or obese, as the Government report itself highlights. Younger generations are becoming more obese at earlier ages, and obesity doubles the risk of dying prematurely, so this is an incredibly serious problem. I am not sure that many parents know that, but they should, and we should be doing more to make sure that they do.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on such an important topic. Does she agree that this is a major health crisis affecting young children? Not only will those children die younger than their parents and before they would have expected to, but they will experience more suffering during their life due to the ill health caused by obesity.

Ms Dorries: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She is a doctor and knows more than most about the health impacts of obesity, which include diabetes and other illnesses that are costly both to life and the Government.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Dorries: When I have ever not given way to the hon. Gentleman—and when has he ever not intervened?

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate about something that is a massive issue in my constituency. I am a type 2 diabetic—it is interesting that she has referred to that—and I became a type 2 diabetic because of the horrendous food I ate and the lifestyle I had as a young person, until I became a diabetic. It is essential that we address with young people the age-old principle of all things in moderation. I supported the sugar tax and changes to the way in which nutritional information is displayed. Does the hon. Lady agree that while large steps have been taken, there is more to be done to tackle this? Funding must be allocated to allow charities and Sure Start to run programmes on nutrition to teach people cheap and efficient ways of healthy eating.

Ms Dorries: The hon. Gentleman nearly got a speech in there. As I said, I will go on to address funding issues.

The parents on whom this issue impacts the most, and who are most likely to be affected, are those who make the poorest nutritional choices. They do not take *The Times*, or spend time on the internet reading the news or visiting any other sites where information about the effects of obesity on their children is likely to be repeated. They are also the parents who live in areas of higher deprivation. The fast-food, junk-food giants place more of their outlets in such areas than in areas of affluence, which makes the temptation easier and the consequences more impactful.

What can we as a Government do? I want to praise the headteacher and staff at Shillington Lower School in my constituency. Every morning after assembly, every child joins in with 15 minutes of vigorous exercise. Some are outdoors, running around the field perimeter, while others are in the hall doing boot camp with the cyber coach. That is in addition to their normal PE lessons and physical activities. The school actively encourages walking to school, and I have to say that Shillington Lower School’s efforts are there to be seen, but that is one approach, in one school in one village.

I am doing my little bit by embarking on a tour of schools in my constituency, and I am speaking to public health officers at Central Bedfordshire Council to find out how much more we can do locally in my Mid Bedfordshire constituency. However, this piecemeal approach is part of the problem. We have local council initiatives, as well as individual schools, teachers, parents, elected Mayors, public health officers, social workers and health visitors all doing their own little bit, and while that is all incredibly worth while, no one knows what the other is doing. The approach is taken on the basis of good intentions, but it is far from being an effective plan to deliver any measurable results.

This issue should be a governmental and departmental priority, regardless of Brexit and the noises off. This crisis has nothing to do with Brexit and everything to do with the lives of our children, yet there is no plan that co-ordinates a national strategy to make dealing with this issue a priority, and there is zero leadership from the top—I am very sad to say that. A national

crisis requires leadership and a holistic, co-ordinated headline plan. Tackling this problem needs to be one of the Government's top five priorities, and that needs to include funding.

The Minister is very much doing his bit, in line with the Government's obesity plan. That is a great achievement, but sadly it is nowhere near enough to tackle the problem. The Minister is a good, conscientious and pragmatic man, and the father of healthy and very beautiful young children. I know that he personally is as worried about this as anyone else, but he is just one Minister in one Department, although I accept that his is the Department that should be leading on this, in accordance with the Government's aims and objectives in this area. However, if we had some high-level leadership and direction, we could have all the Departments working together towards one strategy and working together as one taskforce to establish our short, medium and long-term goals to reduce the weight of the nation and in particular of our children.

In fact, the Minister is the only person who is accountable for tackling this national crisis. As "Off the Scales" highlights, there is little or no direct accountability among Departments for the childhood obesity plan, other than the Department of Health and Social Care and a small requirement on the Department for Education. What about the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government? What about the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, given that sport is one of the biggest players in the fight against obesity? What about the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Transport and the Treasury? We know that the Treasury is the place where all good ideas go to die, regardless of which party is in power, and it is not giving this national crisis serious consideration. So many people—from the wonderful staff at Shillington Lower School all the way up to the Department of Health and Social Care—are doing their own thing, but, sadly, none of this can be monitored or measured, because it is all entirely disjointed and unconnected.

The NHS has recently enjoyed a £20 billion cash injection. At present, only 0.2% of the NHS budget is allocated to Public Health England to deal with obesity and to put in place preventive strategies with regard to childhood obesity, yet the Government's plan places huge responsibility on Public Health England to tackle this issue.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Does my hon. Friend agree that money spent on managing obesity is money well spent? In fact, the money that is invested in helping people to be more healthy will be recouped, because there will be less NHS spending on their ill health.

Ms Dorries: I think that my hon. Friend has seen my speech; my next point is that we are putting the cart before the horse.

There is a huge responsibility on Public Health England, yet it has only 0.2% of the NHS budget. The Government have reduced the public health budget by £600 million between 2015 and 2018 and increased the NHS budget for acute and hospital care. This complements my hon. Friend's point, because they are pumping all that money into hospitals and acute care, but putting very little into strategies to prevent people from going into hospital in the first place. This imbalance in the NHS budget

demonstrates how little attention and importance are being given to this crisis at the top of the Government by No. 10 and No. 11—particularly No. 11 and the Treasury.

As I said, the cart is being put before the horse. As a nation, we are allowing people to become ill. We are failing to prevent that from happening, but we are providing state-of-the-art hospitals and doctors in our amazing NHS to treat them. We should be placing our focus on preventing obesity, which is the second biggest preventable cause of cancer after smoking, and keeping people out of hospital.

Of all the nations that fund healthcare, we have one of the highest healthcare budgets in the world. We spend more each year on treating obesity and diabetes than we spend on our police, our fire service and our judicial system combined, yet we allocate only 0.2% of the NHS budget to Public Health England. When we cost out Public Health England and take out its accountable costs, we see that only a tiny fraction of that 0.2% is given over to obesity prevention and treatment in real terms. The chasm between treatment and prevention highlights the critical need for the Government to develop their approach to the delivery of public health services further and to ensure that prevention receives the investment it so desperately requires.

It is time for the Treasury to think forwards, not backwards, by reversing the reduction in councils' public health budgets and providing local councils with the funding they need to tackle this problem head on. Local councils should be the major player in this strategy, yet they have seen their funding for public health services cut. They know their own demographics. They know the problems in their area, and they know how to deal with them. Local councils have already engaged as much as they can with this issue, and they are saving the lives of the next generation.

I cannot say it often enough or strongly enough: one in four children will die younger than their parents. If we lined up 50 parents and told them that figure, they would be shocked. Parents need to know that information.

How much of the new £20 billion that the Government are allocating to the NHS will be made available to Public Health England and, in turn, towards funding the Government's childhood obesity plan of 2016? As much as people scream and shout that the NHS is being starved of funding, the truth is that the recently announced £20 billion, along with savings from the £20 billion Nicholson challenge, amounts to a £40 billion uplift to treat people who are taken to hospital with illnesses induced by obesity.

Given that Public Health England has been given responsibility for decreasing the proportion of children leaving primary school overweight over a 10-year period, why is so little of the NHS budget allocated for preventive medicine? What uplift was PHE given to address this childhood obesity crisis? How is it supposed to achieve the aims and objectives set out in the 2016 plan? Does the Minister not believe that there should be a cross-departmental strategy, devised by Ministers, to set out in detail what each Department will do to achieve pre-determined goals? If that is not the case, we should engage in a national information and media drive to warn parents of the dangers of obesity. Allowing a child to become obese is almost as dangerous as putting cigarettes in their mouth.

[Ms Dorries]

I understand why the Department of Health and Social Care introduced a policy to cap the calories in various types of junk food, but it will not work—people will buy two. The voluntary sugar reduction targets in the 2016 plan have not been met by the main producers and providers of these foods.

Is it not time to introduce a mandatory approach? I am aware that the money raised by the sugar levy—I probably should have mentioned this earlier—is to be allocated to implementing some of the aims and objectives set out in the 2016 plan, and the Government's approach is a welcome step, but where and to whom will that money go? Will it be allocated to local councils? Is it enough?

As we have seen with food producers that are not meeting the requirement to reduce sugar in food, will the same happen with the sugar levy? Will it actually make a difference? Will it give us the funding that we need to tackle this crisis? I would say not, because we are basing our plans on something subjective and unknown. We do not know how much the levy will raise. We do not know whether producers will reduce sugar in drinks and food. We do not know to what degree the sugar levy will work. As this is such a crisis, should we not be looking at more quantifiable measures?

Where will the money go? Is it not time to consider the recommendations of the Centre for Social Justice and develop a frontline approach? I cannot think of any Government policy on which all Departments work together and on which there is a non-political taskforce above the Departments run by an independent body to pull together policies from each Department to tackle an issue—that goes entirely against our culture—but that is what we need. Should we not work with companies that load food with sugar and set them mandatory goals, not voluntary goals, to reduce the amount of sugar over a period of time? Should we not introduce financial penalties? We have seen producers of products such as breakfast cereals do just that, but the problem is that it is not happening fast enough, it is not consistent and it is not equitable, because only some producers are doing it.

Only by adopting a long-term approach that is nationally led and locally driven, with the councils involved and heading it, that is overseen by an independent body outside the influence of party politics and that is championed by committed political, cross-party leaders will an effective childhood obesity plan ever be delivered. I do not want to chuck a bucket of cold fizzy drink over the Minister's 2016 plan, because it is a great initiative and I hope it will make some difference, but I hope he understands my concern that the money just is not there to tackle this problem head on now. I go back to the substantive point in what I have just said: 0.2% of the NHS budget going to Public Health England, despite the sugar levy and the taxes we are going to raise, is just not saying, "We are committed to doing this," and the money has to go to local councils.

7.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Let me start by reiterating what my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), my good friend, has said: childhood

obesity is one of the top public health challenges for this generation, if not the top one. I thank her for mentioning my two beautiful children—we are not sure where they get it from, although undoubtedly it is Mrs Brine. They are watching us right now, so for once I shall be useful to Mrs Brine and say, "Surely it must be time for bed after you've seen daddy."

As Members will be aware, figures released only last week in the national child measurement study continue to show that our child obesity rates remain far too high. About a fifth of children are overweight or obese when they start primary school, and that rises to about a third by the time they leave. What is worse, as we have heard, is that the burden of obesity does not fall evenly across our society. The number of severely obese children living in the most deprived areas is more than four times that of those living in the least deprived areas—this is one of the burning injustices of our age. The effects of obesity have a profound impact on a child's opportunities in life—on both their physical and mental health. We know that obese children are more likely to be bullied and have low self-esteem as a result. They are also more likely to become obese adults, which will give them a higher chance of developing certain types of cancer, type 2 diabetes, and heart and fatty liver disease.

So the Government are determined that we will lead the way in tackling childhood obesity. We have already heard from my hon. Friend about our 2016 childhood obesity plan, part 1—there was a clue in the title—and I agree with her that it is a good plan. It introduced bold, world-leading measures, such as the sugary drinks levy. I was in Argentina at the G20 earlier this month, giving a presentation about the work we are doing in this area. Many other countries around the world look to what is happening in England and are copying it. Since bringing in the levy, we have seen the equivalent of a staggering 45 million kg of sugar taken out of soft drinks through reformulation. As a result, hundreds of millions of pounds have been poured into improving opportunities for physical activity for children. My hon. Friend asked where the money was going—that is where it is going. It is going into the sport premium in schools. The Treasury has kindly agreed to double that sum. I will expand on the point about where it is being spent. She mentioned one example, but I have others.

We also challenged manufacturers to reduce the sugar content in some of the foods children eat most, and they responded. Tesco, Lucozade Ribena Suntory, Kellogg's, whose people I met this afternoon, Waitrose and Nestlé are just some of the companies that deserve credit and deserve a mention, as they are dramatically lowering levels of sugar in their products.

Dr Johnson: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: Very briefly, because we do not have long.

Dr Johnson: I have a quick question: are these manufacturers of food and drinks products removing the sugar and making the products less sweet, or are they replacing the sugar with artificial sweeteners?

Steve Brine: They are doing both. As the representatives from Kellogg's were at pains to say to me today, it is about healthy eating and quality taste. I passionately believe that that is true.

We were always clear that our 2016 plan was just the start of the conversation, and we are clear that more needs to be done. We always said that we reserve the right to do more, which is why in June this year we published chapter 2 of the child obesity plan. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire asked whether there is a cross-departmental strategy; yes, chapter 2 is very much a cross-departmental strategy. It sets a bold ambition—what we like to think of as a north star—to halve child obesity and significantly reduce the gap in obesity between children from the most and least deprived areas by 2030. As with our initial plan, the new policies were informed by the latest research and emerging evidence, including from many debates in Parliament and various reports from key stakeholders. Those stakeholders include the Health and Social Care Committee and, yes, the Centre for Social Justice. In fact, the latter's "Off the Scales" report is on my coffee table in the Department. It was the Centre for Social Justice that told me all about Amsterdam and it is because of it and its good work that I went to Amsterdam to see the work being done there.

Key measures in the next chapter include looking to address the heavy promotion and advertising of food and drink products high in fat, salt and sugar on television, online and in shops. Alongside that, we want to equip parents with the information that they need to make healthy and informed decisions about the food that they and their children eat when they are out and about.

My hon. Friend mentioned Brexit. Of course, there is never a debate in which we do not mention it, but there is a Brexit connection for this debate. One thing that campaigners call for is traffic-light labelling on the front of products. We are unable to do that while we are an EU member state, but once we are no longer, we will have new freedoms in that regard. I do not know whether that is what was meant by taking back control, but I put that on the record for the House.

I was pleased to hear of the efforts of Shillington Lower School in my hon. Friend's constituency. Staff there are obviously doing all the right things to encourage children to take part in physical activity. I have seen great examples in my own constituency, most recently at Western Primary School, and I am sure that many other Members have seen good examples, too. Yes, it is about recognising that we need foods to be reformulated, but it is also very much about the importance of physical activity in tackling obesity. Yesterday, I opened a major physical activity and health conference across the way at the Queen Elizabeth II centre. It is going on all week and will consider the benefits of physical activity and health. As part of chapter 2, we are promoting a new national ambition for all primary schools to adopt the initiative of an active mile—or healthy mile; people call it different things.

I agree with my hon. Friend that achieving our ambition to reduce child obesity will require a concerted effort from many others, including families, schools and local authorities, which she mentioned. At the recent Local Government Association conference, I announced the trailblazer programme, which will work closely with local authorities to show what can be achieved and find solutions to barriers at a local level to address child obesity. I took great inspiration from what has been done in the city of Amsterdam. My hon. Friend is

absolutely right that local authorities know their local areas best. By sharing ideas with each other—some very good things are going on—they can achieve the full potential of the powers and levers that they have. Many local authorities already have great powers and levers to change their areas. For instance, they have powers over junk-food advertising in the areas around schools. We want to see those powers used better.

As part of the second chapter, we have already launched the consultation on banning the sale of energy drinks to children—the message is clear: we do not think that they are appropriate for children—and the consultation on calorie labelling for food and drink served outside the home, or in the out-of-home setting, as they say. Later this year, we will launch consultations on restricting the promotion of fatty and sugary products by location and by price, and we will consult on further advertising restrictions, including a 9 pm watershed on high fat, salt and sugar products. Currently, products deemed HFSS are banned from being promoted only during programmes predominantly aimed at children. We will consult on taking that through to a 9 pm watershed. That work is with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the sugary drinks levy—the sugar tax—work is with Her Majesty's Treasury, and the trailblazer programme work is with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, so I gently reject the idea that this is not a cross-Government strategy. These consultations are genuine and are open to everybody, and we welcome full and considered responses from across society and industry.

So far as the future is concerned, we continue to learn from the latest evidence; my hon. Friend mentioned evidence. The Policy Research Unit informs us all the time of new approaches from across the UK. We welcome the action taking place in Scotland, which is consulting on its own obesity plan at the moment. It is good to see that many of our ambitions align. As I said, I often talk to partners in other countries about work going on internationally—I have mentioned Amsterdam a couple of times—and about where we can learn from them and, possibly, where they can learn from us.

My hon. Friend is also right to mention the additional £20.5 billion a year for the NHS that will support the new long-term plan. I cannot pre-empt what the NHS will put into the plan—the Prime Minister set NHS England the challenge of writing it—but we have been clear from the outset, and the new Secretary of State has been clear, that prevention should be a key part.

Our ambition is bold but simple. We have a lot to gain by reducing obesity, and we have an awful lot to lose. We believe that the hard, evidence-based actions that we propose will encourage healthier choices and will make those choices more readily available and identifiable to parents. Taken together, we are confident that those actions will have a real impact on child obesity. We will continue to monitor progress and emerging evidence. As we have always said, this is not the end of the conversation. We watch things like a hawk.

Finally, I reiterate my thanks to my hon. Friend for securing the debate, and to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for facilitating it.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 16 October 2018

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

Eating Disorders

9.30 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered reducing stigma around eating disorders.

It is a honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger.

We probably all know at least one sufferer or ex-sufferer of an eating disorder. As one put it to me, eating disorders are the easiest thing to get into and the hardest to get out of. We have come a long way in recent years, but we are nowhere near to providing lasting, successful treatments for hundreds of thousands of people. Many people are suffering alone and in silence, without a support network. We are failing as a society to support people in their deeply personal battles.

This debate is about stigma. There are two stigmas around eating disorders—that from outside and that which sufferers feel themselves. The result is that people often wait a long time before asking for help.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate on such an important issue. Does she agree that one of the ways to tackle the stigma is for people to speak out and then for others to have confidence to speak out as well? That will contribute to more early diagnosis and better treatment and care.

Wera Hobhouse: I totally agree. There are a number of people in the Public Gallery today who have spoken out. I will come on to how important it is that people have the confidence and feel secure enough to speak out.

It takes an average of 58 weeks from someone realising that they have a problem to them seeking help from a GP. That is more than a year of self-doubt, self-loathing and self-harm. On average, it is a further 27 weeks until the start of treatment. Add to that the time that the person has suffered with a disorder before admitting that there is a problem and we start to see the real picture.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): In my constituency, there is an excellent facility, Rharian Fields, run by Navigo, a social enterprise. It is rated as outstanding by the Care Quality Commission, but only accepts patients over the age of 17. If we are to tackle some of the deep-rooted psychological issues, does the hon. Lady agree that we need facilities for young people under the age of 17? Such facilities are incredibly difficult to access around the country.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Lady for that contribution. We do not really understand eating disorders deeply enough and we need to start a lot earlier. We

need facilities for people younger than 17; we need to get into the issue at a much earlier age. It is all about understanding what the problem really is. We are a long way from properly understanding the deep-rooted causes. The more treatment available and the earlier we can intervene, the better.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Early intervention is hugely significant. Many eating disorders can be prevented from developing to their full extent with proper preventive care. Is she aware that the Government enable public health bodies in Cumbria to spend only 75p per head for children in the county on preventive treatment? Does she agree that that is a disgrace and that we ought instead to be investing in, for instance, having a mental health worker attached to every single school, to ensure that we prevent people getting to the later stage?

Wera Hobhouse: Across the board, and particularly when it comes to public health, prevention is so much better than picking up the pieces afterwards. We can save so much money if we do something early rather than only intervening when somebody is already in crisis. That is particularly true for mental health, and the challenge here is that eating disorders are still not very well understood.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I have a personal interest in this subject. A close member of my family suffered from bulimia. What we found most important was the support provided by the family network. That, above anything else that could be provided, was what carried the family member through to a positive conclusion.

Wera Hobhouse: Anybody who has had a close family member in such a situation will understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but families are often pretty helpless too, if they do not really understand what can be done and how they can help their family member to get out of the problem. It is a form of addiction, and like with any other addiction, family members are co-sufferers. They want to help but do not really understand the deep-seated problems. Family members are important, but we need the professionals and their understanding to help families get through together. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that families are incredibly important.

Eating disorders define large periods of people's lives. How can we shorten that time? We need people to be okay with saying, "I'm not okay." We need to tackle the stigma around eating disorders, and the message needs to get through to a lot of people. More than 1 million people in the UK have an eating disorder; three quarters are women and one quarter are men. That is a very large number, plus there are the friends and family who suffer with them. So many people with conditions such as anorexia and bulimia blame themselves. It is not their fault and we need to make sure that they know that.

When I announced on Twitter that I was holding this debate, I received a wave of emotional responses and personal stories. Yesterday, a local doctor dropped into my office a book that she had written, which described her fight with eating disorders since the age of 13. That shows how early it can start.

[Wera Hobhouse]

I also got an email from a young woman called Lorna, who experienced serious anorexia while studying in my constituency in Bath. This is what she told me:

"I ended up with an initial diagnosis of anxiety and depression, and was started on antidepressants. I suspended my studies and worked as a carer in my local village, living at home with my mum and brother. People I'd known all my life began commenting on the weight I'd lost, and telling me how good I looked. This is when my anorexia began to take full hold.

I stopped eating completely, lying to my mum and saying I'd eaten at work, began over-exercising compulsively, and remember pacing the corridors at work to burn extra calories. I became obsessed. I weighed myself up to 12 times a day.

My mum was terrified, and didn't know what to do. Eventually she came with me to my GP and I told him everything. I told him I was petrified of putting on weight, exercising excessively and skipping nearly every meal. His response was 'Oh, that'll be your antidepressants.' He took me off a high dose, there and then. Cold turkey.

Each time...I told him how out of control I felt with my eating. He'd force me onto the scales, shaking and crying, and then tell me my BMI was 'healthy' and I didn't meet the diagnostic criteria. I was devastated. I had opened up and was denied help. I never got diagnosed with anorexia, despite going from a size 16 to a size 8 in less than a year.

I went through the monthly humiliation of being dragged onto scales and told I wasn't thin enough to be helped yet. And not having that formal diagnosis is hard. When I tell people I was anorexic, they never quite believe me, as even doctors didn't. I think they always assume I was being dramatic, or 'it wasn't that bad then'. Today, I am weight-restored, although struggle with now being overweight.

It took me 3 years to recover. 3 years of misery and obsession. I was dangerously unwell, but not sick enough to get an ounce of support."

When I read that story, I am amazed by how brave Lorna is. She was brave to ask for treatment and even braver to put her trust into the medical system a second time, even after she did not receive the treatment that she really needed. She was very brave to tell her story. Lorna has gone on to campaign for proper treatment for eating disorders. She is here in the Chamber, and I want to thank her personally for letting me share her story—Lorna, thank you. I am so sorry that you had to go through such an awful experience. I know your words will help others, and I desperately hope that together we can improve the treatment and care of those with eating disorders and end the stigma for good.

We cannot ignore the medical failings in Lorna's story. We need to use them and the figures that prove that Lorna's experience is not an isolated case. First, we need to break the stereotype that all people with eating disorders are underweight. Hope Virgo's campaign to "Dump the Scales" was also a response to being told that she was not thin enough to receive support. She is calling on the Government properly to implement the eating disorder guidance delivered by clinicians, a call that I strongly echo along with over 60,000 signatories to her petition. To judge an eating disorder simply by BMI is not good enough; rather, we need to look at the trend and rapidity of weight loss and the story that sufferers tell.

We know that the Department of Health and Social Care knows this is an issue. We know that if we fail to take action, people not only suffer but, in some cases,

lose their lives. When questioned on waiting times, the Minister often says that the Government do have targets, but he ignores the fact—or he does not tell us—that there is none for adult services. On average, adults wait twice as long as people under the age of 19. The Government must do everything to remove barriers to treatment. In particular, young adults are incredibly vulnerable. At our autumn conference, the Lib Dems called for the Government to ensure that all young people can access young people's mental health services up to the age of 25, because from the age of 18 many young adults move out of home, go into further education or start their first job, all of which can be stressful when they no longer have support from home. We must also introduce waiting times for adults to ensure that they receive help as quickly as possible.

The Minister is likely to mention that in 2015 the Government allocated £30 million of extra resources per year for five years to improve the NHS treatment of eating disorders for teenagers. However, in some cases that is not reaching the frontline, because the funding is not ring-fenced and can be diverted to other priorities.

Tim Farron: Leading on from that point, my hon. Friend will be aware that in 2016 the Government pledged money for a specific one-to-one eating disorder service for children and young people under the age of 18. Yet two and a half years on, that service does not exist in Cumbria, and people who present with eating disorders often go through the struggles that she has just talked about, because the people that they see are not specialists.

Wera Hobhouse: I will come to that. The lack of proper training is really at the heart of what my hon. Friend describes.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on giving us the opportunity to discuss this very serious issue. Does she agree that, in addition to dealing with the problems that are thrown up by having an eating disorder, the difficulty for people in that position and for their families is access to proper services? That varies from place to place, town to town and city to city. Does she believe that we need a more integrated service that is the same everywhere and that provides an effective service for young people—and older people, for that matter—who are in that situation?

Wera Hobhouse: I fully agree with the right hon. Gentleman: the services are too patchy, which is why families do not really know what to do. We need to ensure that there is not a postcode lottery—I will come to that later—and that services follow on from each other and are much more holistic and integrated. There is a lot to do.

Funding for eating disorders must be properly ring-fenced, because it is just too easy for trusts to use that money to plug other funding gaps. If we fail to do that, we end up with tragic deaths such as that of Averil Hart, which prompted a Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman report. She was completely failed by the system. The report not only called for parity of adult eating disorder services with child and adolescent services, but stated that:

"The General Medical Council (GMC) should conduct a review of training for all junior doctors on eating disorders".

Research conducted by Dr Agnes Ayton in June 2018 shows that, on average,

“medical students receive less than two hours of teaching on eating disorders”

throughout the entirety of their undergraduate training. Some 20% of medical schools do not include eating disorders in their curriculum at all. Of the medical schools that do include eating disorders in their curriculum, 50% do not include in eating disorders in their examination.

In the end, it comes down to the priority that we and the medical profession place on mental health and its treatment. Making mental health a priority and giving it parity with physical health is more than a slogan; it requires understanding and some new thinking. If somebody breaks their arm, we do not sit around for a year and then put on a cast; we treat the broken arm immediately. We need to act quickly to treat eating disorders and mental health in general. If we wait too long, these illnesses can become severe and entrenched—they can last for many years and often have a massively debilitating effect on sufferers and their families. The earlier the intervention, the more likely it is that sufferers will make a full recovery.

In Bath, we have a not-for-profit social enterprise called Brighter Futures, which is funded by child and adolescent mental health services and which provides special services for children and young people. The 30-plus practitioners do an amazing job, but their funding has been cut in half. Such services are perfect opportunities for early intervention to treat eating disorders, but if they are not properly funded, young people will slip through the cracks. Charities are now trying to fill the gap. The Somerset and Wessex Eating Disorders Association is one such charity—the only charity between Cornwall and Norfolk that works in this field. It is based in Shepton Mallet and sees clients from a wide area: from Somerset to Bath, Bristol and Swindon. People self-refer to the service; they do not need a diagnosis. The association is very much pro-recovery and self-help.

There are people all over the country who do not have any access to such services. There should not be a difference in the level of service that people receive, depending on where they live—we cannot leave this to a postcode lottery. Clearly, we need to do better. It is obvious that services are patchy at best, and that people have to travel much too far for treatment and wait too long to be treated. Others really need help but fall under the threshold for treatment.

It is not the just the Government who should act to tackle eating disorders. The focus of this debate is stigma and how we can reduce it. Each and every one of us can help. Eating disorders are widespread, but they continue to be kept secret by so many sufferers, who fear being judged negatively by others. They see themselves as defective and as not meeting societal standards. They feel disgust and self-loathing about their appearance, eating or purging habits, or they worry that disclosure will result in their difficulties being trivialised. The stigma is perpetuated by general ignorance of what eating disorders are. The first step to challenging stigma is providing better education—it is not only our future doctors and health professionals who need to be better trained, but the general public. A successful strategy to reduce prejudice is for people to come forward and tell their stories. Such stories break the silence and the shame. That is why we so desperately need people such

as Lorna and Hope, who are brave enough to come forward. I thank them for being here and telling their stories. Together, we can end the stigma.

9.50 am

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. No one who has been directly affected by any form of eating disorder, or who has been around a relation, colleague or friend who has battled such a disease, will be in any doubt about the devastation that such conditions can bring to a person's life. Sufferers of eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of people with mental health conditions. About 1.25 million people in the United Kingdom suffer from eating disorders, so I feel strongly that this issue has to be addressed head-on: with strong actions, rather than warm words. Although eating disorders can affect anyone, it would be inappropriate not at least to acknowledge, in an era that emphasises having a positive body image, that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence estimates that about 90% of people with eating disorders are female.

I welcome the £1.4 billion that the Government have committed to tackle mental health and eating disorders over the next five years, which comes on top of the £150 million they committed in 2014. Although funding is important, having a treatment strategy is even more so. We cannot just throw money at the issue and hope it makes the improvements we need. Hope is not a strategy.

The Government have made important commitments, such as the target to ensure that, by 2020, 95% of those referred with an eating disorder will begin treatment within one month—within one week for cases diagnosed as urgent. We cannot underestimate the benefit of early treatment; to tackle this issue, we must emphasise the need for it. It is reassuring that the Government clearly recognise that. I want to ensure that anyone with an eating disorder who needs help receives it fast.

Someone close to me visited her doctor because she was having distressing thoughts about ending her life. Her eating disorder had taken over and gone so far that she believed it to be irreversible. She cried in the doctor's surgery about the pain it caused her and everyone around her. She was offered antidepressants. I welcome Beat's recommendation to the Scottish Government that GPs need to be informed of the early symptoms so that they are able to refer without delay. We are far too quick to offer patients prescriptions, rather than give them the help they actually need to overcome this deep-rooted issue.

It is incredibly troubling that the picture is so different north of the border in Scotland, compared with England. The Scottish National party-led Government have failed to deal with the problem with the same urgency. Let me make it clear that I am not here to score political points; I am here to address the gaping hole that I, my constituents and many pressure groups see in Scotland, and I want to use this opportunity to put more pressure on the Scottish Government to right that wrong. Although England's population is 10 times that of Scotland, it has only four times as many hospital admissions for eating disorders. Although that may partly be down to differences in how such admissions are recorded, we cannot ignore the possibility that eating disorders are simply more frequent north of the border due to cultural or dietary differences.

[Kirstene Hair]

Although the increase in eating disorders is a UK-wide phenomenon, in Scotland the number has increased by two thirds since 2005, compared with just 44% in England. Despite the apparent prevalence of eating disorders in Scotland, the Scottish Government are failing to act. Most worryingly, and with no reasoning behind it, Scotland has no specific waiting time targets for people diagnosed with eating disorders. Such patients are subject to the same 18-week target as patients with any other mental health condition. That timeframe is simply not good enough, and shows a complete failure to understand how urgently this illness needs to be treated. Eighteen weeks—126 days—is not acceptable; it could be the difference between life and death.

I wrote to the Scottish Government earlier this year to press them on this matter and to see whether they had any plans to introduce waiting time targets in line with those that the UK Government have outlined. Their response confirmed exactly what I thought: disappointingly, although not surprisingly, they have no such plans. Various groups have submitted freedom of information requests to the Scottish Government to get a true image of the position, but due to the lack of a national framework, the data has not been collated consistently. Why would the Government not implement a system that allows that information to be readily available to ensure easier data collection so solutions can be found? People with this debilitating disease expect more from their Government. I support the work of Beat and other charities that are doing great campaigning to stop the wait in Scotland, and to highlight that eating disorders should not be categorised and treated as though they are the same as other mental health disorders.

I return to my anecdote about the doctor's surgery to talk briefly to training. Recent research shows that teaching and training in Scotland is, to put it politely, falling short. Four excellent universities in Scotland—Aberdeen, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee—were asked how much time on average is dedicated to eating disorder training during their four-year medical degree. They answered in hours: Aberdeen, three; Dundee, three; Edinburgh, four; and Glasgow, four. They were asked whether eating disorders were covered in the final submissions. It is covered in one question in Dundee and none in the other three. I am not a doctor, but I know that that is not enough.

When a patient with an eating disorder or a similar issue presents themselves, our specialists must have the tools to be alerted to their problem. We know that people with eating disorders have the innate ability to make out that the issues relating to their lack of food are in fact nothing to do with food—I know that, because I have witnessed it first-hand with people around me.

Self-referral is another area where we can try to get help to those who need it. We know that people with eating disorders need significant support to determine whether they need help, but when they self-refer, they should be welcomed and nurtured by our system. Two thirds of NHS trusts in England accept self-referrals from children and young people. However, in Scotland, only Dumfries and Galloway CAMHS accepts self-referrals from children and young people who are suspected of having an eating disorder. I know that all hon. Members are thinking the same as me: why?

We can make progress on this issue only if we have an approach that recognises that eating disorder diagnosis requires urgent action, resulting in specialist treatment. The Scottish Government must act sooner rather than later. I will continue to campaign and put pressure on them to get the improvements we need for my constituents and all those who are suffering in Scotland. The Scottish Government must stop burying their head in the sand and give this issue the dedicated attention it needs. We need to help those affected to get out of the position they find themselves in so they can begin to rebuild their lives and the lives of those around them.

9.57 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing the debate and on the compassionate way she introduced it. She clearly cares, and I thank her for that.

I have been involved with this subject with some of my constituents, and I want to talk about two examples. One was not successful, and one was—I use that term loosely. I am my party's health spokesperson, and I have been directly involved in those two cases. I have knowledge of them, so I want to comment on them.

An estimated 360 adults and 90 children are referred to specialist community eating disorder services each year in Northern Ireland. Those truly monumental and horrendous figures indicate the health problem. The figures for the past five years have increased by 92%, which indicates that we need to focus on this issue through the Department of Health and Social Care. I look to the Minister to make a suitable response that will give us heart.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the startling increase in the past five to 10 years indicates that we need even more research about the underlying reasons for the problem, so we can assess it? We must not have a superficial response to it.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for his intervention. He is absolutely right: we do need to raise awareness, and I think this debate will do that. We also need to raise awareness within health services so that they can give the correct diagnoses earlier for such conditions.

I will give some examples, if I may. During my research for the debate, I was distraught to learn that a young lady from Ballynahinch, whose family are from Killyleagh in my constituency, lost her fight against her eating disorder: in March, she died of a heart attack at age 21. She had been struggling with the eating disorder since 2009—that is horrendous. I will share her mum's interpretation of it, which I read in an article that she wrote for the *Belfast Telegraph*; it outlined the problems with treatment in Northern Ireland. I know that that is not the Minister's responsibility, but I just want to show that our problems are similar to those on the mainland—I do not think location matters much; problems are replicated across Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England.

In the *Belfast Telegraph* article, we read that beautiful Sophie Bridges was 14 when she was referred to the NHS children and adolescent mental health service. The words of her mother are clear:

“Absolutely pathetic. It’s no reflection on anybody who works there, they try their best, but she was discharged on her 16th birthday. She was no better, she was just above the age for their service. She was still too young, though, for the adult service and had nowhere to go.”

That is one of the problems: moving from child to adult services. My examples will illustrate that very clearly.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I am sorry that I came late to this debate. Does my hon. Friend agree that when we talk about early intervention, we are talking about young people? Schools and social media have a responsibility, as they can be such cruel places for young people who feel that they are not perfect and are forced down the route of eating disorders. More needs to be done in that regard.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right: social media have a lot to answer for in many respects, but especially on this issue.

In the *Belfast Telegraph* article, Mrs Bridges went on to say:

“We just had to deal with it at home. We felt there was only a focus on her physical health, there was absolutely no psychological service.”

We need early diagnoses to ensure that we can deal with the physical—yes—but also the psychological, because that is such a key factor. Sophie spent the first half of 2017 as a hospital patient in a mental health unit. Mrs Bridges said:

“They did their best, but the provision just isn’t there. There are just so many different issues in one unit. There are girls like Sophie in the same ward as elderly people with dementia and others with schizophrenia.”

We can see right away where the problems are. Those problems are not unique to Northern Ireland, but are replicated across the United Kingdom. It is clear that we are letting down people who need help and attention that could make a life-saving difference. That was just one example of a young girl who very tragically lost her life, and our thoughts are with her family—her parents, in particular.

Another example is that of one of my other constituents, whose mum and dad I knew quite well. They were both in the police service, and I knew them when I was a councillor and a Member of the Assembly, long before I came to this place in 2010. Their daughter, whose name I will not mention, had anorexia that was so extreme, as I was telling my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), that I spoke to Edwin Poots, the then Northern Ireland Minister for Health, and explained the case to him.

We do not have the self-referrals that the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) referred to; patients have to be referred by the Department of Health. I asked Edwin to look at the case because the young girl was very close to death. He referred her to St Thomas’ Hospital, just across Westminster bridge, where they were able to help her; I met her and her parents in the House back in 2010 or 2011. The fact of the matter is that the treatment she got—let us give the NHS some credit for its work—saved her life and turned her around. She is now married and has two children. For her, her parents and her family, that is good news.

Despite our best efforts at addressing nutrition in classrooms and through soaps and other TV programmes, the Eating Disorders Association NI said that the eating disorders most commonly seen in young people under

18 are becoming more common among children between the ages of eight and 14. Let us not underestimate just how early eating disorders can start and how that affects people; the hon. Member for Bath mentioned that in her introduction. Eating disorders in children are becoming more common within that age group, and research shows that boys are at as high a risk as girls. I will share some of the figures on that in a moment.

The society that we live in fixates on skinny living, which is a misguided approach to healthy living. At one stage, I weighed almost 18 stone and risked developing diabetes. I turned the situation around by reducing my weight, which I will hopefully keep down. I did that and stopped once my goal had been achieved. What about people who cannot stop?

Comments in programmes such as “Keeping Up with the Kardashians”—I do not watch it and could not say who any of the Kardashians are or where they are from, but my parliamentary aide does watch it, much to her shame, which she will not mind me saying—fixate on looking skinny; in one clip, being called “anorexic” is even a compliment. That must be addressed.

In fairness, the apology from the Kardashians is wonderful, and they should be commended for realising that their comments came across in an unhealthy way, but the words cannot be withdrawn: young women who want to be more like the Kardashians, who seem to have it all, have already been impacted. I am not saying that we should have censorship, but we must have the common sense to address and not worsen our eating disorder problems. My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) referred to social media, which have a lot to answer for. They set trends and create peer pressure. Sometimes, I wonder whether some of society’s problems—not all, but some—are caused by social media.

Many of us have referred to raising awareness, and the health service ombudsman has also recommended measures to increase awareness of eating disorders among healthcare staff, who have to know what the tell-tale signs are to support early diagnosis. Maybe the Minister can give us an indication of what he can do on that.

I look at my own beautiful granddaughters and sincerely believe that they are perfect. The thought of their view of themselves being shaped by others is frightening. They are young girls—only nine and four—but for some eight-year-olds, eating disorders have already taken hold, so let us address the issue at the earliest opportunity. We must take steps to ensure that the difference between skinny and healthy is taught from a young age.

I have some figures here that indicate the magnitude of eating disorders. Some 725,000 people in the UK are affected. At the time I found the figures, 90% of those affected were female, but the latest figures indicate that 25% of those affected are male. While it is very much an issue for young girls—they make up the cases I am aware of in my constituency—we also have to recognise that there are young men out there with the same problems. Young men are becoming as likely as young women to suffer from an eating disorder, and we must ensure that the message is sent that this is not a teenage girls’ disorder. It affects men and women, old and young, rich and poor. The disorder is life-threatening and we must do more to address it. We must provide more help to beat it and keep beating it every day of sufferers’ lives.

10.8 am

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I thank you, Sir Roger, and congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this important debate. She began, rightly, by saying that eating disorders are about so much more than stigma. It is right that we focus on treatment, because eating disorders—as all of us in the room know—are conditions that are often dismissed initially as girls trying to look like celebrities. They often end with a third of sufferers recovering, but a third of sufferers live with them for the rest of their lives and a third do not make it at all. Those figures are truly shocking and would be shocking for any condition, whether mental or physical.

The stigma arising from eating disorders is not solely about looking slim. It is about the pervasive effect of that eating disorder. It is a condition that quickly stops people being able to function in the way that they would wish to function. It is a condition that stops people leaving the house. People end up being stigmatised because they are not behaving as they would like to, not able to fulfil a function within society and, often, not even able to work or go out. The stigma arises because of the condition, and it is the condition on which, clearly, we should focus.

I commend the work that charities such as Beat have done to raise awareness of eating disorders and to ensure that people are not stigmatised; that GPs in particular do not greet people who show up suggesting that they are worried about their attitude to food by saying that it is not a problem and that they might just allow themselves to go away and get better. We need to focus on NHS training but also to acknowledge, as my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) did, that there has been some progress in England, if not sufficient in Scotland yet. However, this is not a party political matter.

We have seen not only some positive work by the NHS and charities, but some of the damaging effects of social media, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said. Social media presents a huge opportunity to promote the positive body image that we would all like to see of what being healthy in the 21st century looks like. In reality, at this stage on this front social media does far more harm than good. It is far too easy to scratch the surface of the internet to find images that reinforce deeply negative perceptions of body image, reinforcing behaviours that are profoundly harmful. If social media companies can do a huge amount to take down child abuse images and other images that we as a society decide are profoundly harmful, it is reasonable to ask what more could be done automatically or more rapidly to take down images that all too often end up with people losing or taking their own life.

John Howell: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point about social media, but perhaps he needs to go one stage further, to look at the role of the advertising industry and the images that it puts forward, which encourage young people to achieve a fantasy position for themselves and their body image.

Matt Warman: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and, in fact, that was the point that I was coming on to make next. Clearly, not only do some sites encourage profoundly self-harming behaviour, but the advertising

industry puts forward exactly that pervasive image to which he referred. We should look to regulators and Government for action to tackle that in a sensible way that promotes a genuinely healthy lifestyle without promoting unhealthy or unreasonable expectations, but we should not pretend that it is anything other than very difficult. Tackling such issues should not bleed over into not being positive about people who struggle with their weight, who would often like to see a more positive image of people who are larger. None of us wants to see an advertising regulator that ends up prescribing an ideal weight, although we need to prescribe a greater sense of health.

I agree absolutely with what the hon. Member for Bath said about no sensible and properly trained doctor in the modern NHS using BMI alone to assess whether a person has an eating disorder. However, too often it does become the single defining characteristic. Too many doctors have not been provided with all the tools and do not have the services to which they might refer their patients. Too often BMI becomes the measurement of last resort, and it is right for the NHS to seek to tackle that and for this House to do all we can to encourage the Minister and the NHS itself.

The hon. Lady mentioned family therapy. My understanding is that family therapy, in particular for young people and adolescents, is the only clinically proven therapy. It has been shown to make a real difference. It is incredibly intensive in resources and in the pressure on the family and patient, but it works. We should do more to reduce the stigma—to come back to the point of the debate—so that families accept that they might have someone in their midst who needs help not just from the NHS but from them—their family and friends.

As the hon. Lady said, however, it remains the case that eating disorders do not stop when someone is 17 or 18. In all too many cases, triggered by stress, they can emerge or return when a patient gets older. With that in mind, we should commend the work of places such as the Maudsley, which have tried to push family therapy beyond the point where everyone is expected to live at home and to say, for example, that the university setting could be a kind of family that encourages people to get better. What happens when people are older? As I said at the start of my speech, there are of course a number of functioning older adults who need all the help with which we can provide them, and that is about more than antidepressants.

If the Government could do two things, the first would be to encourage social media companies to look more closely at what can be done to tackle those images that go beyond the kind of advertising that my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said we need to look at and go way into a territory that is not healthy for anyone. My second ask, when it comes to funding research and spending some of that £1.4 billion that we are allocating to eating disorders over the coming years, is for the extension of family therapy—the one method that we know works. With the help of science and innovation, we should be looking at whether we can go further with that therapy. The stigma around the condition is a hugely important issue, but we must focus on tackling the illness itself.

10.17 am

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this important debate.

A sad reflection of our times is that the explosion of social media in the past decade has spawned an obsession with looking good and showing off the body. If people want to be in with the right crowd, they need to post images of themselves looking happy with their beautiful body. Sadly, sometimes the impression given on social media does not match the reality, and cases have been reported of people who have not been able to keep up with the facade of being permanently happy, and striving for the perfect body has resulted in their suicide.

Eating disorders are part of that obsession with body image, and hashtags such as #thinspiration are associated with images of mainly young people showing off their thin bodies and limbs. Unfortunately, the way in which social media works nowadays means that if they click on the internet links about being thin or having a beautiful body, and thanks to the algorithms that are part and parcel of social media, people will more than likely receive online advertisements about dieting or weight loss.

One thing that is desperately needed is greater understanding of the mental health aspect of eating disorders and the addictive nature of many of the conditions, including body dysmorphia. I have a constituent who has been struggling with anorexia for a number of years. He had difficulty in living on his own and, for his own wellbeing, had to move back in with his parents, because of the support that they were able to give him at home. He desperately needed mental health services from the local clinical commissioning group and, although it was a battle, we were successful in getting him the help that he needed.

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses that can have severe psychological, physical and social consequences. Typically, they involve disordered eating behaviour, which might mean restricting food intake, binge eating, purging, fasting, excessive exercise or some combination of those behaviours. Recently, I was made aware of orthorexia, which is an obsession with or addiction to eating healthy food—a gateway to other eating disorders. Many of the eating disorders are associated with negative perceptions of body image, as I mentioned. A negative perception such as that, coupled with an obsession with posting pictures on social media, exacerbates the problem and leads to more stress, pushing those who are suffering closer to the edge. In its clinical guidelines on eating disorders, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence states:

“The emotional and physical consequences of these beliefs and behaviours maintain the disorder and result in a high mortality rate from malnutrition, suicide and physical issues,”

such as electrolyte imbalances, osteoporosis and anxiety disorders.

Using figures for UK hospital admissions from 2012 to 2013, the eating disorders charity Beat estimates that there are 725,000 people with an eating disorder in the UK, approximately 90% of whom are female. Every disorder is closely associated with poor quality of life and social isolation, and each one has a substantial impact on family members and carers. Eating disorders are long-lasting conditions if they are not treated.

In *The Guardian* in October last year, Dave Chawner described his experiences as a boy with an eating disorder. He wrote:

“Before I was anorexic I’d always assumed people with mental illness knew they weren’t well. But on reflection that’s ridiculous. My Dad has diabetes. He had it for years before anyone realised and no one expected him to innately know. Sometimes you’re too close to your own life to gain perspective; it’s like trying to make sense of a painting if you’re only inches from it.

It’s really hard to find the words to describe my anorexia—it was more of a feeling, a lacking, an awareness I wasn’t really coping...I wanted to talk but I didn’t know what to say. I was waiting for something to happen so I could classify myself as ill. I was worried people wouldn’t take me seriously, that if I didn’t explain myself properly people would think I was attention-seeking or pathetic.”

He concluded:

“So I understand why more people don’t just talk, because sometimes finding the words can seem impossible. Not all the silence on mental illness is to do with stigma. It’s also about finding the right words.”

We have to get rid of the stigma around eating disorders to help the thousands of people like Dave who are suffering.

Thousands of people with eating disorders are turned away from treatment and support every day. The NICE guidelines for access to treatment are correct, but they are not implemented in the right way.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): That is a real issue with Vale of York CCG, where only 12.9% of people start treatment within four weeks. The CCG spent only £68,000 of the £161,000 it had to spend on eating disorders. Beat identified it as the worst CCG in the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that far more robust accountability is needed for the delivery of services for eating disorders?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Yes, much more funding and accountability is needed to tackle eating disorders. I will come to that shortly.

A person’s BMI should not prevent them from getting the support that they need. Action is also needed to tackle irresponsible social media companies, which give platforms to those who glorify eating disorders and negative body images. Failure to tackle eating disorders costs lives and results in heartbreak, anguish and despair for people with such disorders and for their families. It ends up costing the NHS more, because of the increased need when someone hits crisis. Much more funding is needed for mental health services, including child and adolescent mental health services. More early intervention is needed to address eating disorders.

Eating disorders are serious and potentially life-threatening conditions. Unless proper support and more mental health funding are made available to tackle them, we will all pay the price.

10.23 am

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on bringing this vital debate to the House. I pay tribute to everyone who is watching the debate, whether they are in the House or at home. I know that eating disorders—bulimia nervosa, anorexia nervosa, body dysmorphia and others—

[Chris Evans]

are secretive and private illnesses that people battle, and that it is difficult for those individuals to speak out because of their fear of being judged.

Many Members touched on the immense pressure that people are under to look thin, healthy or muscular. When I was a teenager, my big role models were Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. Every time their films came out, I wanted to look like them. It got to the point where I worked out twice a day. I lifted weights constantly and followed a diet. I suffered from all the causes of body dysmorphia. I never looked good enough. But wanting to look like big Arnie was not the trigger; the trigger was that my parents were going through a divorce and I was about to sit my exams. It was a high-stress situation, and the only way out of it was to look like Schwarzenegger or Stallone. Luckily—or unluckily—I injured my arms and could not lift weights any more, and that feeling went away. But for so many people, it does not go away.

On my way to the Chamber, I went to the newsagent and looked at the magazines. This week's *Men's Health* says, "Lose belly fat in 30 days." *GQ* has pictures of people with six-packs. Gary Barlow, who is promoting a new book, said, "I was so unhappy when I was 17 stone, but look at me now—I'm 12 stone. I lost 5 stone." People are under immense pressure. Mark Wahlberg, who led the band Marky Mark and has starred in various films, said recently that his daily regime begins with him getting up at half-past 2 in the morning and working out twice before half-past 7, when he plays golf and goes off to work. Nobody in the media condemned him—everyone complimented him on his discipline. That is madness.

What message are we sending to young people—that it is good to look like someone from "Love Island"? When I am on the beach in Porthcawl, no one looks like they are on "Love Island". This weekend, my wife and I decided to clear out some old books. Most of them were by Atkins or had titles like *30 Days to a New You* or *Body for Life*—"12 weeks to your new body!" There was even one about the Dukan diet. All those diets sell a perfect way of life. If someone suffers from self-esteem issues and thinks they are not good enough, like I did many years ago, those books feed into that. It is not just social media that we have to come down on.

Let me say this about social media. I read in the paper that a young girl who got through to the final of "The X Factor" said she had been plagued by trolls about her size. As someone said earlier, if we force social media to take down illegal things, we should do the same with trolls. The Government could go further with the diet industry. The Advertising Standards Authority needs real teeth so that when it sees those things happen, it can come down on magazines and advertisers like a ton of bricks. Equally, we have introduced health warnings for things such as cigarettes and alcohol, and we should do exactly the same for eating disorders.

Eating disorders manifest themselves in different ways. For me, it was body dysmorphia and my constant desire to train. Other people experience other things. When I was about 10 or 11, an extremely skinny young woman lived at the top of our street. My mother, who said that the woman had anorexia, befriended her. That young woman said that every morning, she would wake up

and eat a quarter of a red pepper. My mother asked why, and she said, "Because when that comes up, I know I'm empty." She could not get the help she required. She could not get a referral to a psychiatrist.

It is all very well saying that that was 30 years ago, but it still happens. The National Audit Office reported the other day that a quarter of young people, who make up most of those affected by eating disorders, cannot get an appointment with a psychiatrist. When they do, it is often not with a specialist. The picture is patchy across the country.

Let me end as I began—by paying tribute to everyone who suffers from an eating disorder. I say to them: "Talk to someone. Seek out the help you need. It does not have to be from a professional—it just has to be from someone you trust. If you come forward, you will find that people do not judge you but try to help you if they can."

10.29 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, in an extremely important debate that reaches out to those across the United Kingdom who are struggling with eating disorders, and their families. I very much commend the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on bringing the debate to the House and on her extremely poignant and sensitive speech about the day-to-day issues that people living with eating disorders face and their difficulties in accessing services across the United Kingdom, and specifically in her constituency.

Let me put it on the record that I have worked as a psychologist in the NHS in Scotland, including with people who have eating disorders. I want to spend a few minutes discussing the issues I had while working with people and how services can be taken forward. First, I thank all hon. Members who have spoken; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke consensually, as always, about the issues in Northern Ireland and how difficult it can be for people to come forward and seek treatment. I also thank the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who spoke about her difficulties in accessing treatment in her locality; that is a difficulty indeed, which is reflective of the service difficulties across the United Kingdom. I would like to sit down and discuss my own experience with her, if she were willing to do that.

The Scottish Government have put money into mental health services, including eating disorder services. An extra £250 million for mental health has been placed at the heart of the strategy. The Scottish Government's mental health strategy is a long-term strategy from 2017 to 2027.

The issues raised by hon. Members about body image are extremely important. Body image has come to the fore with the advent of social media. People struggle with it, particularly young people, and I think it contributes to the difficulties that people face. It is possible that there is a greater propensity for eating disorders to develop as a result of those issues. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) for raising the issue of body image, particularly for young men, because often that is overlooked. It is extremely important and will become much more relevant as time goes on,

because social media has such an impact on people, as do advertisers. It certainly contributes to the difficulties that people experience, through the sense of perfectionism. Young men are not excluded from that—in fact, idealistic images are portrayed to young men and young women that are particularly unhealthy to psychological and physical development, particularly in relation to people's adjustment and mental health in particular.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) also spoke about body image, social media and the difficulties of accessing treatment and services in his constituency. He often makes fantastic contributions and I am always pleased to be in debates alongside him. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) made an extremely well-informed speech, about some of the difficulties in coming forward and GP training, primary care and people's pathway through services. I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland produced a briefing paper that states that

“Scotland has seen striking improvements in the provision of specialist eating disorder services over the past decade.”

They include specialist units in Aberdeen and West Lothian, and beds in Glasgow. It continues:

“Services have been developed to provide alternatives to hospital admission, or shorter admissions.”

There are anorexia intensive treatment services in Lothian and Fife, day programmes in Aberdeen and specialist teams in Glasgow. On training, the 2010 Eating Disorders Education and Training Scotland programme was set up to bring training to professionals across Scotland and to train experts in practice. But despite all those issues and progress made, there is still so much more to be done.

From my own experience, I agree with the majority of Members who have spoken that services remain quite patchy. There is still a postcode lottery across the United Kingdom. I do not set Scotland out as different or having different difficulties in that regard, but Governments across the United Kingdom are trying to grapple with and make progress with these issues. It would be helpful if the Minister could address service provision in rural areas, what might that look like and how people could access services. I know that having to travel long distances to services can be a particular difficulty for patients when they come forward, and that is not always helpful for family involvement, yet we have heard that therapy and family involvement can be extremely important for the prognosis.

On CAMHS, it is an objective of the Scottish Government to put counselling services in every school. From the work I have been doing on the Health Committee, I know that the UK Government are also looking at those issues. However, it is difficult because when young people have an eating disorder it perhaps does not initially present as that—it might present as depression, anxiety or another symptom. Often the eating disorder is not acknowledged by the person suffering from it or does not come to the attention of those around them for some time later.

Those who work with young people should have appropriate training to look below the surface for the symptoms of eating disorders, which might present in different ways in young people, so that people do not

fall through the net so often. It can be difficult, and misdiagnosis in the initial stages is quite common, because one of the symptoms is denial. Perhaps the person does not want to seek treatment, or they present themselves in a way that suggests that they have a different mental health difficulty. Perhaps their family wish them to seek treatment but they are resistant. Those are all the issues that services have to grapple with. Therefore, the care pathway must be improved.

Denial is extremely important. Hon. Members spoke about early intervention, but it is extremely difficult to intervene early when often people do not accept their own difficulties and do not wish to come forward for treatment. Often, we look for other types of difficulties at presentations in primary care at GP level. GP training will have to be extremely sensitive and more hours will have to be devoted to understanding the different ways eating disorders present.

One of the difficulties I experienced was referring from primary care to specialist eating disorder services. The person had to go through three services to get where they needed to be. By that point, we are talking months down the line because only a community mental health team can refer to the eating disorder service. I suggest that that is not necessary, because psychologists and psychiatrists working in primary care are perfectly capable of diagnosing eating difficulties and referring straight on to specialist services. That should be addressed.

Weight restrictions are a particular issue for those with bulimia. If a service uses weight restrictions and makes body mass index a key criterion, those with bulimia will fall through the net. My quick ask of the Minister is for services to be more flexible and accept referrals to specialist services from those in primary care; for specialist training for a member in every CAMHS team to pick up eating disorders in young people; to have a discussion with advertisers about the contribution to mental health of unrealistic body image expectations; and to pick up the issue of rural services.

10.40 am

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. Like others, I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this important debate and for speaking so passionately.

As we have heard from many colleagues, eating disorders manifest in many different ways. They are mental illnesses that involve disordered eating behaviour, with types including anorexia, binge eating disorder, bulimia, purging disorder and avoidant or restrictive food intake disorder—that list is clearly not exhaustive. Their severity and complexity should never be underestimated. Sufferers will commonly go to extreme lengths to hide their symptoms and behaviours even from those closest to them.

It is thought that the majority of people with eating disorders are young women aged 12 to 20, but it is harmful to stereotype; the possibility that someone can develop such a disorder should never be ruled out. The number of boys and young men developing them is rising, and the numbers could be higher than we think, mainly due to stigmatisation and fear of speaking out. Indeed, when I visited the Navigo eating disorder service, which my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby

[Paula Sherriff]

(Melanie Onn) spoke about, I met four service users of whom two were women over 40 and another was a young man in his late teens. That shows that we must not stereotype.

Eating disorders have the highest mortality rates among psychiatric disorders, with anorexia having the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric disorder. Of those who survive, 50% recover, whereas 30% improve and 20% remain chronically ill. It is estimated that 40% of sufferers will also self-harm. Given those startling statistics, it is clear that more needs to be done to help sufferers with their recovery and that access to treatments must be greatly improved. Someone with an eating disorder will currently wait an average of 3.5 years before receiving treatment. As we have heard, it is worse for adults, who statistics show have to wait twice as long as children before accessing treatment.

In 2015, clinical commissioning groups were given extra money to help children and adolescents suffering with eating disorders. Unfortunately, in the CCGs' bid to balance the books in these times of severe NHS funding cuts, much of that money never found its way to the frontline and, of what did, little was actually used for eating disorder services. We heard from the hon. Members for Bath and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) about how services are patchy. There does appear to be a postcode lottery and disparate availability of services. However, we do recognise that some fabulous work is going on, including the service run by Navigo in Grimsby.

Much more needs to be done to raise awareness and to remove stigmas. Common misconceptions include that people with eating disorders are more responsible for their symptoms and that they would be more likely to use their disorder to gain attention than those suffering from other mental illnesses. Such misconceptions must be dispelled and greater awareness must be raised. The popular TV series "Hollyoaks" is currently running a story highlighting a young woman's struggle with her eating disorder. Well-researched storylines such as that are an important way of educating people and dispelling myths, but there is still much work to be done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), who made a passionate speech, spoke about how the media controls much of the narrative. I remember looking at women's magazines—I tend not to buy them so much anymore—and constantly seeing frighteningly thin models; plus-size models are rarely seen, even though being bigger than a size 10 does not necessarily mean that someone is unhealthy. Equally, social media plays a big part. Role models also have a responsibility. I remember a supermodel famously saying that nothing tastes as good as thin feels. Children and adolescents in particular look up to those people, who must recognise that they are role models in society.

Data on access, quality, workforce and investment in adult eating disorders services, which is key to the evaluation of whether services are effective, is not routinely collected and published. That would not be acceptable for physical health conditions, so why is it for a mental health condition? Furthermore, we have heard that there are no waiting time targets in place for over-18s. It would be great if the Minister responded on that.

In December 2017, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman published its findings after investigating the death of 19-year-old Averil Hart from anorexia. Its investigation "Ignoring the alarms: How NHS eating disorder services are failing patients" found that there had been inadequate co-ordination and planning of Averil's care and that, tragically, Averil's death could have been prevented had the NHS provided appropriate care and treatment.

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman and Beat, which I also thank—it does fabulous work and lobbies Members of Parliament to ensure that this issue is firmly on the agenda—have recommended that the General Medical Council conduct a review of training for all junior doctors on eating disorders to improve understanding of complex mental illnesses. As we have heard, although eating disorders affect an estimated 1.25 million people in the UK, training on it is limited to just a few hours over several years of training.

GPs, who are often the first port of call for people with eating disorders, must be provided with the training they need to identify the illness and to know what steps to take next. Blame is attached not to NHS staff but to how the service is run. The problems in the NHS have not come about overnight; the Government knew they would happen. Junior doctors have protested against the situation.

Much more needs to be done to aid the early stages of diagnosing and treating eating disorders because, as with much else, early intervention is crucial. A constituent of mine who was suffering from an eating disorder was praised on her weight gain during a consultation—such comments are enough to set recovery back for months. Health professionals should be given training on acceptable basic language when dealing with these sensitive issues. I am interested to explore family therapy further, because when I have met sufferers of eating disorders and their families, its great impact on the whole family has been clear. Family therapy is therefore a positive way forward.

I am conscious that I am running short of time, so I will try to summarise the remainder of my speech. NICE guidance for eating disorders states that children and young people with suspected eating disorders should start treatment within four weeks. However, a 2017 survey by Beat found that only 14% are referred within four weeks of their first GP visit. The average wait for referral is more than 11 weeks, and those aged 19 and over wait significantly longer. The situation is worse for men and boys, who make up between 10% and 20% of people with anorexia or bulimia.

We know—it has been said before—that mental health services are the poor relation in a cash-starved NHS. Some 40% of NHS mental health trusts are having their budgets cut, and we appear to be moving further and further away from parity of esteem. When I recently questioned the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), it emerged that an average of 2,000 mental health staff are leaving their posts in the NHS every month. At the end of June this year, one in 10 mental health posts was vacant, despite promises by the then Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), that he would increase the mental health workforce by 21,000.

As Labour's shadow mental health Minister, I am passionate about seeing improvements across all our mental health services—as I know everyone in the Chamber

is. I am committed to delivering on Labour's promise to have a counsellor in every high school, as early intervention is the key to preventing serious mental health issues. We would also ensure that budgets for mental health services are ring-fenced and ensure parity of esteem, providing a properly funded NHS with properly funded mental health services.

10.49 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this incredibly important debate on a topic that is a key priority for the Government and for the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who unfortunately cannot be here; that is why I am responding to the debate.

It is clear from the testimony we have heard today that having an eating disorder can be devastating. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that people should have the correct mental health support—in the right place, at the right time and, most importantly, without the fear of stigma.

Eating disorders are serious, life-threatening conditions with the highest mortality rates of any mental health disorder. They can have severe psychological, physical and social consequences and they often start and are prevalent when people are young. We know that early intervention is absolutely vital, as noted by the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), and we recognise how important it is that everyone with an eating disorder can access quick, specialist help when necessary. That is why we set up the first waiting times, in order to improve access to eating disorder services for children and young people, so that by 2020-21 some 95% of children with an eating disorder will receive treatment within one week in urgent cases and within four weeks in routine cases.

Latest available waiting time figures for children and young people with an eating disorder indicate that NHS England is on track to meet that standard by 2020-21. First quarter data showed that 74.7% of all patients started urgent treatment within one week and over 81% of patients started routine treatment within four weeks. The number of people who are seeking treatment is rising and it is greatly encouraging to see a commensurate increase in patients getting the care they need, as well as a significant reduction in waiting times compared with last year.

However, there is further to go. Beat, the eating disorder charity referred to this morning, which does fantastic work, reports that on average it takes people over a year to seek help after first recognising the symptoms of an eating disorder. We recognise the importance of raising awareness and reducing stigma so that more people feel able to talk about their eating disorder and to seek treatment.

In January 2017, the Prime Minister committed to making mental health first aid training available to all secondary schools, aiming to have trained at least one teacher in every secondary school by 2020. In the first two years of the programme, over 2,000 school staff have received training, helping to reduce stigma in

school environments. The Government have also committed to equip 1 million people to be better informed about looking after their own mental health. Public Health England is leading the development of a £15 million national mental health campaign called "Every Mind Matters". The first pilot began earlier this month in the midlands, ahead of a national launch next spring.

I move on to community services for children. In-patient treatment should be seen as a last resort wherever possible, which is why the Government announced in 2014 that they would invest £150 million to expand and improve eating disorder community-based care. We are making good on this promise and as a result 70 dedicated new or extended community services are now either open or in development. This has led to swift access to effective eating disorder treatment in the community, with the number of children and young people accessing treatment increasing from 5,243 in 2016-17 to 6,867 in 2017-18.

The services are designed to give young people with eating disorders and self-harm issues early access to services in their communities, provided by properly trained expert teams that deliver evidence-based psychological and medical intervention, aiming to avoid the need for hospital stays. By improving care in the community, we can improve outcomes and recovery, reduce rates of relapse or prevent eating disorders continuing into adulthood and, if admission is required as a very last resort, reduce lengths of stay.

I will now address some of the issues raised by hon. Members in the debate. The hon. Member for Bath made a series of incredibly important points, particularly about training for GPs. Early identification is crucial and it is vital that professionals look out for potential signs that indicate an eating disorder. GPs are trained to identify symptoms and help patients discuss the issues, but in response to the recommendations in the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman report on the tragic death of Averil Hart, as referenced by the hon. Member for Dewsbury, Health Education England is reviewing its current education and training offer and, crucially, identifying any gaps. It is working with eating disorder experts to scope existing evidence-based practice, to inform any new education and training resources.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury was right to mention that being under weight and body mass index are not good criteria for treatment. The NICE guidance is clear: rejection for treatment on the grounds of weight and BMI is not in line with any of the published guidance and should not occur. The hon. Lady also mentioned travelling too far for treatment, as did the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). We are committed to ensuring that everyone with an eating disorder has access to timely treatment, as close to home as possible. That is why we are seeing a shift to community services, to try to reduce, wherever possible, out-of-area placements. The hon. Lady talked about ring-fencing funding for these services. This is important too, as local areas need to fund services based on local needs. That is why I was alarmed to hear the figures from the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). I will ensure I take this up with our local clinical commissioning group. As the hon. Member for Bath said, funding must reach the

[Nigel Adams]

frontline. We already have in place the 70 community services, designed to give young people with eating disorders early access to services in their communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) talked about having the confidence to speak out. She is right and we welcome Beat's work in helping to improve awareness. I am delighted that the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow will be meeting my hon. Friend the Member for Angus, following her powerful speech. The hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) brought up an awful case concerning a constituent. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that my officials have heard what he said and, with his permission, we will follow up and make sure the Department of Health and Social Care comes back to him about that case. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow was correct to mention service provision in rural areas.

Several hon. Members raised the issue of social media, including my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and, not least, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It would be very unwise of me to attempt to keep up with the Shannons, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Government recognise the impact that social media can have on mental health. Increasing evidence is showing that excessive social media use may have a detrimental effect on young people's mental health.

The hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow and for Enfield, Southgate also raised body image, as did the hon. Member for Islwyn in his incredibly powerful and moving speech. Those promoting the perfect body image should be forced to watch this debate, to listen to the testimony we have heard and to be made to think about what they publish and the devastating impact it can have.

To conclude, I extend my thanks again to the hon. Member for Bath for securing the debate and all hon. Members here today for their powerful speeches. I am proud of the work the Government are doing to improve eating disorder services. We have a long way to go. I am also proud of the incredibly brave young people who have come here today to listen to the debate and who have been mentioned in the speeches. I hope I have been able to provide some reassurance that we are absolutely committed to reducing the stigma associated with all mental health conditions, including eating disorders.

10.59 am

Wera Hobhouse: I thank everyone who is here, particularly the amazing campaigners, including Lorna, Hope and the representatives from Beat, who do amazing work to help us all to break the silence and the shame that sufferers feel. We can do a lot as a society and social media can help.

Practical things can be done, where Government and mental health services are responsible. We have been talking—I thank the Minister for his response—about waiting times, ring-fencing of funding and proper training for doctors, but also practical things, such as dumping the scales. As he said, there are NICE guidelines, but we need to make sure that they are followed.

The statistics, including the fact that the mortality rate is the highest for any psychiatric disorder, are shocking. A third of people do not get better, and a third suffer chronic consequences. Only a third get better, while a third get worse. Those are terrible statistics for something that we know what to do about. We can do something about it, and we fail to. I see today's debate only as a beginning; I promise everyone in the Gallery that. I also promise the Minister that I shall continue to bother him.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Step-free Access: Battersea Stations

11 am

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered step-free access at stations in Battersea.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I speak not only as the Member representing Battersea, but also as someone with a disability, because I am a visually impaired person. My constituency is home to four railway stations. Clapham Junction, the busiest interchange station in the country, served more than 27 million journeys last year and has step-free access to all platforms. However, step-free access to trains remains a significant challenge for many disabled rail travellers; that is a point I shall come to later. The other three stations—Battersea Park, Queenstown Road and Wandsworth Town—at present have no step-free access. In total, more than 7.5 million passengers go through their doors each year but, as the stations do not have step-free access, their doors are closed to people with mobility issues, including a great many disabled people.

Battersea Park station, which had nearly 2 million people passing through its doors last year, was chosen as a station for the Access for All 2014-19 funding cycle. Access for All is a Government programme to fund accessible infrastructure improvements at all train stations. However, that much-needed planned work was put on hold because of the Hendy review of Network Rail's investment programme. Queenstown Road station, another busy station, which served more than 1.5 million journeys last year, is due to have a fully accessible second entrance as part of the new Battersea Park East development on the north of the site, but there will be no step-free access to the station platforms. Wandsworth Town station, which was the 20th busiest station on the Wessex route, with 4 million journeys last year, is similarly due to have an accessible entrance at its north side as part of the Swandon Way development. Again, however, step-free access will not be provided to all platforms. That raises a question: what is the point of having an accessible step-free entrance, but no step-free access to the actual train platform? I would like the Minister to address that point. I am pleased to say, however, that two new stations currently under construction in Battersea—Nine Elms and Battersea Power Station—are expected to have step-free access.

Battersea Park station and Queenstown Road station are both in Queenstown ward, which has a higher proportion of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions than does the constituency as a whole. Yet their local train stations are not accessible to them. Clapham Junction—a station that is step-free and where more than 6 million journeys are made by disabled people each year—does not guarantee step-free transfers between train and platform, which prevents many disabled passengers from getting on and off trains independently.

Why is what I have described important? We must not underestimate the significance of barriers. Step-free access to stations can mean the difference between the ability to lead a fulfilling and flourishing life seeing friends and family and going to work, and being left isolated at home, unable to travel and excluded from participation, from leading a fulfilling and flourishing

life, and from the world of work. That is the reality for far too many disabled people. For example, one man said that the lack of step-free access means that

“you have to consider which jobs you go for, some are just not an option. If someone offered you a promotion and you think there's a train station around the corner but scope it out and...there's steps then it will make the difference between going for the job or not.”

Another person spoke of feeling anxiety when having to travel by train, and being unsure whether there would be support at each station. That is also the case where there is no step-free transfer between the train and the platform, which leads to many disabled people having to rely on members of the public for assistance getting off or on a train.

There is no doubt that much more can be done to enable disabled passengers to embark on and disembark from trains independently. It will require meaningful commitment and investment. The Government must step up to that.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate her on securing the debate. Disability access is an issue in many places. In my constituency, campaigners in Levenshulme have been calling for step-free access for a long time. We are making good progress, which is largely down to the determination of community groups and local representatives who have brought the issue to the fore. Does my hon. Friend agree that all stations in the country should have step-free access as standard, and it should not depend on how organised communities are?

Marsha De Cordova: I agree with my hon. Friend and will come on to that point, because many older people's and disabled people's groups campaign tirelessly and push for fully step-free access at all stations. My hon. Friend is right that that should be standard.

As well as the lack of step-free access, disabled people face numerous other barriers when they want to travel by train. They include the unreasonable requirement to book assistance in advance—that prevents spontaneous travel and removes the ability to turn up and go—and the expansion of driver-only trains. The removal of guards means that the railways become more inaccessible, and disabled people lose the assistance on trains that many of them require. That is why we must keep guards on trains.

With so many barriers placed in the way of disabled people's independent travel, it is no surprise that a recent survey by Leonard Cheshire Disability found that more than a third of disabled people experienced problems using trains last year. That highlights the fact that we still cannot say we are a fully inclusive society. Many of those barriers exist because when stations were built, the rights and interests of disabled people were not recognised or acknowledged. It is essential for infrastructure work to be done on stations to modernise them, and for them to be built around everyone's needs. We would all benefit, and we could truly say that we were a fully inclusive society.

Department for Transport cost-benefit analysis shows that, on a “conservative estimate”, for every £1 invested in the Access for All programme there is a £2.90 benefit to the economy as a whole. However, I am disappointed that the Government's progress to date has been inadequate.

[*Marsha De Cordova*]

The Access for All programme was founded under the Labour Government in 2006, and it brought about significant benefits, including the funding of the infrastructure improvements that led to Clapham Junction being made step-free in 2011. That has helped to remove some of the barriers that prevent disabled people from travelling by train, but its progress has been too slow, with just one in five stations around the country being fully accessible.

The Conservative-led coalition Government's Equality 2025 programme created a target for disabled people to have the same access to transportation as non-disabled people by 2025. However, in the 2015 to 2019 rail investment control period, the Government cut £47 million from the Access for All funding. That lost funding should be restored in the 2019 to 2024 rail investment period, but the Government's commitments, as set out in their recently published inclusive transport strategy, did not appear to do that. After such significant cuts to the Access for All programme, do the Government have any hope of delivering on the transportation aim of Equality 2025?

The process for securing funding needs to be improved—that point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). Access for All funding depends on applications being made to Network Rail. Rail operating companies have to compete for funding, and whether a station is allocated funding depends on the strength of the business case that is put forward. Will the Minister comment on that? Should not the starting point be to ensure that the Access for All programme is adequately funded, so that all stations that require infrastructure work can be covered? All our stations should be accessible by default, and they should all be step-free.

Will the Minister say whether there will be step-free access not just to station entrances, but to platforms? Can she guarantee that all newly built stations will be fully step-free? Given the scale of the work needed and the cuts that have been handed down, when do the Government expect disabled people to have the same access to transport as non-disabled people do? It was once hoped that that would be achieved in seven years, but is there still any hope of that? Will the Minister commit to restoring the £47 million that has been cut from Access for All, so that stations such as Queenstown Road and Wandsworth Town can be made fully step-free?

It is the Government's responsibility to build an inclusive society, in which the barriers I have spoken about are broken down. To do that, train journeys must be accessible from end to end—that means that someone can get to the station, on to the train, off the train and out of the station at the other end. I call on the Government to put in the investment needed to build an inclusive railway, including accessible stations in Battersea. Finally, I thank those who have provided me with briefings on this important issue.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on securing

this debate and giving colleagues across the House the opportunity to discuss the important subject of accessibility to the rail network as far as Manchester—that is no distance from Battersea! I recognise how important it is for the hon. Lady's constituents to have access to the railway and to get to and from work, see family and friends, and go about their lives.

Delivering a transport system that is truly accessible to all is of great importance to me, and I hope that the hon. Lady has seen the Department for Transport's inclusive transport strategy, published in July, as evidence of the Government's commitment to taking action to safeguard and promote the rights of all disabled passengers. We do not deny that our strategy is ambitious, but we are determined to deliver it. By 2030 we want disabled people to have the same access to transport as everyone else, and if physical infrastructure remains a barrier, assistance will play a role in guaranteeing those rights. Key commitments to improving accessibility across all modes of transport for those with visible and less visible disabilities include up to £300 million to extend the Access for All programme until at least 2024.

Marsha De Cordova: You mentioned that we are looking at disabled people having parity with non-disabled people by 2030, so does that mean that the target in the Equality 2025 strategy is being moved to 2030?

Ms Ghani: I think you are conflating two very separate things—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order.

Ms Ghani: Forgive me, Sir Roger—I should not have referenced you.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Quite right. It is not the Chair's responsibility to respond to questions, and I take the opportunity to say the same thing to the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). We really must work in the third person.

Ms Ghani: Forgive me, Sir Roger. I will make sure not to do that again.

The hon. Lady is conflating two issues. There is the 2025 aspiration, but the 2030 target is to ensure that we come into line with the UN's ambition to ensure accessibility across all modes of transport. We mentioned £300 million for Access for All, and we also have £2 million to help bus operators install new audio-visual equipment on buses, and £2 million to enable the installation of more Changing Places toilets in motorway service areas. The strategy also requests that local authorities pause the installation of new "shared-space" schemes.

Marsha De Cordova: Good.

Ms Ghani: I am glad the hon. Lady is pleased about that. That will apply specifically to new schemes at the design stage that incorporate a level surface. An accessible transport network is central to the Government's wider ambition to build a society that works for all, regardless of the nature of a person's disability. People should have the same access to transport and the same opportunity to travel as everyone else, and this is an important measure to reduce social isolation and create opportunities

for people to play a more active role in society. I represented the Department for Transport at the loneliness strategy that was published yesterday, along with the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch) and the family of Jo Cox, to ensure that transport is seen as a way of ensuring that we tackle isolation.

As the hon. Lady noted, many of our stations—including those in her constituency—are Victorian, and their infrastructure is not fit for today. Those 19th century stations were not built with the needs of 21st century passengers in mind, which has left us with the huge task of opening up the rail network to disabled passengers. Although 70% of journeys are step free, we have continued our commitment to the Access for All programme. The inclusive transport strategy included a commitment to extend our Access for All programme across control period 6 between 2019 and 2024, with an additional £300 million of funding from the public purse. The hon. Lady asked about the £47 million, but that was not cut at all as it has been deferred to that round of funding. Part of that funding will be used to continue work on the stations that were deferred as part of the 2015 Hendy review, including Battersea Park station—I am pleased that the hon. Lady welcomes that investment.

Those funds will allow design work to restart on all deferred projects from April next year, and once the designs are completed, Network Rail will confirm the construction date for Battersea Park. The project is likely to be difficult to complete, given the nature of the station, but Network Rail has been instructed to continue to work with local stakeholders, including Wandsworth Borough Council. I know that the council has aspirations to improve not just the station but the wider area, going further than the Access for All project.

I am confident that a solution that meets the requirements of all stakeholders can be found. Some of the best Access for All projects have been those where a number of smaller schemes and funding streams have come together to enhance a station greatly. For example, Clapham Junction and Putney both had lifts installed in recent years to make the stations accessible, and other work has been carried out at the same time to reduce congestion. In addition to those stations deferred from the previous round of funding, we will use part of the £300 million fund to make improvements at even more stations. We have asked the industry to nominate stations for new funding by 16 November this year, and I urge all hon. Members to encourage nominations in their constituencies. Nominated stations will be selected based on annual footfall and weighted by the incidence of disability in the area. We will take into account local factors such as proximity to a hospital or the availability of third-party funding for the project, and we will ensure a fair geographical spread of projects across the country.

The hon. Lady will know that neither Queenstown Road nor Wandsworth Town in her constituency have previously been nominated for Access for All funding. Nominations come through the train operating company in partnership with the local authorities, Members of Parliament and, of course, local councillors championing them. I encourage her to liaise with South Western Railway if she wishes these or any other station to be put forward, and ideally to seek a proportion of third-party

matched funding that will help to weight the business case. I hope to announce the selected stations by April next year.

I noted that the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) mentioned a station in his constituency. We are not asking for local communities to drive these campaigns. We are asking for train operating companies to recognise the stations that they would wish to prioritise. We have quite a large sum of funding, £300 million, but we have to ensure that it is spread appropriately. This new £300 million of funding builds on the success of the Access for All programme. So far it has installed accessible, step-free routes at over 200 stations, and around 1,500 stations have benefited from smaller-scale access improvements.

We are also pressing the industry to comply with its legal obligations to ensure that work at stations meets current accessibility standards, not only on flagship projects such as Crossrail, the redevelopment of Birmingham New Street and the TransPennine route upgrade, all of which are delivering significant accessibility improvements, but as part of the business as usual work of their renewals programme, for example by making sure that any replacement bridges have lifts or ramps. It is also important that the industry meets its obligations to anyone who needs assistance, whether they have booked ahead of time or not.

Afzal Khan: Will the Minister explain why it is appropriate to defer the £47 million she talked about when so many disabled people throughout the country are suffering because they do not have fair access to stations? Also, when is the Minister likely to visit Levenshulme, as she has said she will try to do?

Ms Ghani: I am thankful for the intervention, which allows me to clarify that the £47 million has not been deferred. All the deferred stations in the last spending round have been put into this spending round, which is why we have £300 million to spend. I am grateful once again for an invitation to the hon. Gentleman's constituency; I will see what I can do, but obviously I cannot accept every invitation, although this one is incredibly attractive.

Getting back to the point that the hon. Member for Battersea raised about how much time people have to leave before taking a journey, every passenger should get the best possible help to use the trains, whether booked ahead of time or not, particularly at stations that do not have fully accessible facilities. Each operator is required to have a disabled people's protection policy in place as part of its licence to operate services. The policy sets out the services that disabled passengers can expect and what to do if things go wrong, and commits the operator to meeting its legal obligations by making reasonable adjustments to their services to allow disabled people to use them, for example by providing an accessible taxi, free of charge, to anyone unable to access a particular station. Through the inclusive transport strategy, we are also looking at how we can improve Passenger Assist to make it more flexible and responsive to real-time changes.

I hope I have demonstrated that this Government are committed to improving access at stations for disabled passengers, through both specific projects such as Access for All and improvements delivered as part of our wider commitment to improving the rail network. I thank the hon. Member for Battersea and all colleagues for the

[Ms Ghani]

contributions they have made; I appreciate the frustration of passengers who do not have access to stations in her constituency, but I hope the hon. Lady has been reassured that the Government remain committed to investment that will improve rail services. We want people to continue to benefit from the record levels of funding, including the Access for All investment that will benefit passengers at Battersea station. I am beginning to understand her particular experience of disability and accessibility, and I am more than available to meet her to discuss any issues relating to hidden disabilities that we need to cover through the inclusive transport strategy.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.

Road Safety

[MRS MADELEINE MOON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered road safety.

It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Mrs Moon. I am grateful to have secured this important debate. Road safety is an issue that affects every constituency, and I am delighted to see colleagues here from both sides of the House. No doubt they will want to draw my hon. Friend the Minister's attention to particular roads or even particular accidents, but I will endeavour to keep my remarks as encompassing as possible and to explore how we can best measure and improve road safety as a general rule. I hope that we can have a dispassionate debate about an emotive subject, while always recognising how traumatic failures of road safety can have life-changing implications.

In Great Britain last year, 1,793 people were killed in road crashes—that is 1,793 too many. In addition, the Government estimate that road traffic collisions cost the UK economy more than £16.3 billion a year. In Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire alone, all accidents involving speed cost the economy an average of £32.5 million annually. Those costs could be reduced if we made our roads safer.

Last month, the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety released a new report, entitled “Developing safe system road safety indicators for the UK”. That timely and interesting report from PACTS will form the basis of my remarks. It was done in association with Ageas, which is one of our largest motor insurers; it employs more than 400 people in my constituency. They are all too aware of the devastation that poor road safety can cause to those injured or bereaved. I am grateful to them for sending me briefing materials and also grateful for input from the Association of British Insurers, the Road Safety Foundation, the Royal National Institute of Blind People, the Institute of Alcohol Studies, Living Streets and Highways England.

The economy has grown every year since 2010, and the population and the volume of road traffic have grown with it. Despite that, the number of road deaths has not grown over the same period, and we can be thankful for that. However, we could be doing better and getting the number of deaths and serious injuries down. More worryingly, the number of pedestrian fatalities accounts for more than one quarter; it is up 5% on the previous year and up 11% on the 2010 to 2014 average.

We have some of the safest roads in the world, but we need to ensure that the general downward trend in road deaths over the past 45 years continues. That was achieved through improved safety measures, technological advances and public awareness campaigns, modifying behaviours and militating against elements of previously fatal scenarios. And we are far from exhausting the potential for technological advances, particularly in the field of autonomous cars and smart roads. It is at this time of great technological change that a more comprehensive approach to road safety is needed—something against which both current and new forms of transport can be

tested, and something that is responsive to new technology. The Government are of course aware of that, and it is strongly to their credit that the UK is leading the way in embracing the advances that driverless technology promises to bring.

The Government issued a British road safety statement in 2015. That was followed by the road safety management review commissioned last year and published in June of this year. It is clear that the Government favour a partnership approach, fully respecting devolution and local authority competences. That is all very welcome, and it is welcome that the report by PACTS and Ageas has come forward. In this spirit of encouragement, I ask the Minister to respond to the points raised by the report. In particular, I ask how the Department is progressing towards a safe system approach.

Traditionally, road safety measures have always been far too reactive. Areas with a history of more serious collisions have received far more focus and, often, locations where there is the greatest danger of collisions and a history of near misses do not get the attention that they need. Also, campaigns have focused on getting drivers and vulnerable road users to stop certain behaviours, instead of such behaviours being proactively designed out.

Systemic measures are needed; that is what a safe system is all about. It is an evidence-based approach focused on preventing death and serious injury, rather than preventing all crashes in the face of human error. Because people do make mistakes and collisions do and will take place, a systemic approach recognises that minimising the physical impact of collisions is a shared responsibility for those who design, build, manage and use roads and vehicles. To put it bluntly, if we crash into someone or something, the vehicle and not the people should take the impact and any damage. That means that, as well as expecting road users to comply with the laws on seatbelts, speed limits, not using phones and so on, we should expect, first, vehicle makers to design safer cars, vans, lorries and buses and, secondly, highways agencies to design and maintain legible and forgiving road infrastructure. Thirdly, medical and emergency services should be prepared, trained and equipped to provide an efficient and effective post-crash response.

A key aspect of a safe system approach is the ability to monitor, target and track progress through specific performance indicators. As Dr Suzy Charman of the Road Safety Foundation has said,

“You cannot manage what you do not measure. There is a need for road safety performance indicators in order to drive effort and investment in the right direction.”

I would be interested to hear from the Minister what consideration has been given to devising any indicators beyond those EuroRAP—European Road Assessment Programme—indicators that are already in use for the strategic road network. I would be especially keen to hear his early responses to the eight indicators proposed in the PACTS report. I will briefly run through the indicators set out in the report.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. Before he gets on to the eight indicators, would he agree with me that it is already known where the most dangerous roads are? They are often roads over moors, in rural areas, where overtaking takes the car on to the other

side of the road, and there are often head-on collisions, which lead to fatalities. Improving those roads should be the focus of the Government's investment policy. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Jack Brereton: I agree to an extent, in that those are some of the key roads where investment should be prioritised. There are also far too many accidents occurring in urban areas—hits particularly involving pedestrians, which are obviously much more prevalent in towns and cities, where an accident can be much more serious.

I will go through the eight specific indicators. The first is compliance with speed limits on national roads. Speeding currently accounts for about one fifth of road fatalities. The second indicator is compliance with speed limits on local roads. Data collection for both those speed indicators would be through existing speed monitoring equipment and self-reporting in, for example, the Royal Automobile Club survey, which already identifies this.

Obviously, speed is not everything when it comes to reducing dangers, so the third point is abstinence from alcohol and drug consumption. That is a key indicator. Nearly 15% of road crash fatalities involve a driver exceeding the legal alcohol limit. I am told by the Institute of Alcohol Studies that deaths caused by drink-driving are now at their highest rate since 2012. Meanwhile, it is estimated that some 200 road deaths a year—more than 10% of road deaths—are drug-driving related.

The fourth indicator is the percentage of car occupants using a seatbelt, child seats or child restraints. For many people, wearing a seatbelt is now second nature, but, despite it being illegal not to wear a seatbelt, not enough people are wearing seatbelts. Not wearing a seatbelt accounts for between 20% and 30% of road fatalities among car occupants. That is more than 150 deaths a year.

The fifth indicator relates to one of the more recent legislative changes; it is the percentage of drivers not using an in-car or hands-free phone. It can be difficult to establish when mobile phone use has contributed to a crash, but it is reported that dozens of fatal crashes involve the use of a mobile phone.

The sixth indicator is the percentage of new passenger cars with the highest European New Car Assessment Programme safety rating, which is obviously important for the quality and design of vehicles. An academic study cited in the PACTS report has estimated that the risk of fatal injuries is dramatically reduced in five-star-rated vehicles by as much as 68% compared with two-star-rated vehicles. The seventh indicator is the percentage of roads with the highest relevant International Road Assessment Programme ratings, broken down by road type. The final proposed indicator is the percentage of emergency medical vehicles arriving at an accident within 18 minutes of notification.

Those are the eight indicators set out in the report by PACTS and Ageas. Some data will be more challenging than others to collect. The report identifies a number of sources and methods for that collection. It also lists alternative indicators that were considered but rejected because of the difficulties in accurate data collection, such as cyclists not wearing the correct type of helmet, which would be quite difficult to calculate.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I want to pick up on one thing he said about cyclists not wearing the correct kind of helmet. Is he aware that there is no requirement on cyclists to wear helmets in this country? In fact, in most countries where cycling is an awful lot more prevalent than it is in this country, most people do not wear helmets, because they do not need to.

Jack Brereton: I think that is an issue. I encourage more people to wear a helmet, because the more they do so, the lower the risk. I recognise that on the continent there is more of a cycling culture, and that we do not see as much of that in this country, outside of London. It is challenging in many communities to encourage people to use cycling as an alternative. I always say to my constituents that wearing a helmet is a way of ensuring that they have the best possible protection and safety on our roads.

As I was saying, it would be interesting to know whether the Department for Transport intends to explore such potential key performance indicators for non-motorised road use and for road crossers, such as those on foot—that also relates to cyclists. I recognise the danger that too many indicators might dilute that focus. A further danger is that indicators can become targets that skew priorities. I think that the PACTS report is helpful for recognising the importance of having effective comparative data that can be trusted to assess road safety.

It is essential for indicators to go beyond the fatal and seriously injured figure—the KSI figure, as it is known. As the former co-chair of the Staffordshire Safer Roads Partnerships, prior to my election to this House, I am quite impressed by the thinking and working that has gone into this report. It is aligned with the progress that is being made at a local and national level, following the Government's determination to reduce the number of fatalities on our roads.

Of course, actions to improve road safety must be data-led—we must take proportionate action that has a meaningful impact—but the data needs to be broader and take a more systemic view. If we consider the Stoke-on-Trent figures for 2016 as an example, the KSI figure showed an increase of 74%, but within the context of a 5% reduction of overall reported casualties over the same period. There are clearly issues with using the KSI figure alone on a local network level, as significant short-term percentage changes can be caused by a small number of particularly deadly collisions.

As the Government's road safety statement notes, 98% of the road network in England is local roads, and local action needs to be encouraged and respected. I would be interested in hearing how the Department is getting on with initiatives to spread good practice from one authority to another, particularly on more controversial schemes, such as shared space roads, which the RNIB has raised concerns about.

Another area of controversy is the use of speed cameras. In an age of high levels of accountability, the public increasingly demand transparency. Sometimes speed cameras are seen, unfortunately, as nothing more than a cash cow, to help to meet tightened public finances. We need to ensure that there is public confidence in road safety measures, that we communicate with

motorists effectively and that actions on speed—such as putting in cameras or vans—remain reasonable and build on justified, tangible improvements in road safety. Better indicators and data collection may well help to justify such actions.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. On the issue of speed cameras and their locations, does he agree that it is essential that the wider public—pedestrians and motorists—see that they are positioned in such a way as to help to prevent accidents, rather than to apprehend motorists who might happen to be doing 31 mph in a 30 mph zone?

Jack Brereton: I certainly agree that that should be the case. That is why it is so important that the work is data-led, so that the public can have confidence that cameras are used only in locations where there is a justifiable need for them. I think that that is particularly important when it comes to things such as speed cameras, where motorists are being fined.

Moving on to working locally, it has become increasingly clear, as the PACTS report recognises, that road safety is not just about speed or chasing previous collision history, but about ensuring that actions are focused on reducing dangers more widely. Sometimes, making motorists feel safer has the perverse effect of making them drive more dangerously, but if they are made alert to possible risks, they drive with greater attention. It was, for example, a brave decision for Westminster City Council to remove the pedestrian railings at Oxford Circus when the crossing was redesigned to include diagonal lines. I think we would all agree that that has been a success. It works through behavioural measures—through a nudge, as they say.

It is not only Westminster that is innovating and taking bold steps forward to tackle broader dangers on our roads. Across the country, we are increasingly seeing proactive partnerships, like the one we have in Staffordshire, which represents a change in approach from local service providers. There is an increasing shift towards more holistic preventive actions through a whole range of methods, with the local community stepping up to take greater responsibility to improve safety on their roads. That means more work in schools and with community groups, to teach people about safety and encourage more responsible road usage. Many communities are also developing speed watches in their towns and villages, with local residents volunteering time to encourage safer road usage. After all, the people who drive most irresponsibly and dangerously are often part of those communities, and peer pressure from friends and neighbours can be a powerful tool—more powerful than directions from central Government. I am glad that Whitehall now recognises that.

In conclusion, I hope that the improved use of safety indicators is under serious consideration and progressing well. We need to bolster the trend towards broader preventive and community-led initiatives that best encourage behavioural change and more responsible road usage from everyone. Making data available will be key to that, as will spreading information and examples of best practice in road safety across local partnerships, which will deliver the improvements that we all want to see. I think PACTS and Ageas have made a great contribution.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's giving way, because I know he is winding up. Will he say a little bit about the Government's consultation last year on causing death or serious injury by dangerous driving? Yesterday was the anniversary of the Government's statement that they would bring in tougher sentences for those crimes, but nothing has happened in the last year. Will he say something about the possible deterrent effect of a tougher sentence for dangerous driving?

Jack Brereton: I know that that issue is important to the hon. Lady, and we had a brief discussion about it earlier. It is important that we have tough and appropriate sentences, but they are only part of the picture. As I have set out, there are several ways in which we should encourage safer driving. It is not just about encouragement, but about designing a safer road system and taking a holistic approach to road safety. I hope that the Minister keenly anticipates, as I do, the forthcoming Ageas-supported Road Safety Foundation annual risk mapping and performance tracking report, which will be launched on 30 October and entitled "Getting Back on Track". The Minister is always on track—or, I should say, on road—so I look forward to his response.

2.50 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am pleased to see you presiding over our proceedings, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this important debate. I will do my best to be brief, given how many hon. Members want to contribute.

I chair Fire Aid, an international charity that delivers pillar 5 post-crash response to 40 countries using staff and equipment from the UK fire and rescue service and its supply chain. Our constituent members also use the Department for Transport's excellent THINK! road safety education material and are grateful for it. I thank the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety, Anderson Etika and David Davies; Cycling UK, especially Roger Geffen; and the all-party parliamentary group on cycling and Adam Coffman for their briefings for the debate, which I am sure hon. Members found extremely useful.

There is a concern, which I am sure the Minister shares, that casualty reductions have plateaued in recent years. PACTS writes that its members are particularly interested to hear more about the refreshed road safety statement and two-year action plan, which was trailed as being due out in October. I hope the Minister can tell us when that will actually be seen.

I have raised the issue of targets with the Minister before. As he knows, PACTS and many others would like the Government to adopt casualty reduction targets. There is some encouragement, which perhaps the Minister can say more about, in the fact that the Department appears to be reconsidering their advantages. There is a recognition that targets are not a magic bullet, but the absence of a UK target badly undermines our claim to be an international leader in road safety. In the UK, we have a plethora of targets set by various bodies with different dates, baselines and definitions, including one set by the Department for Transport for Highways England, and we endorse United Nations and EU casualty reduction targets, but do not have our own.

Targets can be aspirational, and the Government have adopted them in a range of public policy areas such as NHS waiting times, reducing suicide, vehicle emissions and greenhouse gases. Given that road crashes are the largest cause of death and injury for young people and many of us in our daily lives, surely they deserve equal priority.

If possible, I would like the Minister to say something about 20 mph zones. Everybody supports them and they have appeared all over the country, but we all recognise that without physical restraints or technological equipment, just putting up signs that say 20 mph does not achieve anything.

I would also be grateful if the Minister commented on the number of traffic police and enforcement officers. There have been massive reductions in the number of police officers around the country, which would suggest that the number of traffic police has also been significantly reduced. If he could say something about that, and about the last time that he discussed the numbers with his ministerial counterpart at the Home Office, that would be helpful.

The cycling community has expressed angst about the Minister's review of dangerous cycling. As a cyclist, I see far too many fellow cyclists going through red lights and pedestrian crossings, and the tragic incidents that have taken place warrant a review of dangerous cycling. The cycling community says that there also needs to be a review of dangerous driving, however, and that the Government need to show an approach to both rather than just focusing on cycling.

Cycling UK makes reference to the fact that convicted drivers routinely evade driving bans by claiming that it could cause exceptional hardship. As of June 2017, more than 10,000 drivers in Britain were still permitted to drive despite having more than 12 points on their licence. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that and the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) about convictions and the punishment fitting the crime—the Government have been promising to make a statement on that for some time.

This ought not to be a party political issue, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, whom I congratulate again on securing this important debate, and the number of hon. Members from both sides of the House who want to speak demonstrate, but the Government have to recognise that there is disappointment. To go back to targets, there was a 30-year consensus. Targets were introduced by the Thatcher Administration in the '80s and parties of both colours kept to them for all that time. They were effective in reducing the numbers of people being killed and seriously injured on our roads. I am keen to hear whether the Minister has any news on that.

As a former Road Safety Minister, I know that the issue presents huge challenges, but the Minister is highly regarded and trusted so he has an opportunity to restore the confidence of road safety campaign organisations and hon. Members present. We hope that his refreshed road safety strategy and two-year action plan does just that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Stephen Kerr, I ask hon. Members to show consideration for one another. If they keep their speeches to about four and a half minutes, we could get everyone in.

2.56 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this important debate. I compliment him on his speech's content and his delivery. I pay tribute to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Police Scotland and the Central Scotland Road Safety Partnership, which delivers the "Safe Drive Stay Alive" campaign every year, as I have previously remarked on in the House. The highly effective campaign includes an evocative and emotive live presentation designed to change behaviour and thinking about the responsibilities that we have when we sit behind the wheel of a car.

I want to speak about my constituent, Mrs Elizabeth Billett, who came to see me a few months ago because she had read something in the *Stirling Observer* that vividly brought back memories of what had happened to her grandson, whom she had brought up. Her case was previously mentioned in the House by my predecessor, Dame Anne McGuire, but I mention it again because the issues surrounding it are still relevant. Those issues relate to the consequences of foreign drivers who visit the UK driving on the wrong side of the road. The essence of my speech is to ask the Minister what more can be done to help foreign drivers who come to this country to be aware of the need to stay on the correct side of the road. I will also raise points that are outside his remit as a Minister, but which I hope he will contemplate and perhaps offer a view on.

Mrs Billett came to talk to me about her grandson, Andrew McLean, who was 22 years old when the car he was driving was hit by someone driving on the wrong side of the road. That person happened to be a French national, who was subsequently sentenced to 200 hours of community service and given an 18-month driving ban in 2012. When I met Mrs Billett, it was clear that the grief that she felt was still as fresh as if it had only just happened. That is the reality of that kind of shocking loss. To lose a grandson at such a young age—he was only 22, as I said—is a truly horrible thing to happen. It has blighted her life. We must recognise the truly shattering effect that the loss of such a young man has had on Mrs Billett and her family.

I now turn to the case that brought Mrs Billett to my constituency office and highlight the issue that I wish to raise. Recently, in Gartmore on the A81 in my constituency, a French driver, again on the wrong side of the road, resulted in three people being seriously injured and hospitalised. The sheriff in Stirling imposed a £3,000 fine, which he stated was immediately enforceable, and he disqualified the driver from driving for 27 months. I recognise that this is a devolved area, but it is a relevant one, which we should contemplate in this debate.

The sheriff said the second part of the sentence—not the fine, but the disqualification—was unenforceable, because if the individual concerned returned to France it would have no effect. That is what I ask the Minister to contemplate today. Is there not a way in which the consequences of this type of accident, the impact it

has—visible to me when I met my constituent; I have a lasting memory of her grief and pain at the loss of her grandson—and the resulting sentence can be enforced, regardless of where the individual concerned goes? There must be a way of co-operating across Governments on this issue.

Being in charge of a motorcar is a very serious responsibility and drivers must take it seriously. I ask the Minister and all of us here today to consider how we might ensure that sentences are appropriate to the impact of the crime and are enforceable across national boundaries. My constituent, Mrs Billett, has been left in limbo for years. Nothing can be done to bring her grandson back, but we can go further than we currently do and help to bring her some sense of justice.

3 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this very worthwhile debate. My contribution will be very short and will cover slightly different areas to those covered so far.

I am indebted to many of my parish councils. I attended a meeting last Friday at St Paul's church in Whiteshill and over two thirds of my parish councils were represented there. The issue that people came to discuss was speeding. It is probably the biggest issue I have, in terms of postbag, outside of all the individual issues that we all face as Members of Parliament.

People came to that meeting to express their concerns, but I was also greatly indebted to my friend Charles Pedrick, who has done more than anyone I know in the area to highlight the issue of what to do about speeding. He organised the meeting, with the support of Martin Surl, Gloucestershire's police and crime commissioner, who has put his money where his mouth is by partly paying for two automatic number plate recognition cameras—one in Whiteshill, which is why we were there, and the other one in Rodborough. The cameras have demonstrated that, in the main, people are law-abiding, but those who break the law do so in a hideous way, by driving at 70 mph through a 30 mph zone.

My first question to the Minister—this is why I will be brief—is whether it is possible that we could use the data that has been collected. In Gloucestershire, about 100,000 pieces of data have been collected in the year or so since the two ANPR cameras have been up. At the moment, that data is used by the police. They go and knock on a door, in extremis, or they send letters to those who have offended seriously, not once or twice but on a regular basis. Is it possible that we could use that data more proactively, so that we can catch these people out?

I was genuinely shocked when I tabled a parliamentary question about how many people in Gloucestershire were banned from driving. Given how serious speeding and drink-driving are, the number is infinitesimally small, and that is because we do not seem to have any joined-up action. Can we use that information to crack down on those people who are making other people's lives a misery?

Of course, it is not only people who are affected by speeding but cows and horses. There are a number of commons in my constituency. Every year, when the

cows are put out we lose about 12 of them, because they are knocked down. However, it is not just a case of knocking down an animal; such incidents have a hideous impact on the affected farmers, who have to pick up the beast and who also often lose out financially. There is very little that can be done about the perpetrators. We ought to be able to do much more to them. If anyone hits an animal in a car, it is their own fault; they were driving without due care and attention. Is there something more that we can do to follow up on those individuals who have had accidents and caused all this disruption?

The same is true of horses. We are considering how we can have safer bridleways, but how do people get to those safer bridleways? We need to consider, very carefully, how the network can be joined up, to ensure that people are able to ride their horses safely, without people rushing past them at 60 mph.

My last point comes from the meeting I attended last week and it is a request to look at traffic regulation orders. Can we have a way in which we can make villages more composite, so that each village does not have to pay quite a large sum of money to get a TRO to reduce the speed in their area to 20 mph, which is largely recognised as being what villages need?

If the Minister could answer those questions in the short time that he has today, I would be very grateful.

3.4 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Safety on our roads is obviously an important issue; it is also one that we have discussed here in Parliament before. The countryside is changing and has been for many years, and yet country roads are not changing, except perhaps for repairs of a few potholes and patchy resurfacing. I am talking in particular about roads in rural areas.

I credit my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), first, for securing the debate—it is a fantastic debate on an important issue—and, secondly, for highlighting the hazards and deaths on our roads. Devon and Cornwall police have recently diverted resources from fighting what we might call traditional crime, such as burglary, to keeping our roads safer. They recently launched their “No Excuse” campaign, which challenges road users who, basically, break clear rules about road safety and thereby cause injury and death. It is a shame that, because of that and the inability to maintain improvements to the roads, resources are being diverted in this way.

Attention really must be given to designing out danger, as well as to managing driver error and behaviour. As a rural constituency MP in west Cornwall, a number of issues are raised with me on a regular basis; indeed, I have raised many of them in this place before. As I have said, the countryside is changing. However, as a local MP I believe that I have exhausted every possible route other than to raise these issues with the Minister, which is disappointing. I would like to hear from him today what tools MPs can use to get their local authorities and others to focus their efforts on areas where there is clearly a danger, as well as a concern, and where local communities are genuinely worried about what is going on in their neighbourhoods and outside their houses.

I would really like to know from the Minister what more I can do on roads such as, for example, the A30 at Trereife junction, which I was involved with even before

I was elected to this House. The A30 is a very busy road that takes people to Land’s End and the junction is tricky, and advertised as such. Years ago, red was painted on it to slow people down. However, that red paint has now gone, and despite many efforts and petitions, Cornwall Council seems completely uninterested in making the junction safer.

In New Road, there is simply a need for a pedestrian crossing from a massive housing area across to the beach. Again, however, the local authority has shown no interest.

As I have said, the countryside is changing. We have huge vehicles, including agricultural vehicles, using our roads. Often they use minor roads, and in a village called Leedstown, which is on the B3302, it has been established that speeding takes place. I have had many meetings with the council, huge petitions have been created by the local community and lots of concerns have been accepted, but there has been no action whatsoever. The council blames the police for not enforcing the law; the police blame the council for not improving the roads. And in Ashton and in Breage, the situation is exactly the same.

The Minister and the Secretary of State will be aware of our concern about the A30 in Crowlas. It is the main road that takes people into Penzance, which has a population of more than 20,000 people. It is a single-carriageway road that takes people to that end of Cornwall. The money has been secured to make it safer—indeed, it was secured some time ago—but there has been absolutely no action. So I would love it if the Minister could give Highways England and Cornwall Council a call, to ask them why they have not acted when they have the money to do so.

Finally, on Sunday there was a three-car crash, which resulted in life-changing injuries for one individual, on the A30 from Camborne to Penzance. I recently talked to Highways England in Bristol about that road and it said that there was no more that it could do; it needs the Secretary of State to ensure that a route appraisal is included in the second road investment strategy, or RIS 2. I thought that I would take the opportunity today to make that point, particularly to the Minister. So, please include a route appraisal in RIS 2.

3.9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your chairmanship today, Mrs Moon.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on bringing this issue forward and giving us all a chance to participate in this debate.

I will very quickly give a flavour of what is happening in Northern Ireland, as I do in nearly every debate in Westminster Hall, because it is always important to have the statistics that back up the story we are trying to tell.

In Northern Ireland we had 9,737 casualties on our roads last year. Obviously, we have to do better. Road safety is a multifaceted issue and a multifaceted approach is needed. Speeding is a clear issue. All hon. Members who have spoken so far have said that, and will continue to say that. According to statistics released by the Department for Infrastructure, 69% of drivers broke the speed limit on built-up roads in Northern Ireland.

[Jim Shannon]

Whereas 50% of them drove too fast on single and dual carriageways, speeding on motorways was down by 30%, so there are some good things. The majority of pedestrian casualties occur in built-up areas. Again, we need to highlight that issue. Twenty-nine of the 34 child pedestrians and 302 of the 413 adult pedestrians who were killed in 2016 died on built-up roads.

Pedal cyclists are also vulnerable in built-up areas. More than half of the cyclist deaths in 2016, 58 out of 102, and most cyclist injuries in that year, almost 17,000 out of nearly 18,500, occurred on built-up roads. Although rural areas have their own particular issues, built-up areas are where the real pressure seems to be. In 2016, 789 people were killed, almost 16,000 were seriously injured and 113,055 were slightly injured. If someone is driving at 40 mph and they hit a child, they will probably kill them; at 30 mph, the child has an 80% chance of survival; and at 20 mph, the child is likely to survive being hit, with only minor injuries. So it is clear that we need to drive in built-up areas at a speed that is not a threat to other people.

Inexperience does not end with passing the test, which is why the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, which the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) referred to, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and the Institute of Advanced Motorists have a scheme that involves on-road driving assessments, manoeuvrability tests, road-safe and wellbeing exhibitions and simulated fatal car crashes. Those are important steps in the way forward to educating people and raising awareness.

Teaching our young drivers is essential. We must address the fact that they do not have lessons on motorways, and their first trip up the road to university, changing lanes and navigating, is simply dangerous, so we must look at that issue as well.

I very much support the scheme that we have back home in Northern Ireland; I suspect it is probably evident in other parts of the United Kingdom as well. Our education programmes in high schools feature personal stories, often from young people who have been disabled in accidents. There are graphic demonstrations or dramatisations to influence the attitude of young students driving for the first time. I remind the Minister that the insurance companies do some monitoring of first-time drivers. The scheme to reduce insurance and to monitor the speed of cars is a good scheme.

I also have concerns about horse deaths on the roads. The British Horse Society is aware of some 2,914 reports of road incidents involving horses; 230 horses have died and 39 riders have lost their lives. We need to remind people how to drive at the right speed at the right place. There might be a 60 mph national speed limit, but sometimes it is safe only to drive at 40. When it might be safe to drive at 60, some people doing 20 mph is an issue that must be addressed as well. There is work to do, and there must be funding for a strategy. I look to the Minister for the strategy and for the funding to back it up. I welcome the fact that in Northern Ireland we have put measures in outside schools. We have put in schemes to reduce speed, which will increase safety for children at school.

3.13 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, in this important debate.

We have had so many statements from the Government and debates in this House about one or more of the issues of congestion, air pollution, obesity, diabetes, poor physical and mental health, and the decline in our high streets' economies. I have two solutions to all those, which do not cost a lot to the public purse or to our constituents: cycling and walking. I shall focus mainly on the first: more people cycling more often to work, school, the shops, to visit friends and family and all those other journeys that we take as part of day-to-day life.

Unfortunately, too few people in this country cycle regularly. The single greatest reason why British people, most of whom own bikes, do not cycle as part of their daily or weekly activities is fear for their safety. If the road culture and infrastructure were safer, more people would cycle. So we need to normalise cycling, as many of our competitor countries have done, as a safe and convenient activity for people of all ages and abilities, with all the health, environmental, economic and quality of life benefits that that would yield. We can do that only if the Government focus on the safety of those who are on bikes and on foot.

I want to express my concern at the Government's announcement of a new review specifically of cycling offences in 2017 in response to one admittedly awful case involving a pedestrian killed in a collision with Charlie Alliston, who was illegally riding a fixed-wheel bike, which illegally lacked a front brake, on the road. I believe a much wider overhaul of our laws is needed, as promised by Ministers more than four years ago.

I shall focus on the key issues that reflect the five main headings of the "safe systems" approach adopted in the Government's road safety statement. On safer roads and junctions, we were promised new standards for cycle-friendly planning so that they consistently applied in all new roads and traffic schemes, new developments and planned highway maintenance works. It cannot be right that new housing estates are built in this country with not only no segregated cycle paths, but sometimes no footways, either. The Government should show leadership in all new developments, housing schemes, rail infrastructure and major roads, as well as leading on retrofitting our existing urban and rural infrastructure.

We need work in every town and city so that we can all be served with a safe network of segregated cycle routes on main roads, safe quietways on minor roads, and safe accessible places to lock or store cycles, and that needs a shift of some—not a lot, proportionately—of transport capital funding. The earmarked UK Government spending for cycling and walking in 2019-20 will decline to just 37p per person: just a fraction of the £10 per head called for by my group, the all-party parliamentary group on cycling, in our 2013 "Get Britain Cycling" report and by the Transport Committee's own 2014 report on cycle safety.

We ask that the Government adopt continental-style rules to give greater safety and priority to pedestrians and cyclists at junctions, as promoted by British Cycling's "Turning the Corner" campaign. This is based on the

principle that drivers turning at a junction give way to pedestrians and cyclists travelling straight ahead across their path. We hope that that will be incorporated into The Highway Code.

We need to build a nation of safer drivers. It goes without saying that all road users should respect the rules of the road and the safety of others, which means a combination of education and enforcement, as other speakers have said today. We need better driver awareness of cycle safety, including new and consistent advice in The Highway Code, to be reinforced through public awareness campaigns. We need to strengthen roads policing and the capacity to enforce. We need to review traffic laws and penalties to clarify, for instance, the distinction between careless and dangerous offences. We need to make use of driving bans, reducing the ability of convicted drivers to evade such bans, and we need tougher penalties overall.

We must invest in cycle training for children and adults to give them more confidence in cycling on the roads. Provision is currently a postcode lottery. Such training also leads to safe driving behaviour for those who have experienced it. After all, HGV drivers regularly include cycle training as part of their driving training. I had hoped to mention more of the recommendations today, but time is short. We look forward to working with the Minister on the recommendations.

3.18 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this important debate on an issue that clearly and obviously has much cross-party support and interest. I want to speak today on behalf of my constituents, the Smith family from Llandeudaw, who tragically lost their daughter Rhiannon, aged just 21, in a road collision last year. I want to pay tribute to them for the way in which they have bravely and relentlessly campaigned ever since for measures to make our roads safer, to prevent such events from happening to other families.

Alongside their work on local road safety issues, the family established the Rhiannon Jade Smith Memorial Trust, which held its first Welsh road safety conference last month at the Celtic Manor in Newport. It was extremely well attended and covered a large range of road safety issues, many of which were touched on today. Experts who attended included Rod King, from the “20’s Plenty For Us” campaign, which advocates the potential benefits of default 20 mph speed limits in urban and residential areas, except where it makes sense to retain 30 mph speed limits. My Welsh Assembly colleague, John Griffiths, is campaigning on that with the Welsh Government, and it was the subject of a recent debate.

Gwent police Chief Inspector Martyn Smith, who is responsible for our roads policing, and police and crime commissioner Jeff Cuthbert, spoke about how they are tackling alcohol and drug driving as well as those who use their phones behind the wheel. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) that cuts to police and traffic officers make their job far more difficult, and that that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. We also heard from Sarah Jones, of Public Health Wales, who talked in favour of graduated driving licences. Those are obviously targeted at younger drivers and they exist in other

countries. She is a passionate advocate of them. It would be interesting to hear the Minister’s views on both the 20 mph campaign and graduated driving licences.

We talked about the need for a dedicated road collision investigation branch, similar to those that investigate rail, maritime and air accidents, which would look at road accident data, analyse incidents and spot any trends, to identify solutions. I know that the Smith family would like me to raise that specifically with the Minister today. Obviously, it would not replace the work of the coroners and police, but it would work on top of that, to analyse trends, and would have the potential to save more lives.

I was pleased to see the Government’s announcement in the summer of a dedicated branch run by the RAC Foundation as a pilot. I look forward to hearing the results so far from the Minister, so that that approach can grow. Countries such as Sweden have used it effectively for many years, and it would be interesting to see how far the Government have got. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse, I think targets are important; it is time that the Department for Transport thought again about the national road safety targets, which were scrapped in 2010.

I draw the Minister’s attention to the suggestion for an all-Wales fatal collision review board, which South Wales police are working on. They have proposed a model similar to the national road collision investigation unit, where a board of experts would meet regularly to discuss categories of drivers or road users who are particularly high-risk and review fatal collisions to consider trends. All kinds of bodies and partners could be included. It would be good if the Minister looked at that, and specifically at cross-border working with the Welsh Government. It is important to learn road safety lessons wherever we can.

We are clearly not making the progress on road safety and fatalities that we should expect as a nation. The Government’s projections show an increase in local traffic of up to 50% by 2040, so clearly we must do more and collaborate better to make roads safer.

3.23 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this debate, whose importance is self-evident, given the Members attending it.

Having served for 31 years in the fire service, and sadly over that time having attended many needless and avoidable road traffic crashes, I believe that the importance of road safety in all its forms throughout the UK must never be underestimated. Many of the events in question ended with fatalities or life-changing injuries. As we have heard today, the impact extends to the families of the individuals, and that must be considered. The needless loss of a loved one in a road traffic crash can be continually devastating.

Before the emergency services arrive at an incident, many people find they are trapped in not only a crushed motor vehicle but a twilight world between life and death. It is often wet, miserable, cold and bleak. In a rural area it might be in an insecure and isolated place. I, and many others in the fire, police and ambulance services, have on many occasions had the privilege

[*Bill Grant*]

simply of holding someone's hand, squeezing it gently and speaking to them quietly, making the promise—not knowing whether it can be kept—“We'll soon have you out of here,” while mentally formulating a plan to achieve that important goal.

In those 30-plus years, I have seen many improvements to vehicles and, indeed, to legislation—I commend manufacturers for improvements such as airbags, crumple zones, improved braking systems, side impact systems and so on. Many people owe their lives to those developments. Legislators can be proud of introducing the compulsory wearing of seatbelts, and of crash helmets for motorcyclists. I take the point that has been eloquently made that we should perhaps be on the journey towards the compulsory wearing of head safety gear by cyclists on the streets today. Not least of all such measures is the breathalyser, although it is sad to note that, despite it, the relevant statistics are rising. That is shameful and disgraceful.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South ably emphasised the importance of the recent report on developing safe system road safety indicators. I do not intend to repeat what was said, but in the report, PACTS raises the importance of securing statistics in the form of eight key performance indicators. I, for one, would welcome those KPIs on road safety, but with the proviso that they should be used wisely and actively by roads authorities, police, policy makers and other stakeholders. That might include the Chancellor, with respect to investment.

The intention should be to reduce road traffic crashes. Statistics tell us that currently 71 deaths or serious injuries occur every day in the UK. That must be unacceptable. There is no value in gathering useful data and not putting it to use. All of us present in the Chamber are concerned about the fact that the trend for improvement in road traffic fatalities and serious injuries has in recent years ceased. The improvement has plateaued and bottomed out: the figures for 2017 show another year of no improvement with respect to the reduction in deaths and serious injuries on the UK's roads. It is not good enough.

We need to ensure that the driving test keeps up with new developments. I hope that I will not be misunderstood, as it is not always a matter of young drivers—some people do pass their test when they are older, and there are mature gentlemen like me who cause road accidents. Aspects of the test might be how to cope with driverless vehicles, which will soon be on the roads and could be encountered in the not-too-distant future. Drivers and riders should be encouraged proactively and continually to self-assess their abilities to drive in a safe manner. Should they be driving? People need to be safe to drive. That is especially relevant when people are affected by illnesses notifiable to the DVLA.

It may be hard when someone reaches my time in life to give up what they have done for 40 or 50 years or more, but perhaps it is wise to give it some thought, or seek serious advice about whether they should do it. There is a balance between the young and the old. Educating drivers on managing everyday tiredness and fatigue is an enormous factor in accident prevention. It will be interesting to assess the data gathered on that, if the PACTS recommendations are brought forward.

I would be pleased if the PACTS recommendations on statistics gathering were introduced. However, in tandem with gathering data for future years, we must endeavour to secure improvements across the field of road safety year on year. I am encouraged by the work that various agencies and Governments undertake to arrest the increase in fatalities and serious accidents.

We recognise that things are not working as they should at the moment. I know a great deal is being done, but further improvements will be achieved through education of individuals as much as improvements to the environment in which they drive—something that has been mentioned before. There is recognition that improvement is needed in some of those areas. I welcome the KPIs. I think that they will be a good step, and I hope that the Minister will consider introducing them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. I need to call the first Front-Bench speaker at 3.33 pm.

3.28 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on initiating the debate. I want to raise an issue that is rarely discussed in the context of road safety—driver eyesight. My interest—indeed, my passion—about the issue arises from a terrible incident in my constituency two years ago. Poppy-Arabella Clarke—three years old, a delightful girl and the apple of her mum's and dad's eye—was crossing the Chester Road with her mother, Rachel. She was run down by a driver who was 72, and who had been told twice in the previous three weeks that he should never drive again, although he continued to do so. The family are devastated to this day.

We need a common-sense approach towards this—indeed, on other issues we have had such common-sense engagement with the Government. Five years ago Avril Child's two daughters, who were in their early 20s, were crossing the Walsall Road. They got hit by a driver who was doing 64 miles an hour, and Sarah died. Bizarrely, the individual who was behind the wheel got four years in jail and a four-year driving ban, and he started serving the driving ban on day one of being in jail. We engaged with the then Justice Minister, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), and the law was changed so that such bans will now run consecutively. In a similar vein, I hope that the Government will approach with common sense the issue of what needs to be done about driver eyesight.

I wish to make three points. First, as things stand, when we take a driving test we have to read a number plate from 20 metres. That is a lamentably poor measure of visual acuity, so why not improve it? The original number plate test dates back 80 years to 1937. It is a comparatively weak test, and across Europe there is a much more robust approach. Of 29 countries assessed by the European Council of Optometry and Optics, the UK was one of only five that required just a licence plate test. Furthermore, in 22 of the 29 countries assessed, a doctor or ophthalmologist is required to carry out an eye test, yet in the UK, only the driving instructor conducts the test on the day. Evidence from Brake

suggests that the public would support such a measure, and polling shows that 67% of the general public believe that the system should change.

There is also a case for the introduction of regular eyesight tests during our driving lives, because at no point do most drivers ever have to take an eye test. Again, if we consider the European experience we see that some countries such as Hungary and Finland require an eye test from drivers in their 40s, and a further 13 countries require an eye test at 70, 75 or 80. We know from evidence provided by Brake and data from Direct Line that British drivers are not getting their eyes tested on a regular basis. Indeed, 12% of drivers never get their eyes tested, and 16% of drivers have had an accident in the past two years. For those who have problems with their eyesight, the figure for those involved in an accident increases to 67%. There is a strong case for us to do something in the United Kingdom, as has happened in many countries throughout Europe.

There is also the question of older drivers. Under UK law, once someone reaches 70 they must renew their driving licence, but they self-certify that they are fit to drive. There is no requirement for a medical—people just fill out a form and stay on the road. According to evidence from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, there are 4.5 million drivers over 70, and 100,000 over 90. The overwhelming majority of those people drive safely—indeed, statistically the big problem is not older drivers; it is young men. Having said that, there has been rapid growth in the number of older drivers, and as we live longer the number of drivers over 70 and over 90 increases—there are 3,700 drivers over 90 in the west midlands alone.

In conclusion, we hope that the Government will consider a range of measures, including a mandatory obligation for an ophthalmologist or doctor to report to the DVLA anyone they examine who cannot drive safely. It is somewhat surprising that the road safety strategy does not refer to eye testing, and I hope that the Minister will agree that these are real issues. We have already engaged with the Minister and had constructive discussions, and I hope that the Government will be prepared to take the necessary action, because never again should we have a tragedy such as the one that befell Poppy-Arabella Clarke.

3.34 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this important and, as it turns out, wide-ranging debate. It is my duty to sum up the debate, and I hope hon. Members will forgive me if I miss any salient points. I shall start with the previous speaker, because I felt that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) was directing his remarks at me, although I will try not to take it too personally. I recently had an eye operation, and at the moment I have a self-imposed ban on driving, even though I have been reliably informed by my consultant that I am fit to drive. The hon. Gentleman's points were well made.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South introduced the debate with a wide-ranging discussion that covered traumatic tales of accidents, as well as the need for us to

use data properly, to data-mine why accidents happen, and to use that information to further road safety. I do not think that anyone disagrees with him. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) wants us to think about road safety, and to consider 20 mph zones as well as looking at the reduction in the number of traffic police that has led to other accidents. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) commended his local police and road safety people on their "Safe Drive Stay Alive" campaign. He touched us all when he spoke about foreign drivers and how there is no way to enforce the bans imposed by Scottish sheriffs. That is a tragedy.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) spoke about local speeding issues and data from local cameras. I cannot go into the technicalities of English law, but anything that helps to increase road safety should be used, and it is the duty of all Members of the House to ensure that roads in their constituencies are as safe as possible. The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) spoke about country roads and made an important point about the A30. I will try to get through my remarks quickly, because there is a lot for the Minister to answer.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave a comprehensive overview of road safety in Northern Ireland, and he spoke about the education of young drivers and how graphic illustrations really help. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) is a real advocate for cycling and walking. She may be surprised to hear that until recently I cycled frequently, but I take on board her views that most people do not cycle because of road safety issues. I only ever cycled on cycle paths, and I thank Sustrans for its work in Scotland and for the number of cycle paths that pass by beautiful places.

It is important to consider amending The Highway Code—that returns to the point about education because we must ensure that people understand those amendments. The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) eloquently paid tribute to the Smith family in her constituency and the trust that they have set up. The investigation of such road accidents can only help to improve the lives of people in her constituency and across the UK.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) spoke about his more than 30 years' service in the fire and rescue service, and about the devastation caused by accidents. People who are trapped often require a simple hand hold, which is an immensely powerful thing. I thank him for his service. As he said, the improvements made to motor vehicles by manufacturers are important, but, as we know, vehicles are driven by people and education is the most important thing. The hon. Gentleman mentioned seatbelts, crash helmets and so on, as well as breathalysers. Drink-driving is still rising in the UK, but I am glad that things are improving in Scotland, because of the actions of the Scottish Government. I think those were all the Members who spoke, so I will briefly do some quick headlines.

I want the Minister to consider the Scottish Government examples that I will give him. Scotland's road safety framework to 2020 has produced really good results, with cuts in the numbers of accidents. Things that the Scottish Government have done include cutting the blood alcohol limit, and we must take on board the fact

[*Marion Fellows*]

that the limit has been reduced from 80 mg to 50 mg, which is lower than for the rest of the UK. We really must look at, and I would like the Minister to think about, the 7.6% reduction in drink-driving as a result of that.

The Scottish Government are also looking at drug-driving limits—I commend that idea to the Minister—and they are going to introduce roadside testing. They have considered where they can make prosecutions for different types of drug, specifying the limit for each and testing against that. Importantly, they also want to ensure that it is not just people who are driving in an impaired manner—zig-zagging across the road—who can be stopped by the police.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. I did not want to interrupt the hon. Lady, but she has gone past her allotted five minutes. If we are to hear from the Minister—

Marion Fellows: I did not realise I had five minutes to sum up—my apologies, Mrs Moon.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): My apologies for interrupting.

3.41 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for securing this important and timely debate. He is clearly very committed to making roads safer in his constituency and he speaks with great knowledge of the subject.

The Government recently published their 2017 figures for reported road casualties in Great Britain, after a lengthy delay. Although there are some positives in that latest statistical release, there is also cause for concern. The Minister told me earlier this year that the picture was mixed, and it remains so. We have heard from hon. Members on both sides of the House about this country's proud record. We have some of the safest roads in the world. In fact, we have the fourth lowest number of road deaths per million inhabitants, behind Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. However, we must never think that that means the job is done, while thousands of families each year are still traumatised by the tragedy of losing a loved one in what are so often avoidable circumstances.

Last year, as we have heard, 1,793 people were killed on Britain's roads. That is an average of five every day, and more than 10 times that number suffered serious injuries, many of which were life-changing. The Government talk a good game about road safety being a top priority, but their legacy so far is one of disappointment and frustration, and the latest Department for Transport figures reaffirm that. Since 2010, progress has well and truly stalled. Another year of stats has been published and we are no further forward.

I pay tribute to the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety and Ageas for publishing their important report on safe system and road safety indicators

earlier this month, and the Government need to sit up and take notice of that. Many stakeholders are calling on the Government to adopt road safety performance indicators. The Government scrapped road targets that successfully reduced the number of people killed or seriously injured by a third under the Labour Government. The Government say that targets do not achieve anything, but I disagree. They focus minds and attention, and hold the Government to account. Currently, there are no targets with which to assess progress. The Government set themselves targets to meet in pretty much every other area of policy, but not for reducing road deaths and injuries. Why is that the case?

We have heard about the safer road fund, and we welcomed that targeted approach to enabling local authorities to improve the most dangerous stretches of A road in England. The fund initially totalled £175 million, of which £100 million is currently invested. However, the other £75 million that was originally allocated has, according to the Minister, "not been required". Will he clarify what that is about? We saw this morning that the RAC Foundation and the Road Safety Foundation have published a report on the possible benefits of the safer road fund, which estimates that the fund could prevent almost 1,450 deaths and serious injuries over the next two decades on the riskiest A roads of England. We are crying out for investment in road safety, so why is that money not being spent and where is it being reallocated to?

We are also concerned about enforcement. Traffic officers have seen a 24% fall in their numbers since 2012—a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). In 2010, there were 3,500 police officers patrolling the UK's roads, but by 2017 the figure had fallen to 2,600. It seems that cuts to our vital services are putting safety at risk.

The latest road safety figures show that there has been an increase in the number of pedestrian and motorcyclist fatalities as well. The number of cyclists killed has remained broadly constant since 2010: why has progress stalled in that area as well? I would be grateful if, in the time he has available, the Minister could answer some of the points raised by the Front-Bench spokespeople as well as by hon. Members on both sides of the House.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I thank you, Mrs Moon, and I thank all colleagues across the House for the very interesting and wide-ranging debate this afternoon.

Far from not being held to account, I think this is the third road safety debate I have done in recent months, and it speaks to the vigour of our democracy that Ministers can be held to account on this important issue. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) who has done excellent work on the Transport Committee. He knows from that, and from his work before entering Parliament, that this country has what was described by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner)—perhaps I should not refer to him as my hon. Friend, but he is—as a "proud record" in road safety improvements, and that is rightly recognised.

An interesting example is a case I have officials looking at, which is the recent concerns about seatbelts and the proportion of accidents in which failure to wear a seatbelt has been a contributing cause. That has rightly been touched on in the debate. It is sometimes important to remember that seatbelt use is observed by 98.2% of car drivers in England and Scotland, which is one small indication of how attitudes and practices have changed over time. Although the number of fatalities has levelled out recently, as has been said, we should be very proud that that number fell over a consistent period and is significantly lower now than it was even 10 years ago. However, it is important to say that I recognise, as do the Government, the billions of pounds in economic costs alone of road casualties, and that is not to say anything of the human costs. Three dreadful stories of death on our roads have been mentioned in the debate, and I hope to have the chance to touch on those.

If I may, I will briefly rehearse the current state of play from the Government's standpoint and then come to the many interesting questions that colleagues have raised. As colleagues will know, in 2015 my predecessor announced an overarching strategy known as the road safety statement, and I think the evidence is clear that we have made very good headway in many areas. However, we absolutely recognise that there is more work to do. I am glad that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East has mentioned the RAC Foundation's report into the effect of the investment that was made in safer roads.

That £100 million was bid for by 50 local authorities, and it was allocated to them. I am sure we will return to that subject over time, but it is worth saying that as the report shows, that money is projected to have a very positive effect on reducing casualties and deaths, and—purely in economic terms—a high cost-benefit ratio, as one might expect. That in itself is worth mentioning.

However, as an indication that the Government are not in any sense letting the grass grow under our feet, we announced in June a two-year action plan to address four specific priority groups within the overall road safety statement, as part of a refresh of that statement. The first group is motorcyclists, and the second is rural road users, who have been mentioned; I think the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) rightly picked up the issue of rural roads. The third group is older and more vulnerable users—the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) mentioned elderly drivers and the effects posed by them—and the fourth is young road users, who are disproportionately implicated in killed and seriously injured statistics.

We are also trialling many new and different approaches to try to get at the root of what is clearly a hard problem. That is why earlier this year, the Prime Minister announced a £480,000 partnership between the police and the RAC Foundation to trial the new approach to investigating road collisions, along the lines of the road collision investigation branch mentioned by the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). It is also important to note the £350,000 competition run by PACTS to provide police forces with the next generation of mobile breathalyser equipment. If that is being adopted in Scotland as well, we can be delighted, because that is a source of improvement.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) suggested that somehow, the Government were only targeting cyclists with our latest announcement about the review of cycling road offences. First of all, that is clearly not true, although there are specific concerns about potential risks and harm posed by cyclists, which Laura Thomas mentioned in her report and have existed among the judiciary and the legal fraternity for a long time. That harm is not large in numerical terms—it is very small compared to the number of cyclists killed by drivers—but it is undoubtedly worth noting as we evolve a wider ecology of road use. We have taken measures to address drivers specifically, including doubling the penalty for the use of mobile phones to six points and a £200 fine, and targeting drink and drug driving. Drug driving is a particular menace, killing some 200 people a year, and we have targeted it through a new regime of roadside swab testing, which has proven to be a fast and efficient means of identifying drug drivers.

Of course, some things are best handled not just through regulation, but through other, softer interventions. I was pleased to note that the national speed awareness course is having a real effect, and is more effective at reducing speed re-offending than fines and penalty points, according to a recent evaluation over a period of three years following the initial offer to attend. The Government are also thinking about interventions to support new drivers. A range of measures is being trialled, but legislation is now in force that allows learners on to motorways when accompanied by an approved driving instructor, so they do not have that cliff-edge experience of going from driving on local roads to driving on fast-flowing motorways.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South rightly mentioned the safer roads fund. He will be aware that in Shropshire, not far from his constituency, there is the A529 between Hinstock and Market Drayton, which has the unhappy accolade of being the most dangerous road in that part of the UK, according to analysis carried out by the Road Safety Foundation in 2014. That is just one of the areas that has been targeted with nearly £4 million through the fund. Of course, Stoke-on-Trent City Council should be congratulated on the work it has been doing on investing in road and pavement maintenance, re-allocating bus lanes, upgrading traffic signals, and the like.

I mentioned that the two-year action plan focuses in particular on young people, rural road users, motorcyclists, and older people—not just the damage that older people might do to themselves, but the hazard they pose to others. It was my very unhappy duty to meet with the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington, and the Clarke family to discuss the awful situation of Poppy-Arabella. I remember it extremely well, and I hope that Rachel and Phil were glad of the opportunity to talk about their situation and the experience that they had. It is important to say that optometrists already have a duty of care to check eyesight, and at the moment there is not any evidence that a compulsory, formal duty to assess eyesight would have a marked positive effect. However, that is one of the things that we are trying to cover—if not directly now, then as part of a future flow of work—through the two-year action plan.

The issue of cyclists was mentioned by the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth. She will understand that a formal response to the safety review consultation

[Jesse Norman]

is coming, and a formal action plan, I hope, will follow later in the year. There is some further work to be done on road safety that I hope to announce before too long, so there is a pattern of things under way. I cannot always anticipate things that are going to be made public in formal statements after proper agreement across Government, but she recognises—as does my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South—that there must be, and is, a hierarchy of road use, and that cars do enormous damage to vulnerable road users of every kind, not just cyclists. That is the fitting counterpart to the work we have been doing through the Thomas report, and of course, the killed and seriously injured statistics show that cars are much more dangerous. The Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy safety review has had an enormous response. Something like 13,000 responses have been received; a lot have come through formal write-in programmes, but many have come from ordinary cyclists and members of the public, and rightly so. One of the things that has come out of that, on which the Government have done a lot of work, has been the work of the West Midlands police on close passing. We have already announced some further work on that, and I expect that to continue.

The PACTS report is the original instigator of some of this debate. I congratulate PACTS on the work it has have done, and I thank Ageas for its work as well. I welcome the work on the indicators that are being used. The Government are already very engaged with what might be considered the “safe systems” approach. We have thought about that in the context of cycling and walking, but we are trying to balance that with specific evidence of places where one needs to be able to address actual harm inflicted. The response cannot just be about predictive anticipation of where there may be collisions. It also has to be about showing a local community that a collision has been addressed; an accident has met with a response; and a concern has in some sense been understood, recognised and salved, if not solved. It is important to recognise that we adopt that approach within Government, and we do so seriously.

I have constantly gone round the houses on the issue of targets with my great friend the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)—a brilliant

fireman and, I have no doubt, a great campaigner in this area—and with others. As the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East mentioned, there are countries with targets that have better safety records than ours, but there are also countries with targets that do not have better safety records than ours. The matter is not absolutely clear by any means, and we will continue to discuss it over time.

On 20-mile-an-hour zones, I remind colleagues that local authorities are fully free to use a range of traffic-calming measures, including all-day limits or partial limits. I am very sympathetic to my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) regarding the situation of Mrs Billett, as he will know. We have all kinds of flags at ports, and we have bollards and interventions on roads, but he is absolutely right to flag that issue. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) is absolutely right to pick up the point about agricultural vehicles, and I will be writing to him separately on the topic of the A30. RIS 2 will be announced in the middle of next year.

I had better sit down. Mrs Moon, you have been a brilliant Chair. Thank you so much.

3.59 pm

Jack Brereton: I thank all Members who have contributed to this wide-ranging and interesting debate, and I am particularly grateful for the heartfelt speeches that some colleagues have made. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) will notice, I now wear glasses. I have recently had my eyes checked, and I did not wear glasses previously, but I do now. I am sure that he will be happy to know that my eyesight is now much better.

I thank the Minister for his comprehensive remarks on a number of the points that were raised throughout the debate. I hope the debate has raised awareness, and I particularly thank Ageas and PACTS for the work they have done. I also remind Members of the report produced by the Road Safety Foundation, which is due to be released on 30 October.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered road safety.

Housing and Home Ownership

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered housing and home ownership.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I recently published an 80-page report for the think-tank Onward. Members will be relieved to hear that I do not intend to read it out today, but I want to talk about some of the themes in it.

This is a short debate, so I want to ask the Minister just two questions. First, will he update us on his thoughts about how we can increase home ownership by rebalancing things between the private rented sector and home ownership? Building more homes is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of reversing the decline in home ownership. Over the past decade, the private sector has built about 165,000 extra houses every year, but home ownership fell because the private rented sector has expanded by 195,000 homes every year. Multiple property ownership has been squeezing out home ownership for individuals. Private landlords are not doing anything wrong, but we have to ask ourselves as a country whether we want so much of our housing stock to flow into renting, rather than owning.

To rebalance things back towards ownership, we could do a number of things. We could introduce a capital gains tax break for those who want to sell their rented property to their existing tenants. For future rented properties, we could change the tax treatment to encourage people to put their investments into stocks, shares and businesses, rather than just into bidding up the price of housing. Rebalancing in that way could make a big difference. To give a sense of the magnitude, I should say that if we had kept the ratio of privately owned to privately rented homes the same between 2000 and 2015, 2.2 million more homes would be in ownership. That would make a huge difference—at least as big a difference as we could make by increasing the rate at which we build homes.

We know that tax can be effective. The changes brought in by the then Chancellor in 2015 saw the first substantial increase in home ownership for a decade in the following year. I hope that the Minister and his colleagues at the Treasury are thinking about ownership. If we only think about the supply side of the market in challenging the housing problem, we are effectively fighting with one hand tied behind our backs.

The second thing I would like the Minister to update us on is his and the Government's overall vision for what, where and how we build. The ultimate constraint on how much we build is public consent. If we want to build more, we need to tackle the underlying reasons why people oppose so much of what is built today. For me, there are three underlying reasons. First, too often we build in the wrong places and we lose the green spaces that people value the most. Secondly, we build without the required infrastructure. Thirdly, there are too few benefits for existing residents.

How can we solve those problems? That requires different things in different places. It means building more in the centres of our great cities—densifying them

and regenerating more land. Outside our cities, it means more stand-alone, planned new communities and fewer tacked-on developments stuck on the edges of all our existing villages and towns. Everywhere, it means sharing more of the benefits of development with existing residents so that they can see those benefits.

Let me unpack that a little bit. There is lots of room in our great cities for growth. Glasgow, Newcastle, Liverpool, Middlesbrough, Sunderland, Hull and Dundee all had a smaller population in 2016 than they did in 1981. Other cities such as Manchester and Birmingham were only about 6% bigger. There is lots of room to grow in our great cities, and there are lots of reasons to densify the centres of those cities: it is greener; it means less congestion; it means more people walk to work, which in turn is healthier; and infrastructure costs are lower. There are lots of ways to make it happen. To put ideas in the Minister's head, we could change objectively assessed need to favour inner-city development, to take into account the potential for cities to densify. We could further liberalise building upwards and amend change of use to allow empty shops to be turned into homes.

We could devolve further powers over transport beyond the mayoral combined authority areas. Mayoral authorities such as in London have powers over public transport and the buses. That means they could have denser development, because they can ensure good public transport to it. We could review sightlines in London and build upwards. We could do what the think-tank Create Streets recommends and review regulations so that we can once again build those tall, dense terraces that are so beloved by the population. We can do a lot more in our cities, but we will continue to want to build outside our cities, including in rural areas.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the House. His suggestions are good. Does he think that housing provision for people with disabilities should be improved as well? At a sitting of the Select Committee of which I am a member last week, I argued that the Government should implement approved document M4(2). It sounds a bit wordy, but that is about making new homes accessible and adaptable by default. Does he agree with doing that? That measure includes provisions for a wheelchair standard for new homes.

Neil O'Brien: The hon. Lady has a very interesting idea, but I am not familiar with that measure. I will have to go away and look at it.

Outside of the cities, we generally build right up to existing developments. I see that in my constituency.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and bringing this crucial debate to the House. Does he agree that unless we radically reform our local planning system, we will never get the planning applications through and the houses built that we need? We need to build in huge numbers—more than the Government are proposing at the moment.

Neil O'Brien: I utterly agree; I was about to make that very point. At the moment, we infill bits on the edges of every village and town. We are effectively building in the places that annoy people the most, so we

[Neil O'Brien]

do not build enough homes, as my hon. Friend said. When we do that, we cannot keep up with the infrastructure needs of these places, because it is physically impossible. Perhaps the primary school is on too small a plot or we cannot widen a road that has become a rat run because there is not enough money to meet infrastructure needs.

Previously, we did things very differently. There was the new towns programme: those new towns now house more than 2 million people very successfully. They are fast-growing places. Mrs Thatcher created docklands in London and Liverpool, and the model was roughly the same for both. A development corporation would buy land cheap at existing low values. It would assemble the land, install the infrastructure and sell on that land for uplifted values, therefore paying for itself. That model has been used successfully all over the world.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend who, as ever, is making a very persuasive case. His Onwards report is very good, and he is contributing to what I would call the battle of ideas. He mentioned Margaret Thatcher, who was at the forefront of that. The Centre for Policy Studies published a paper on “help to own” on Monday. We want to be in this space to address some of the big challenges we are facing on planning, taxation and infrastructure, but we also need to try to persuade other parts of the Government—including the Treasury and our dear colleague in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—to address some of the bigger issues of intergenerational fairness. A whole generation is locked out of home ownership, and we want to help them get back on the ladder so that we can become that property-owning democracy again.

Neil O'Brien: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely profound and important point.

A lot of councils are now getting back into the business of building new places. They are being forced to, because if they do not want to mess up every village and town in their area, they need to build new stand-alone places. We need to ensure that they have the tools and expertise they need to make that work.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): My hon. Friend has brought a very important debate to the House. When we build around existing settlements, we tend to have inflated land values before things have even started. Having new settlements will allow us to capture some of that value to provide some of the infrastructure. Does he agree?

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I agree in the strongest possible terms, and will come to that point in a second.

Where there have been good new planned settlements, such as Poundbury or Nansledan, they have often been because of a visionary landowner in the area, but we cannot always rely on that. Sometimes, other good ideas have gone wrong because developers have wiggled out of their commitments or planners have failed to get control over the land. How do we make sure that we always build good new places? I would love to see Homes England become a supporting masterplanner

for local authorities. I would love us to build on the housing infrastructure fund, which is a brilliant initiative. I would love more central encouragement, which is already coming from the Minister, for good vernacular design.

As ever, the other thing we need is money. That brings me to the third of the reasons why people oppose development—because there is not enough benefit for existing residents. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) mentioned, when planning permission is granted, there is typically a big increase in the value of land, but too little of that flows to existing residents. The Centre for Progressive Policy estimates only about a quarter of the value goes to the local community.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned money. Many of the councillors in Northampton welcomed the lifting of the borrowing cap on the housing revenue account. Does he share my hope—this reflects the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel)—that that will be used for shared ownership or owned properties, as well as just for social housing?

Neil O'Brien: I do. That is perhaps for the Minister to answer rather than me, but I absolutely agree that it would be a good thing to do with the extra borrowing power.

How do we capture more of the benefit for the community? We could reform section 106 and the community infrastructure levy and take off the various limits that apply. We could create transparency by creating a register of all land options so that we know what people are paying for land and we stop viability being used as an excuse not to pay for vital infrastructure. We could change the national planning policy framework so that sites do not get put through the strategic housing land availability assessment unless they can pay for their own infrastructure. We could give local authorities the fiscal firepower to assemble land and be their own developers and masterplanners. We could reform land compensation and the Land Compensation Act 1961 to reverse the changes made by unelected judges in the 1970s. A group of organisations, including Shelter, Onward and the Campaign to Protect Rural England, recently came together to call for just that.

As well as more benefits for the local community generally, we also need to see more specific benefit for those most affected by development—those who are right next to it. What about offering cheap homes for sale to the neighbours of new construction sites? At the moment, there is too little other than disruption for the neighbours. In Farndon Fields in my constituency, a developer refused to route construction traffic through neighbouring fields and has instead insisted, using the viability argument, on forcing them down tiny suburban streets. My constituents now have to put up with huge HGVs going down these tiny streets where their children are playing, for several years. No wonder we oppose so much development, when it happens like that. No wonder we do not build enough homes. We have a system that seems geared to maximise opposition.

The only way to build more homes is to deal with the underlying reasons why we oppose so much development today. Those problems can be fixed, and I know our

new, energetic Minister is setting about fixing them with aplomb, but we need to think radically about the way we build and start a new conversation about the balance of renting and owning.

4.12 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): It is a pleasure to serve under your guiding hand, Mr Pritchard. It is a great pleasure to respond to this very important debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien). In his report, "Green, pleasant and affordable," he has presented a smorgasbord—a veritable cornucopia—of radical and interesting ideas. In the time I have available, I want to go through a number of the areas that the report covers, in particular supply and home ownership.

The first issue he quite rightly raises is that of getting the most out of land. In order to increase housing supply, we understand that local authorities need to be empowered to make the most effective use of the land that is present across all our towns and cities.

In its recent report on land value capture, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee made several recommendations for reform of compulsory purchase compensation. Its recommendations included restricting compensation by removing hope value from the assessment of the market value of land. The Government will publish their response to the Committee's report shortly. As I explained when I gave evidence to the Committee, we have very recently introduced wide-ranging reforms to make the compulsory purchase process clearer, fairer and faster for all. That includes changes to the Land Compensation Act 1961. We are keen to let those important reforms bed in. The revised national planning policy framework, to which my hon. Friend referred, encourages local authorities to make more proactive use of their extensive land assembly powers. We will keep the operation of the system under review.

We also recognise that the availability of sustainable infrastructure is important to support new housing. That is why we have introduced changes to the NPPF that will ensure that developers know what contributions they are expected to make towards affordable housing and essential infrastructure, that local communities are clear about the infrastructure and affordable housing, and that local authorities can hold them to account. The revised NPPF requires local authorities to set clearer policy requirements for infrastructure and affordable housing through plans, informed by more transparent viability assessments. It will also support local authorities to ensure that development meets the policy requirements set out in the local plan.

Fundamentally, what we are trying to do in the NPPF is to give clarity up front to developers and local communities about what will be expected, which will allow them to factor that into land value over time. My hon. Friend quite rightly expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of value that is captured from land. He is correct that often in a viability assessment, it is the community infrastructure component—the section 106 component—that gets squeezed. That is largely because the negotiation takes place after planning permission has been granted. We are trying to give more clarity up front through the planning system, so that developers know what the requirements are going

to be, whether that is infrastructure or affordable housing, and can factor that into the value that they pay for the land, so that fundamentally it is the land value that will get squeezed.

We have consulted on further reforms to developer contributions, including removing existing restrictions in certain circumstances that prevent local planning authorities pooling more than five section 106 planning obligations towards a single piece of infrastructure. We will be responding to that consultation in the near future as well.

Local authorities are also able to use the community infrastructure levy to help to fund the supporting infrastructure that is needed to address the cumulative impact of development. Where authorities have introduced CIL, 15% is specifically allocated to meet local priorities, and that is increased to 25% in areas with a neighbourhood plan in place. In an area that has a parish council, the money is passed directly to it. That neighbourhood allocation from CIL gives communities real power in deciding and delivering their infrastructure priorities for their area and will hopefully encourage the spread of neighbourhood planning.

In his report, my hon. Friend also considered the creation of new communities. We believe strongly that the creation of new garden communities can play a vital role in helping to meet this country's housing need well into the future. Our current programme supports 23 locally-led garden communities that have the potential to deliver more than 200,000 homes by 2050. They range in size from 1,500 to more than 40,000 new homes in one place. We have just launched a new garden communities prospectus, inviting ambitious proposals for new garden communities at scale. This is not just about getting the numbers up; it is about building quality, innovative places that people are happy to call home.

Priti Patel: The Minister has lit the blue touch paper in mentioning garden communities. He will know from my correspondence with his Department that one of those garden community proposals covers my constituency, and the Braintree district and Colchester borough. Can he provide any clarity on the conditional requirements that the Department is putting in place for the development of those schemes—where public funds are being used—to support the concept of garden communities?

Kit Malthouse: The primary requirement we have for garden communities is that they have strong local support and are supported by local democratically elected politicians. We would, for example, not countenance a proposal for a garden community that came forward against the wishes of the local authority or local authorities concerned. My right hon. Friend may have noticed—this points to an issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough raised about capacity and capability—that we recently changed the regulations so that we can have locally-led development corporations. They are brought together and approved by the Secretary of State, but under local initiatives and with local control, to try to deliver some of those communities more effectively. Local control, consent and engagement are key, in terms of both acceptability and development.

Another issue that has been raised is increasing density, which we believe is also important. We need to make sure that we make the most effective use of underutilised

[Kit Malthouse]

land. That is a crucial part of our focus. Higher density development and the development of brownfield land can play a significant role in increasing housing supply in urban locations, especially in areas that are well served by public transport and in town and city centre locations. The revised NPPF requires local planning authorities to be more proactive in identifying opportunities to make more effective use of land. That includes planning for higher densities in locations that are well served by public transport, and reallocating underutilised land to serve local development needs better.

I disagree slightly with my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough about the requirement to build towers to achieve density. In central London—a place that I know very well, having served there as a London Assembly member and councillor—some of the densest areas are in fact some of the most desirable, and they are low-rise. It is probably still the case that the densest part of central London is Cadogan Square. Towers do not necessarily deliver density, and they can often be intrusive. Our framework goes further by stating that local authorities should support the use of airspace above existing residential and commercial buildings to provide new homes, as my hon. Friend said. We recognise that there is more to be done, and that is why we have just announced that we will publish proposals for a national permitted development right to permit people to build upwards on existing buildings rather than just to build out.

Important in all of this is the need to diversify the market. We believe that to increase our housing supply we have to be innovative and boost the development sector to allow both large and small builders to flourish and to build the homes that our communities need. The Government fully recognise the important role that small and medium-sized house builders play in delivering much-needed housing in this country, and we are committed to ensuring that this support is in the right place. We have already put in place a number of initiatives to help SME house builders to grow and develop, including the home building fund, the housing growth fund and the housing delivery fund, as well as proposals to make it easier for SMEs to identify land.

We believe that that is a critical way to encourage innovation. The market has agglomerated into a small number of large players, which are perhaps not as innovative as they could be. If we can create a more vigorous market of people competing to build houses and competing for our custom, they are likely to be much more innovative in their method, supply and typography of housing, and they may well cater to different parts of the market and look at sites that larger builders might not.

Scott Mann: My hon. Friend is doing a cracking job, especially with his “more, better, faster” campaign on housing delivery. My point is about self-build—he has not mentioned it specifically, but I know that it is part of the Government’s strategy on delivery. Does he agree with the sentiment that there is no better help that we can give to an individual than to allocate them a plot and allow them to build their own home?

Kit Malthouse: I wholeheartedly agree on self-build, which I am very keen to encourage. Something like three out of every four houses in Austria are self-built

or custom-built. It holds enormous capacity for the future. I recommend that my hon. Friend go and visit a site called Graven Hill just outside Bicester, which is the largest self-build site in Europe and which will deliver about 1,400 self-build homes. It is quite something to see—an amazing array of different houses. There is a house that looks like a stealth bomber sitting next to a Swiss chalet, a Cotswold cottage and a flat-pack house from Poland. As I said on the fringes of conference, I think the site will be a conservation area in the future because of the effervescence of design that is taking place there. We are very keen to encourage self-build.

Finally, one of the big issues—

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kit Malthouse: Yes, I will give way.

Eddie Hughes: I was scared by my hon. Friend’s use of the word “finally” and thought that I might not have the opportunity to intervene before he finished. As an accidental landlord myself—I need to refer to my declaration of interest—I was intrigued by the report on a proposed “help to own” scheme published by the Centre for Policy Studies on Monday. I understand that the Minister has been sent a copy. The idea that landlords might be able to sell a property to a sitting tenant, and that there would be a capital gains tax break for both parties, seemed innovative and interesting. Does he have any thoughts on that?

Kit Malthouse: By sheer coincidence, on my accession to the chrysanthemum throne in housing, I raised a similar possibility, should we look at some way of transferring from landlord to tenant in the future. Those issues of tax, stamp duty and ownership are way above my pay grade, but I have no doubt that the report will have winged its way to the Treasury, where our colleagues will be considering its efficacy. I can see why it might be attractive from a landlord transfer to ownership point of view, although we would have to study its fiscal effects to see what the cost might be.

Priti Patel: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kit Malthouse: I will make a bit of progress. I want to address the issue of home ownership, because it is fundamental to the report and it is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough quite rightly said, one of the most important challenges of our time. As he mentioned, we must find ways to improve home ownership. Rising demand for housing has increased prices and in many cases pushed down home ownership. The Government believe that people should be free to purchase a second home or invest in a buy-to-let property. However, we are aware that that can make it difficult for other people, particularly first-time buyers, to get on the property ladder. That is why in April 2016 the Government introduced higher rates of stamp duty land tax on purchases of additional properties.

Since the council tax empty homes premium was introduced in April 2013, the number of long-term empty residential properties has fallen. When it is in force, the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill will allow

councils to go further, increasing the premium by up to 300% in some cases. That will allow authorities to encourage better use of the existing housing stock in their area. As the Prime Minister announced, the Government are also taking action on non-resident purchases of residential property, which can make it more difficult for UK residents to purchase a home of their own. The Government will publish a consultation on introducing an increased stamp duty land tax charge on non-residents buying property in England and Northern Ireland. More details will be brought forward through that consultation in due course, following the normal tax policy-making process set out by the Government—the legislation will be in a future Finance Bill.

We must also support our younger generation, who find it increasingly hard to get on to the property ladder. We are supporting people's aspirations to buy through a range of initiatives, including Help to Buy, right to buy, greater funding for shared ownership, and rent to buy. Since the spring of 2010, Government-backed schemes have helped more than 481,000 households to buy a home. Younger people are also helped directly by our investment in affordable housing. The Government are investing more than £9 billion in the affordable homes programme to deliver a wide range of affordable homes, including shared ownership homes, by 2022. Since 2010, we have delivered more than 60,000 shared ownership properties, helping people to take their first steps into home ownership. Our recent Green Paper, "A new deal for social housing", announced that we would be exploring innovative, affordable home ownership models to support those who are struggling to raise a deposit.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that this should be a country that works for everyone. That means building more of the right homes in the right places and ensuring that the housing market works for all parts of our community. It is this Government's mission to reverse the decline in home ownership and to revive the dream of Britain as a property-owning democracy. We must revive that dream for ordinary people—for those striving on low and middle incomes, who find the first rung of the housing ladder beyond their reach. The Government are committed to tackling this challenge to make the housing market work. By the mid-2020s, we aim to have increased house building to an average of 300,000 net new homes a year.

On planning permissions, which my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) mentioned, we are now granting more than 350,000 permissions a year against a building target of 300,000 houses. That is another challenge that I face. In the time that I have in this job, I am always open to ideas. I certainly welcome the radical thinking that my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough and his collaborators on the paper have injected into the debate. I will be studying the paper in some detail and I hope to weave some of his thinking into our policies in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

4.28 pm

Sitting suspended.

Closures of RAF Scampton and RAF Linton-on-Ouse

4.30 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the closures of RAF Scampton and RAF Linton-on-Ouse.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am pleased to lead this debate on a vital national and local issue—the closures of RAF Scampton and RAF Linton-on-Ouse. I will focus on Scampton, as its closure has a major impact on my constituency, but other hon. Members may wish to give a more informed assessment of the closure of RAF Linton. I apologise in advance that I will not take too many interventions, but I have quite a lot to raise before I open the debate to other hon. Members.

I am pleased to say that I have a huge amount of local support in opposing Scampton's closure. I have the backing of the Historic Lincoln Trust, which is chaired by Lord Cormack, and I have collected more than 5,000 signatures for my petition opposing the closure. Other local groups have collected signatures on petitions, and added to the signatures I have collected, that amounts to a huge public outcry against the decision.

There is a lot of local anger in Lincoln at the Ministry of Defence's decision. There is real concern about the future of the Red Arrows in Lincolnshire and the potential loss of many local jobs. Since the decision, I have campaigned rigorously and gathered local momentum against it. This is one of the best-supported campaigns I have ever been involved in. People have signed my petition, regardless of their age or political persuasion. Never before have I had members of the public queuing down the high street to sign a petition about which they feel such passion. So far, it has reached 5,000 signatures. We are calling, first, for the Red Arrows to stay in Lincolnshire—that is an absolute must—secondly, for the rationale behind the closure and the impact it will have on the UK's defences to be made public, which I have tried to do; thirdly, for a thorough consultation to be undertaken with all local and national stakeholders; and, finally, for a full impact assessment of the effect that the closure will have on the local economy and workers.

This year, we are celebrating 100 years of the Royal Air Force and 100 years since Air Station Brattleby Cliff was renamed RAF Scampton. The airbase is central to Lincolnshire's past and present identity. Scampton was home to the legendary Dambusters, and since 2000 it has housed the world-renowned Red Arrows. For 100 years, Scampton has symbolised our Royal Air Force's proud history, and it has received a lot of praise for its role. Recently, Air Marshal Sir Michael Graydon referred to it as a "very good base", and the strategic defence review conducted in 2010 concluded that keeping the Red Arrows at Scampton was the best way to allow them to operate. However, the Ministry of Defence ploughed on and announced that RAF Scampton was to be closed and sold off. Although the MOD made that decision, it is ultimately Government cuts that forced that step to be taken. If budgets are cut, our communities suffer. Cuts have consequences.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Karen Lee: I will not, I am sorry. I want to go on, because I am aware that we will have votes in the House.

Locally, in bomber county, there is incredulity that the Conservatives are effectively signing the death warrant of our local RAF base and taking away our Red Arrows, especially as, like Labour Members, only a very short time ago they welcomed the RAF to London and enjoyed the fly-past by the wonderful historic planes. The decision to close RAF Scampton has been very badly managed. There has not been a local transparent consultation. Although I am the local MP, I was not informed; I found out through the local and national press coverage when I turned on BBC news in the morning.

Although the Ministry of Defence statement asserted that it would engage with local stakeholders, that has been far from the reality. I have submitted a letter requesting a meeting and a freedom of information request. I acknowledge that this is a sensitive subject, but I submitted my FOI request on 30 July—78 days, or 11 weeks, ago—and, other than two holding replies, I have not had a proper response. The last thing I want to do is publish anything that would put our country's safety at risk, but my request relates to my petition and to the effect that the closure will have on the surrounding area and the future of the Red Arrows. Rather than withhold the information for an extended length of time, the MOD should publish the impact assessments that informed the decision for the public to see.

From the information available to me locally, I feel confident in saying that the decision is highly flawed. The Minister noted in the initial announcement that

“The disposal of the site would offer better value for money and, crucially, better military capability by relocating the units based there.”

I cannot comment on military capability, as I am not privy to the details, but I dispute the idea that it was an effective “value for money” decision.

The argument for closing RAF Scampton is that the land can be sold and used for housing. That case has been proposed twice before—in 1994 and 2000. On both occasions, the financial case was flawed. The value of the land, particularly the assumed capital receipt and the expected value of the land per hectare, was overestimated. The previous decisions, and most likely this one, were based on an unrealistic view of land values. Other MOD site disposals were used as comparisons, but variations across the country were not considered. On that basis, I asked the Minister to release the forecast pricing of the land, as it has been miscalculated twice previously.

The land in question is also very likely contaminated, and any decision must take into account the cost of land remediation to ensure that it is of the necessary standard for residential development. I have been advised locally that there is an extensive underground fuel system, which is likely to have leaked over the years, leading to hydrocarbon contamination, so a major clean-up would be required before the land could be considered suitable for residential use. The environmental factors, alongside the cost of removing RAF infrastructure, may reduce the value of the land and result in a loss if it were sold.

Will the Minister explain in detail the expected savings from closing Scampton, factoring in the cost of remediation work?

It is not just the cost of the land that means that Scampton should not be closed: It is what it and the Red Arrows provide to the local economy. Not only does Scampton provide 600 jobs, which enables spending in Lincoln and thus increases productivity in the local economy—we hear a lot from the Conservative Government about jobs—but Lincolnshire has a rich military history, and Scampton epitomises that and attracts tourists. I work closely with Visit Lincoln, which has stressed to me on numerous occasions the importance of the base and the Red Arrows. The heritage centre at Scampton is housed in one of the original world war two hangars. It holds more than 1,000 artefacts and contains the original office of Guy Gibson, commanding officer of 617 Squadron—the Dambusters. The Red Arrows are world renowned. Even though they tour the world, between November and March the public can visit them at Scampton. It is an exciting opportunity to visit the impressive Arrows up close. Aviation enthusiasts travel across the UK and from abroad to visit Scampton, but possibly not for much longer.

The selling of Scampton not only deprives the local economy and costs us jobs but wipes out the history of those who bravely fought against the fascist threat during world war two. Did the Minister and the Ministry of Defence consider the effect that the closure would have on the local economy when they decided to close Scampton and relocate the Arrows? Has the Ministry of Defence honestly given any consideration to the future of the heritage centre?

The leader of the Labour party has committed to save Scampton—I went straight up and bent his ear, and he agreed to that. He recognises its immense local and national significance, but the Prime Minister continues with an unpopular, short-sighted and misinformed policy. I have had more requests about this issue in the 16 months I have been an MP than about anything else—it is so vital locally in Lincoln.

I began this debate by asking the Minister questions about land value and the local economy. I hope that I get some kind of reply, because I have had nothing from the MOD. I would now like to open the debate to other Members.

4.38 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) for securing this very important debate.

In my constituency, I have the historic RAF base of Linton-on-Ouse, and I quite understand that the Minister has a difficult job. No one wants their local base to close. Bases are not just about bricks and mortar, tarmac and concrete. They are places of heroic deeds, great endeavours and often the ultimate sacrifice.

Linton-on-Ouse has a proud history. It was first formed in 1937, in the lead-up to the second world war. The No. 4 Group RAF was based there, and it undertook some heroic bombing raids on Norway, the Netherlands and into Germany. Linton-on-Ouse was also host to the No. 6 Group Royal Canadian Air Force. In some of the pubs in my area there are lots of photos of those days—of Canadian airmen and British aircrew together,

looking valiant and invincible. Of course, many of those people never returned from their bombing raids. Indeed, in 1941, the base at Linton was bombed by the Luftwaffe, with a loss of 13 men, including the station commander. All my life, RAF Linton-on-Ouse has been part of the local community. I remember playing darts in the officers' mess there as a young man, and I also went to a very extravagant, formal military wedding there. As a young boy, my son Charlie was first shown how to fly a plane on the flight simulator there by a very good friend of ours, Flight Lieutenant Rod Leigh—a great man who is sadly no longer with us.

The announcement that the base would close in 2020 has shocked the entire community because of the part that it has played in people's lives. It employs many people—as the hon. Member for Lincoln said, these bases employ many people directly—and many people work in the base's supply chain too. Many jobs will be at risk because of the closure and, of course, the local community is very proud of the base's historic contribution to our previous fights against tyranny. The Minister has a very difficult job because he is responsible for taxpayer's money—it is not Government money—and he has got to make sure that all the resources he has are used in the most cost-effective way possible. I understand that maintaining the military estate costs £2.5 billion per annum. The closure of the base at Linton will save £140 million by the end of the decade, and will contribute to a significant investment of £4 billion in our infrastructure and military bases going forward. It is hugely important that our military bases and forces are fit for purpose and can do us proud when they are needed in the future.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his speech, which is very effective. Does he agree that another of the problems that we face is the need to keep the capacity to flex and to expand our capability in the event of threat? With Russian submarines off our coast, Russian aircraft coming very close to our airspace and ships also coming into our waters, is this not a time when our capacity to expand is central to our defence not only in the future but now?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady makes some excellent points. The international threat that she outlines—particularly from Russia—is greater now than it was for many years, so it is absolutely right that we have a military that is fit for purpose.

The Minister will acknowledge that we have corresponded many times over this closure, including with senior officers from the RAF, to challenge them on whether closing the base is the right thing to do, or if it is a false economy. I understand that it makes sense to aggregate all training needs in a single place—they are being moved to RAF Valley on Anglesey—but I have written to the Minister on a number of occasions about some concerns we have, which were first raised by the Public Accounts Committee during a session on military flying training in October 2015. The Committee raised concerns about the prospect of all training being moved from Linton to RAF Valley, and it noted in its December 2015 report that the full implementation of the new training system for military air crew had been delayed by a number of years and that only 151 students had graduated, at a cost of £143 million to the taxpayer—that shows how expensive it is to train pilots—when we were aiming for an annual figure of around 320 students.

On top of this, part of our capacity will be used to train other nations. The RAF is a world leader in its field, so many nations come to it for training, which we should be very proud of. However, there are concerns about how those providing the training will manage with only one simulator when there are currently three at Linton-on-Ouse. It is calculated that the number of flying hours required to make sure that we have the extra capacity has increased by 20 to 25%.

I have a number of concerns—I know the Minister has addressed them before and given me every assurance—along the same lines as those expressed by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). Is this going to mean that we have the capacity when needed in the future, particularly in extra training needs both for our nation and for services that we provide to other nations?

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): On that point, I was lucky enough to visit Linton-on-Ouse with some colleagues in the armed forces parliamentary scheme just a couple of weeks ago. There is a problem with capacity: at the minute, wannabe pilots are joining the RAF and spending up to 18 months to two years in holding, as they await the training to become fighter jet pilots. Does he agree that moving the training to Anglesey will only exacerbate that problem; that young men and women joining up now to fly fast jets will be prevented from doing so; and that this is doing nothing to encourage people to join the armed forces to do the job that they want to do?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, which was also made to me by one of the training officers at RAF Linton who is retiring and has no axe to grind. He made exactly the same point about making sure that we have the capacity to train people on the base. I would like the Minister to make sure that we have got that capacity and that the airbase will not be needed, and to consider the points that we have raised. If he decides ultimately that the base will be closed, I ask him to support us in the planning work that we will have to carry out to find the best possible future uses for the base—yes, housing is one potential use, but there could be many employment uses as well. We want to make sure, if the closure goes ahead, that on that sad day, the employment prospects created as a result at least make up for some of the jobs lost in the locality, and that we provide opportunities for local people who have such a long connection with and have relied so much on that base for their community and for jobs both at the base and in the local supply chain.

I know that the Minister will address those points either now or on a later occasion, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak.

4.47 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) on securing this timely and important debate. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). Recently, I had the privilege to be on a parliamentary armed forces visit, and I take this opportunity to thank everyone at RAF Linton-on-Ouse for making us so welcome and giving us such an instructive, informative and excellent visit.

[Nic Dakin]

I want to focus in particular on RAF Kirton-in-Lindsey, which was closed in 2013. It is in my constituency. There is still an association with RAF Scampton in so far as there are assets in Kirton-in-Lindsey still being used by the Scampton base. The closure of RAF Scampton will have an impact on Kirton-in-Lindsey. Those are the assets that I am concerned about.

I have always found the military personnel—from the RAF and all the armed services—with whom I have come into contact to be excellent, but I found that dealing with the MOD was less than excellent when it was disposing of the site in Kirton-in-Lindsey. The MOD's attitude of mind is very much focused on disposal and simple numbers. However, the impact on cost is not about simple numbers from a disposal—the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton touched on this, in some ways—but about community value and community assets.

In Lincolnshire—“bomber county”, as my colleague said—the disposal of assets has a history of being done in a way that has actually cost the public purse. The disposal might have got a little cash for the MOD at the time, but the cost to the public purse has been a lot more, because the disposal was not done effectively: the maintenance and support of often derelict sites has frequently fallen back on other parts of the public purse.

My plea is that the disposals of RAF Linton-on-Ouse and RAF Scampton are done in a way that engages fully with the local community and that looks for full community value, not simple pennies in the pot. That will much better serve the nation and the communities in which the bases have served for such a long while, giving better value for money to the public purse.

I return to Kirton-in-Lindsey, to read from the letter sent to me by the town council. It reminded me:

“Previously Kirton in Lindsey Town Council have submitted requests to North Lincolnshire Council for the registering of the tennis courts, gymnasium and surrounding leisure land off York Road, Kirton in Lindsey, as assets of community value which are now listed as such”—

under legislation brought in by the coalition Government, which is rightly being used by communities to benefit community interest. The letter continues:

“The Town Council has also proactively written to the MOD requesting that they consider selling the leisure land at RAF Kirton in Lindsey to the Town Council for the good of the community.”

I very much support the town council. Those are assets of community value that can benefit a significant community—or they can be sold to a slightly higher bidder for a bit of cash that would probably be spent fairly quickly by the Red Arrows and would not have the same community and public benefit of the more intelligent approach.

I hope that the Minister will do everything he can to look at the assets in the Kirton-in-Lindsey base and to ensure that the community interest is explored and delivered to the maximum extent possible. It is interesting that in the disposal of the base, North Lincolnshire Council, which is Conservative controlled—sadly, still Conservative controlled—put in a bid for the base land. I think that the numbers were probably fairly close to those of the successful bidder, but by now the council would have developed the base further than has been done.

Instead, the development of the base has been stalled, typically, although I hope it is now moving forward. With the best will in the world, a private developer, even though developing the base for very good business interests, is not making the same progress that might otherwise have been made. I hope that lessons have been learned to benefit both Linton-on-Ouse and Scampton, and that there is an opportunity to put the community value back into the community through the appropriate disposal of the community value assets that Kirton-in-Lindsey Town Council identified and registered—appropriately—with the Ministry of Defence and with North Lincolnshire Council. That is my plea. I cannot make that plea big enough, because this is a moment in time when the public good can be better delivered. If the opportunity is missed, the future will not benefit.

I cannot finish without mentioning the historic nature of the Scampton site. As everyone knows, it was the host of 617 Squadron, otherwise known as the Dambusters. That is rich within our heritage, and always will be—one of the big emblematic and triumphant missions of the second world war, to which we all owe a huge debt. In the 100th anniversary year of the RAF, it is something that we commemorate and remember. The Red Arrows maintain that historical tradition by flying out of RAF Scampton. Often, when I drive to Newark to catch a train down to London on a Monday morning, I see the Red Arrows above, in the Lincolnshire skies, doing their stuff. It is a sight to be seen—awesome, frankly. I share the feeling of my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln that it would be appropriate, if the changes go ahead, for the Red Arrows to remain in Lincolnshire, flying across the Lincolnshire skies.

4.55 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I may be cut off by the Division bell, but many might be grateful for that.

I want to emphasise that this is such an important issue. I am lucky because some of the air traffic control personnel in RAF Scampton at present will move up to RAF Boulmer in my constituency as a result of RAF decisions. The reality is, however, that the one group of people who are not ever able to speak for themselves, and who indeed colleagues have perhaps not mentioned much, is those in the RAF itself. This is very much their decision.

As ever, the RAF is in a state of continuous change and, although this year we have commemorated in extraordinary ways the RAF 100 and the exploits, bravery, and extraordinary and impossible challenges of our incredible airmen and women over the past 100 years, the reality is that those in the RAF look forward. While respecting history, we must allow those who are planning for the future—with technology and aircraft that are out of this world in terms of a normal human's comprehension—to be in places that necessarily work for the RAF. We must respect the RAF's decisions.

I completely respect the position of the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) on the community, however, and I hope very much that the Minister and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, which will be charged with finding new uses for the site, are mindful of history and the need to maintain the location whence extraordinary deeds were done.

I am not shrinking violet when it comes to criticising the way the DIO has managed housing challenges: the MOD was set the challenge of finding a huge amount of land to build housing on, as part of the Government's big housing strategy, and I led the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry into how that was going. I continue to say that much more needs to be done. I commend colleagues on encouraging the Minister to ensure that that relationship is stronger than it has been so that communities know the MOD understands the value of a community. This is not just about taking a piece of land and building houses on it.

We must remember that the RAF wants to move forward. It has a budget—everyone has a budget—and it wants its technological abilities to be honed in the right places. The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) mentioned the Russian threat, but the MOD's investment in Lossiemouth, where the P-8 is coming in, will enable it to do so much more. Technology is constantly moving forward, and the RAF wants those centres of excellence and those training and base centres.

Mrs Moon: The point I was making was not about meeting current capability; it was about having the capability to flex and expand. Once we build on an aerodrome, it is gone. We have to have the capacity to keep things operational, so that should the bases be needed, we can make them so.

Mrs Trevelyan: I entirely agree. During the second world war, we built hundreds of airfields in a hurry, so that we could move those brave young men in and out of the country to defend our shores, but they have not been used since. We always have to look forward. The reality is that we have no idea what the future warfare space might look like. The RAF is telling us constantly that it wants those centres of excellence where it can have the investment.

I am an east coast MP too, and we have long seen our potential enemies as coming from the east—that is why most of those airfields that are now redundant are on that side of the country. However, we must always look forward and support RAF decisions.

4.59 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

5.25 pm

On resuming—

Mrs Trevelyan: I was given a great deal of leeway before the Division bell went, and I will not abuse the privilege.

One more thing I wanted to raise with the Minister was the value of our pilots. The RAF is making decisions that I entirely understand are difficult for those in the Lincolnshire area—in moving how it does training, and indeed in finding a new home for the Red Arrows. I know that RAF Leeming and the north of England would welcome them with open arms. It would be lovely to have a northern point where we have planes in Boulmer—we look after the air traffic control, but we do not have anything that flies.

Notwithstanding that, the key point is that these pilots are extraordinary people and one of the nation's great assets—not only because of their own human endeavour and great bravery, but because we invest

millions of pounds in each of them. It is so important that we consider them an asset rather than a cost. There is the wrap-around that goes with the pilots, and indeed the teams who work with them, and the pilots and their families need to be looked after. We come back to housing and how we invest the money in the MOD budget to ensure that we are not accidentally failing to invest properly in the whole family around our pilots, with us losing the huge investment made by the MOD and the RAF through lack of consideration of that wider family support. I leave that for the Minister to consider.

The RAF can never speak for itself, and it is a great challenge for those who serve that their voice is silenced, but we can thank them for their extraordinary work on our behalf in defending us and our nation, while remembering that their decisions are made looking forwards to the fight that we do not yet know exists—preparing for the unknown and thinking strategically, so as to be able to adapt to whatever the future threats might be. I hope very much that the Minister will consider carefully how we look after all these pilots and engineers as we find a new home for them.

5.27 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) on securing the debate and the informative and passionate speech she made, outlining the impact and effect of any proposed closure for RAF Scampton and RAF Linton-on-Ouse.

We all recognise that the requirements of the defence estate will change over time and that there is a need to modernise to reflect that. However, any restructuring of the estate must enhance our military capability and deliver value for money for the British taxpayer while providing flexibility, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). These two proposed closures are particularly disappointing, coming as they do in the RAF's centenary year. The closure of either site would have a significant impact on the livelihoods of a large number of people, as we have heard: we know that 600 personnel are working at RAF Scampton and just under 300 at RAF Linton-on-Ouse. If those sites were to close, servicemen and women and their families would be required to move, and civilian staff would face redeployment.

Those closures would also affect the wider community. As Members are aware, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln and others highlighted, MOD sites are important to the local economies in which they are situated as well as the wider supply chains that support the work of the bases. In that vein, I ask the Minister what assessment the Department has made of the economic impact of closing the two sites. Will he also set out in as much detail as possible the discussions that have taken place with personnel at those bases and the options that have been made available to civilian staff? What help and support will be given to civilian employees who are unable to move?

Mrs Trevelyan: I know that the shadow Minister is passionate about his defence brief and we have spoken many times. Is there a Labour position on what would be done at RAF Scampton and RAF Linton-on-Ouse?

Gerald Jones: I will address that later in my contribution.

It is important that we look at civilian employees who are not able to move and the impact any closure would have on them. They may have restrictions that perhaps Air Force personnel do not have.

RAF Scampton is known to many as the base for the world-famous Red Arrows, as well as having historic links to the Dambusters. As my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) has highlighted, there are historic links to RAF Scampton that we must consider. I ask the Minister to assure the House that any decision about the future of the site would take full account of those historic links.

To address the hon. Lady's intervention, the Leader of the Opposition has made it clear that we want to see RAF Scampton continue as the home for the Red Arrows, for many years to come. It is a case of prioritising and taking into consideration my points about the links it has, as well as the economic impact of closures, not just on the RAF but on the wider economy and community.

Can the Minister outline what consideration has been given to preserving the heritage centre at RAF Scampton? We understand that the Government are considering other potential defence uses for the site at RAF Linton-on-Ouse, ahead of any potential closure. Can the Minister set out what possible uses there may be and what the timescale is for exploring those options? It is important, as we have said, to look at the wider impact and the community value of the sites.

The announcement of these two closures will undoubtedly raise concerns about other possible cuts and efficiencies that may come about as a result of the modernising defence programme. In light of this, can the Minister take the opportunity to update the House on the progress of that programme and, crucially, when he expects to be reporting on it?

5.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate, and I join the others in congratulating the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) on securing it.

I begin with a declaration of interest. I am a private pilot and I am pleased to say that the last plane I flew was a Typhoon out of RAF Coningsby, which I took through the sound barrier. That is an example of what the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon)—who is no longer in her place—mentioned earlier of dealing with threats, as clearly my presence in the air over the east of England pushed away any Russian threats that day. RAF Coningsby is a fantastic example of what the county of Lincolnshire offers the RAF. We should be very proud of what happens at that base and at all the other bases across the county, and indeed across the country.

Before we discuss the individual basing decisions, it would be remiss of me not to briefly acknowledge, as others have done, the 100th anniversary of the Royal Air Force, a merger of the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service created the first independent air force in the world. At the time, General Haig commented that he hoped that no one would be so foolish as to think that planes would be usefully employed in the objectives of reconnaissance for the purposes of war. He was a cavalry man who thought that the only way of

gaining intelligence on the battlefield was on the back of a horse. We now know that the Air Force would become a significant component in our military capability. Indeed, it was our superior air power during the battle of Britain that led to the cancellation of Operation Sea Lion, the planned Nazi invasion of England.

The size of the RAF has fluctuated. Before the war it was around 31,000; at the height of the war it was 264,000; today it is around 30,000. Such were its requirements that much of the country, especially in the eastern counties, was peppered with bases, landing strips, early warning systems and the factories that made the aircraft, all gearing to support the war effort. Today, thanks to technological advances and changing threats and tactics, our air power footprint is very different indeed. We have a leaner, more versatile and more capable fighting force than we have ever had.

However, we find ourselves responsible for a legacy estate that owns 2% to 3% of UK land, and we realise we cannot afford to keep that going. A significant amount of that land is surplus to requirement. As a result, the MOD undertook a wide-ranging study of the entire estate, culminating in what was known as the better defence announcement in November 2016. That study identified many areas that could be used more efficiently, but stated that overall the estate was too big and expensive, with too many sites in the wrong location. We therefore embarked on a transformation of our estate. We will invest £4 billion over the next 10 years to upgrade key sites—and, yes, we will reduce our footprint elsewhere.

We have a total of 91 sites across the defence estate. Painful though it is, those will have to be reconciled. I hope that that results in a more modern and capability-focused estate. That approach will provide the modern facilities that the RAF needs and give personnel better employment opportunities for their partners and, with fewer movements during an RAF career, the ability to put down roots in their local community, which my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) mentioned. Crucially, that work is being done not by a central body—not by the MOD or the Defence Infrastructure Organisation—but by the armed forces and, in this case, the RAF, which is best placed to understand what it requires to support the delivery of defence in the United Kingdom.

That takes us to the sites that are the subject of the debate. First, as was said, RAF Scampton is steeped in history, but it is of course most famous for 617 Squadron and its daring Dambuster raid on 16 May 1943. As I mentioned, Lincolnshire is blessed with a number of other RAF bases, including Waddington and Cranwell, which I visited recently, and Lossiemouth. RAF Scampton is not in good condition. Some buildings have changed little since world war two. The station is in a poor state of repair, as indeed is the runway. I make it very clear, difficult though it is to hear, that it would require significant investment to restore the base to a suitable standard for the aircraft we use today.

I absolutely recognise the passion—that was illustrated in the powerful speech by the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee)—and the sense of nostalgia about the tough choices concerning the future of RAF Scampton. It simply would not be an efficient use of public money for the Royal Air Force to retain that site purely for heritage reasons. Instead, it will continue to concentrate

its resources on active sites that contribute to the defence outputs that will shape the future. Fortunately, as I said, many of those sites are based in Lincolnshire, so we will not remove that county's important relationship with the RAF.

The Royal Air Force, the MOD and I, as a Minister, are not indifferent to the heroic contributions of those who served at Scampton—not least the Dambusters. I can think of no more fitting tribute than the newly re-formed 617 Squadron, which will be based at RAF Marham with the world's most advanced jets in the form of the F-35 Lightning.

It is those difficult factors that led me to conclude in my announcement to Parliament on 24 July 2018 that RAF Scampton needed to close. We have ensured that our personnel are fully aware of the plans for the future of the site and we can begin to work with interest to prepare the long-term locations for the units, including the famous Red Arrows as well as No. 1 Air Control Centre and the Mobile Meteorological Unit.

I heard the passion that was expressed about the connectivity between Scampton and the Red Arrows, but I would argue that they are a national asset. I think the hon. Lady knows that they have not only been based in Scampton, although there is a current bond there. They spend a fair bit of time in Bournemouth, dare I say it, when they are doing the air shows down in the south of the country. They move around, doing 60 air shows a year not only in this country but elsewhere, and they have moved in the time since they came into existence in 1965. They have been at Fairford, where another international air show takes place, they have been at Kemble and they were at Scampton before moving to Cranwell and then back to Scampton—and yes, they now need to move again.

Of course it is dramatic when the Red Arrows move, but we must bear in mind the costs of keeping that runway and its facilities open and making the best use of the limited budget that we have. This is a tough decision to make, but we must provide them with a home that is fit for purpose. There are now detailed discussions; I know that the hon. Lady wants to know more information about them, but this is subject to discussions with the Civil Aviation Authority and there are difficulties with sharing absolutely everything. If I can agree to meet her one on one, we can have a further discussion about this, which I hope will be of help to her. We have already identified a number of options to ensure there is a home fit for the Red Arrows.

If I may turn to RAF Linton-on-Ouse, again, we heard a powerful but measured understanding of what needs to be put forward for the future of this base from my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). As he is well aware, and I think touched on in his contribution, the Tucano aircraft used by No. 1 Flying Training School, the main users of the site, will go out of service in October 2019. The essential Basic Fast Jet training will also move to RAF Valley, as has also been mentioned, using the Texan aircraft type.

With the main occupants due to leave in 2019, the Royal Air Force assessed that there was no requirement to maintain the station in the long term. The remaining units are due to be moved to existing sites, further consolidating the Royal Air Force into core locations up and down the country. Like RAF Scampton, this is

an example of how we are driving down our running costs and consolidating our people and our investment into fewer sites but ones that are better maintained.

Understanding the realisation of the defence estate is difficult, and some painful decisions must be made. As it was, it no longer represented the modern-day armed forces it was meant to serve. It was too large, and both our people and our investment were spread too thinly across the entire United Kingdom.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the Minister touch on the issue of capacity? There were concerns raised by people who, I think, had no vested interest here, but were concerned that a single base could not deliver the level of pilot training required for our future needs and some of the contracts we have for other nations. Can we guarantee today that RAF Valley will be able to meet that need?

Mr Ellwood: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. I visited RAF Cranwell only a couple of weeks ago and had a full briefing on the progression of the pilots, depending on which aircraft they will eventually use. He also touched on something else. The expertise that we have in this country is phenomenal. We not only train our pilots to an exemplary standard but train pilots for other nations too. That is important for the soft power relationships that we build with other nations.

Nic Dakin: Before the Minister finishes, could he address the points that I raised about the community assets at the Kirton-in-Lindsey site, which will be disposed of as part of the disposal of RAF Scampton? Will he commit to ensuring that the Ministry of Defence engages fully and proactively with the town council and others who have community interests?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about what happens once a decision is made, and the importance of having a strategy, working with the local authorities and with the devolved Administrations in some cases, to take best advantage of the estate that is being provided. Discussions happen with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation on that very front. The air base that he mentioned was not part of the subject matter for this particular debate, which was focused on these two RAF bases, but I would be more than delighted to meet him to be apprised of what is happening and to discuss that in further detail.

I am sure hon. Members will agree that the men and women of our armed forces, who do so much for our country, deserve to work and train at sites with modern facilities, and that the civil servants and contractors who support them in delivering their outputs need the certainty that the establishment of core sites provides. Let us also not forget the families around the serving personnel, who must be able to benefit from the necessary schooling for their children and be able to buy their homes, put down roots and be part of local communities.

The world is becoming a more complex and dangerous place. We are very fortunate with the history of the RAF, what it has gone through and how it has helped to shape the world and who we are today. I simply make the case, as we head toward the next Budget, that we must keep investing in all our armed forces and in our bases to ensure that we continue to have a place and a voice at the international top table.

5.46 pm

Karen Lee: I thank all hon. Members, the shadow Minister and the Minister for attending the debate and for speaking, especially on such an important subject. I thank the Minister for the offer of a meeting, which I genuinely appreciate. I want to make one final plea from the people of Lincoln to let us keep our Red Arrows in Lincolnshire—although I think we all know that it probably will not be my final one. I thank you, Mr Pritchard, for your excellent chairing, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), who has been wonderful. This is the first time I have led a debate, and I will certainly remember it.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I congratulate the hon. Lady on having led her first debate so ably.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the closures of RAF Scampton and RAF Linton-on-Ouse.

5.47 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 16 October 2018

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Pay Review Body

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am pleased to announce that I have invited Lesley Mercer to continue to serve as a member of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body for a further three-year term of office, commencing on 1 March 2019. This appointment has been conducted in accordance with the guidance of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

[HCWS1013]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Domestic Farm Support Funding

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Today I am announcing that the Government are launching an independent review into the allocation of domestic farm support from 2020 to the end of this Parliament. The review will make sure that fair funding is delivered to all four parts of the UK when we leave the EU.

The review will provide recommendations to the Government on factors to take into account in the split of agricultural funding between the four countries of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, once the UK has left the common agricultural policy.

In forming its recommendations, the review will look at what factors should influence the distribution of agricultural funding, while ensuring the effective use of public funds. Each country's unique circumstances will be considered, including its environmental, agricultural and socioeconomic make-up. Both the number of farms and the size of farms in each country could also be considered, to make sure that each part of the UK gets a fair deal. The review will be informed by historical CAP decisions but will not revisit these, or redistribute money that has already been committed.

We have already confirmed that we will continue to commit the same cash total in funds for UK farm support until the end of the Parliament, expected in 2022, providing British farmers with more certainty than farmers across the EU, where funding is only guaranteed until 2020.

This review will be led and overseen by an independent external reviewer. I am delighted that Lord Bew of Donegore has agreed to chair the review. Lord Bew has been the Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life for five years, held esteemed positions in government and contributed to a number of Bills, reviews and reports during his time as a non-party political peer.

Lord Bew will be joined on the panel by representatives from each devolved Administration to ensure that their voices are heard. Membership of this group will be confirmed in due course.

The terms of reference for the review have been published on the gov.uk website today. The review will report in March 2019 and the findings of the review will be published on gov.uk in due course.

[HCWS1016]

HOME DEPARTMENT

G6 Lyon

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The informal G6 group of Interior Ministers held its most recent meeting in Lyon on 8 and 9 October 2017. Representatives from the USA, Morocco and the European Commission also attended the meeting.

The summit was chaired by the French Prime Minister and Interim Interior Minister, Édouard Philippe. I represented the United Kingdom. The other participating States were represented by Dr Joachim Brudzinski (Minister of the Interior, Poland), Dr Stephan Mayer (State Secretary, Germany), Matteo Salvini (Minister of the Interior, Italy) and Fernando Grande-Marlaska (Minister of the Interior, Spain).

Morocco was represented by Interior Minister Abdelouafi Laftit. The European Commission was represented by Dimitris Avramopoulos (Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship) and Sir Julian King (Commissioner for the Security Union). The United States was represented by Jeff Sessions (Attorney General USA) and Claire Grady (acting Deputy Secretary, Department of Homeland Security). Gilles de Kerchove, the EU's counter-terrorism co-ordinator, also attended.

The G6 commenced with a working dinner focused on managing illegal migration flows. During the discussion I promoted the UK's efforts to tackle people smuggling and human trafficking, and highlighted the UK's work upstream and our commitment to work with EU partners on this after we leave the EU. I also stressed the importance of recognising that organised crime is a key threat we need to address.

The second plenary session was on combatting the threat of returning foreign terrorist fighters. During this session I referred to the UK's cross-governmental approach to managing returnees and the need for an end-to-end holistic approach to the issue.

The third session was a working lunch which focused on security co-operation with Sahel countries. During this session I highlighted the UK's commitment to the region and discussed our support on security and stabilisation. I also encouraged partners to share information to develop shared understanding of local issues and highlighted the problem of the use of kidnap for ransom as a source of terrorist funding.

The final session considered terrorist use of the internet. I highlighted the fact that the UK is leading the way on preventing terrorist use of the internet, encouraged the G6 to support the UK's strategic approach of engaging directly with content service providers and sought their support for action to combat child sexual exploitation online.

The next G6 will take place in Germany in 2019.

[HCWS1014]

Security Industry Authority

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The 2017-18 annual report and accounts for the Security Industry Authority (HC 1643) is being laid before the House today and will be published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS1015]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Informal Trade Foreign Affairs Council: 5 October 2018

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The Informal EU Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) took place in Innsbruck on 5 October 2018. The agenda covered the WTO, EU-US trade and EU trade agreements. I represented the UK at the meeting. A summary of the discussions follow.

On WTO modernisation, the discussion confirmed that the most urgent issue was unblocking appointments to the WTO Appellate Body. Many WTO members

were looking to the EU for leadership on this matter. I reaffirmed the UK's support for the rules-based trading system, commended the Commission's concept paper on WTO modernisation, and called for engagement with the wider WTO membership.

On EU-US trade, discussion was on the agreement set out in the EU-US joint statement following President Juncker's visit to the White House and progress since July, noting that the near-term focus was on voluntary regulatory co-operation with full respect for domestic legislation. A limited tariff liberalisation was on offer from the EU, provided it focused only on industrial goods. I expressed opposition to US measures on steel and aluminium and threatened measures on autos, offered support to the Commission's approach of prioritising regulatory co-operation, and agreed with others that there should be no lowering of standards.

On ongoing FTA negotiations, the priority for the Japan EPA to be approved by the European Parliament was highlighted. Attendees also expressed continued support for the range of other EU trade agreements.

[HCWS1012]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 16 October 2018

EDUCATION

Nursery Sector: Sustainability

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Nursery Sector: Sustainability on 10 October 2018.

Nadhim Zahawi: 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.

[Official Report, 10 October 2018, Vol. 647, c. 102WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi):

An error has been identified in my contribution to the Westminster Hall debate on Nursery Sector: Sustainability.

The correct contribution should have been:

Nadhim Zahawi: 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 **other funded provision**.

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