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18 October 2018**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 18 October 2018

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: On today's Order Paper it is noted that on 18 October 1918 the hon. Charles Henry Lyell, Royal Garrison Artillery, Member for South Edinburgh from 1910 to 1917, died while serving as Assistant Military Attaché in Washington, USA. We remember him today.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Food and Drink Standards

1. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on maintaining food and drink standards after the UK has left the EU. [907134]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): DEFRA is working closely with the Food Standards Agency and the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that the regulatory regime for food and drink standards and safety remains robust as the UK leaves the European Union, in order to continue protecting the public and retaining the confidence of consumers, businesses and trading partners overseas. The Secretary of State meets Cabinet colleagues on a weekly basis, when discussions take place on the future relationship the UK will have with the EU.

David Linden: The National Audit Office's report on DEFRA's readiness for Brexit says that the Department "will be unable to process the increased volume of export health certificates" on current capacity and that "consignments of food could be delayed at the border or prevented from leaving the UK."

Ports will be gridlocked and the quality produce of Scottish farmers will not reach its foreign markets. There is a spreadsheet to take the place of the EU's TRACES system—how does the Minister intend to fix this by March?

David Rutley: The NAO report also highlighted that there is a high degree of readiness within DEFRA. We have recruited 1,300 people to take this work forward.

In my role as Minister with responsibility for food, I am working very closely with others to ensure that we will move on all these issues, whether vets or preparations at the borders.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): At the Public Accounts Committee on Monday, we heard from DEFRA officials about preparedness for Brexit, and we are very concerned. One of the biggest concerns is that many businesses do not know what they will have to do to comply with the rules around Brexit. What is the Minister doing to make sure that real effort is going into telling those companies and businesses how they should be preparing?

David Rutley: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. The Government have been setting out technical notices to explain more about what needs to be done in readiness for a no deal scenario. Yesterday, along with the Secretary of State, I met the Food and Drink Sector Council. We are working hard to increase engagement with businesses on the back of those technical notices.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): This year we saw the highest-quality fruit and veg grown on these islands rotting in the fields because there were not enough workers to pick them. Yesterday the chair of the Migration Advisory Committee said that the fruit and veg sector would shrink if its policies were followed—that would mean farmers going out of business. Does the Minister agree with him that that is a price worth paying, or does he agree with me that ending freedom of movement is a huge mistake?

David Rutley: I am not sure that that really fits in with the question, but an important pilot is being taken forward on seasonal workers to address the issues that the hon. Lady raises.

Tree Planting

2. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase tree planting. [907135]

5. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase tree planting. [907139]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): The changes to the woodland carbon fund and the woodland creation planning grant that we successfully piloted in 2017 have been made permanent. We also recently made the countryside stewardship woodland creation grant available all year. In addition, we are providing £5.7 million to kick-start the northern forest, and we have appointed a national tree champion to drive forward our tree planting manifesto commitments.

Eddie Hughes: Does the Minister welcome the work of the Queen's Commonwealth Canopy programme, which is providing saplings to MPs across the country to plant in their constituencies?

David Rutley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his characteristically enthusiastic support for that project—we would expect nothing less for the Queen's Commonwealth Canopy initiative, which is truly excellent. I mention in

particular the five saplings project, made possible by the work of the Woodland Trust, Sainsbury's and ITV—the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) is also to be commended. Like my hon. Friend, I look forward to planting saplings in my constituency soon, in Macclesfield, and I am pleased that many other colleagues across the House will shortly be doing the same.

Alex Chalk: Trees are carbon sinks that lock in greenhouse gases while promoting biodiversity, so what steps is my hon. Friend taking to press forward with forestry investment zones for large-scale woodland creation?

David Rutley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and his keen interest in the need to drive forward ambitious plans to plant more trees. He is a tree champion in his own right. Our national tree champion, Sir William Worsley, is launching the first forestry investment zone pilot in Cumbria today. That new project will help landowners to create vital new woodland and unlock the economic benefits of forestry in areas not traditionally used for tree planting. The project will also provide lessons on how best to support forestry investment.

Mr Speaker: I call Tom Tugendhat, who has Question 6. Where is the fella? He is not here. I hope he is not indisposed. I think it is more likely that the hon. Gentleman is planting a tree.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Trees play a vital role in upper catchment management, by preventing flooding. Environment Agency representatives said in a meeting last week that upper catchment management needs prioritisation. How is the Minister planning for that, and will he ensure that there is provision for it in the Budget?

David Rutley: I know that the hon. Lady has a keen interest in that issue. I will be working closely with the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), to take these activities forward.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister's response. On my land back home, we have planted some 3,500 trees over time, but the important thing is to have trees planted by young people. The Woodland Trust in Northern Ireland, led by Patrick Clegg, is running a scheme whereby every school will plant a tree. Has the Department had an opportunity to engage with the Woodland Trust and education providers to make that happen?

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We need to get young people connected with trees and the importance of woodland, and we are working closely with the Woodland Trust on exactly that initiative.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Given the huge importance of trees to our environment and our quality of life, does the Minister agree that we must ensure that the planning system protects protected trees and woodland wherever it can when new development is being considered?

David Rutley: Yes, that is really important. I think my right hon. Friend will also welcome our commitment to ensure that we will see 1 million more trees in our towns and cities. Trees play a vital role not just in the countryside and more generally but in our towns and close to urban areas.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Tree planting is important for ecological diversity and protecting vital habitats. Sites of special scientific interest protect the UK's most important places for trees and wildlife, but a Greenpeace investigation has found that almost half of SSSIs have not been examined in the last six years, as required by national guidelines. Now that the Prime Minister has announced an end to austerity, what new resources will the Minister commit to, to reverse the alarming neglect and decline of habitats and species across the UK?

David Rutley: That is an important issue. Natural England is focusing carefully on the SSSIs that are most at risk and will ensure that those resources are targeted, for maximum impact in those vital areas.

Sue Hayman: If the Minister cannot commit to new resources for our habitats, what commitments can we expect in the Budget to restore our beloved local parks, which are so important to the environment, health and local communities? Will the Minister confirm how much funding the Government's parks action group has been allocated and how many of the group's recommendations he has delivered?

David Rutley: Clearly we will have to wait and see what comes up in the Budget on 29 October, but we are working closely with the parks Minister on that agenda.

Water Company Performance

3. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of the water companies on their performance. [907137]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): The water regulators—Ofwat, the Environment Agency and the Drinking Water Inspectorate—hold regular discussions with water companies about their performance. I recently had the opportunity to address water companies at the Water UK conference, and most recently I met representatives from the industry on 31 July to discuss their performance and, indeed, underperformance.

Alex Burghart: I thank the Secretary of State for that response and congratulate him on the work he has done to put pressure on water companies to close down their offshore arrangements. Will he continue to hold them to account?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. Water companies have taken advantage of offshore arrangements, which may have been in the interests of some of those who receive dividends, but have not been in the interests of consumers. Those arrangements are now ending.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What plans does the Secretary of State have to build more public drinking fountains across the UK?

Michael Gove: I will not be building them myself, but—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: That is extremely disappointing.

Michael Gove: With your permission, Mr Speaker, perhaps at Holland Park comprehensive we could make it part of the design and technology projects that our respective children are engaged in, to ensure that there are drinking fountains in west London and beyond.

We are working with water companies and other commercial operators to ensure that drinking fountains are more widespread. It was a great Victorian innovation to bring clean drinking water to everyone and ensure that we did not have to rely on private provision for the very stuff of life. We will ensure that there are more drinking fountains, and further steps will be announced later this year.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Some 3 billion litres of water a day are leaking out of water companies' infrastructure pipes, which is enough to fill 1,273 Olympic swimming pools. Private companies have invested a lot of money in infrastructure in the past, but are they now spending too much on shareholders and chief executives, and not enough on actually securing the infrastructure? We need to save water, especially at a time of drought.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the things I have said to the water companies is that in the past few years they have spent far too much on financial engineering and not enough on real engineering. As a result, new targets have been set to reduce leakage in order to both protect the environment and help consumers. One thing that would not help consumers, I am afraid, is Labour's programme to renationalise the water companies, which would mean taxpayers' money going into the hands of the same shareholders, rather than being spent on our environment.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Environment Agency's welcome and overdue plans for flood defences in Kendal suggest that they will be built to withstand a one-in-100-year storm event, yet the water companies, such as United Utilities, are required to meet only a one-in-30-year storm event. That means we could be at the mercy of drain waters while being protected from our rivers. Will the Secretary of State force the water companies to delve into their vast profits and keep communities such as Kendal, Burneside, Grange and Windermere safe from flooding?

Michael Gove: That is a very fair point made in a characteristically acute way by the hon. Gentleman. I know that he has been in correspondence with the Minister responsible, and we will do everything we can to ensure that communities are protected and water companies such as United Utilities live up to their responsibilities.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): On 27 May, 300 homes in my constituency were badly affected by a one-in-900-year flooding event. In response to my concerns,

Severn Trent has fitted new depth monitors in their water pipes. Is that not precisely the sort of investment that we need the water industry to make in the face of the challenge of climate change?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. First, I should congratulate Liv Garfield of Severn Trent Water for the progressive measures that she has taken, which my right hon. Friend mentions. More broadly, the challenge of climate change—as graphically pointed out by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and by the chair of the Environment Agency, Sir James Bevan—requires us all to take further steps to make sure that our communities are safe.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State concerned about the quantity of raw sewage that is being discharged into our rivers by many water companies?

Michael Gove: Yes, absolutely. Remedial action must be taken.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will the Secretary of State ensure that lessons are learned from last winter's disruption to water supplies for many communities? One of the great problems last year was the inability of the water companies to communicate to local residents what was actually happening. Will the Secretary of State ensure that those lessons are learned, and that that is not repeated should such a circumstance happen this year?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. Earlier this year, the Minister responsible had two roundtables with water companies to make sure that appropriate lessons were learned. In particular, Members of this House from across the divide made it clear that Thames Water in particular needed to pull its socks up.

Recycling

4. **Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to increase the level of recycling. [907138]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Recycling has been increasing since 2010. Over 70% of packaging has been recycled or recovered, which is ahead of the EU target of 60%, and the figure for plastic packaging, at 45%, is double the EU target. England's household recycling rate has also continued to increase, but we need to do more. We will be publishing our resources and waste strategy shortly.

Mary Creagh: I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on the birth of her beautiful baby boy, James, a couple of weeks ago.

Fashion should not cost the earth, but every year 300,000 tonnes of garments are disposed into landfill. Will the Minister ensure that the forthcoming resources and waste strategy includes something to force clothing producers to take account of the end use of the garments that they produce?

Dr Coffey: I know that is the subject of an inquiry that the hon. Lady's Environmental Audit Committee is undertaking at the moment. The Government, with our partner the Waste and Resources Action Programme, have been working with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation on this issue, and I am sure she will recognise how it is being addressed.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is important to improve recycling rates in areas such as on-the-go packaging. Does the Minister agree that in this area it is better to extend the existing packaging recovery note system, which keeps funds within the system for improvement, recycling and restructuring, than to introduce an expensive deposit return scheme in which funds will be lost, including on reverse vending machines that cost up to £32,000 each?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend has great experience of the packaging industry, so I know he speaks with authority. We are reforming the PRN system, but we also believe the deposit return scheme is an appropriate way to increase the amount of recycling and to reduce littering. That will, however, be subject to consultation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: If I can encourage the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) to overcome any unnecessary shyness, and in light of the fact that we are not likely to reach question 13, I would say to her that her question is very similar to this question, so perhaps she would like to make her point now.

13. [907149] **Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab):** I was hoping we would get to question 7, but thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

In July this year, the National Audit Office produced a report that was very critical of DEFRA's oversight of the scheme, which sends half of all our mostly plastic recycling material abroad, mainly to China. With China indicating that it intends to stop the importation of solid and plastic waste, what is DEFRA going to do? How is it going to massively reduce plastic waste in this country, and when will we see the resources and waste strategy?

Dr Coffey: Plastic waste exports happen because overseas processors recognise the value of how it can be used. I am conscious that plastic with a certain contamination level no longer goes to China. Other countries have taken it up, but of course we want more to be recycled here in the UK. The hon. Lady will see more in our resources and waste strategy, which will be published very soon.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend plan to rescue humanity from the blight of disposable nappies?

Dr Coffey: Disposable nappies have become a consumer convenience. I am very pleased that Procter & Gamble has invested in technology, which we see in Italy. We are encouraging it to bring it here, not only for disposable nappies but other forms of absorbent hygiene products.

We can do something about this, but I am not convinced that we will be seeing an end to the disposable nappy any time soon.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): One of the barriers to the successful recycling of plastic is that many simple packaging materials are actually made up of composite plastic with a number of polymers, which is particularly difficult to recycle. Will the Minister consider bringing in regulations to simplify this packaging?

Dr Coffey: I am pleased to say that the Government have been working with a mixture of organisations, retailers and manufacturers to try to simplify the polymers that are being used. Technical innovations will need to happen, but I am confident that some good news will be coming out very shortly.

Plastic Pollution

7. **Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con):** What steps he is taking to reduce the amount of plastic pollution.

[907142]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): In addition to the Government's ban on microbeads in rinse-off personal care products, and removing nearly 16 billion plastic bags from circulation with the 5p carrier charge, plastic pollution in our marine environment is a global challenge, which is why I was pleased that we had the blue charter at the Commonwealth summit this year, and that the UK and Vanuatu are to establish the Commonwealth clean oceans alliance. The Global Plastic Action Partnership was initiated in the United Kingdom and was launched in New York last month at the UN General Assembly. It will be instrumental in delivering those commitments.

Vicky Ford: We know that plastic pollution is a problem at home and across the globe. In developing countries especially, it contributes to blocked drains, increasing flooding and disease and exacerbating poverty. Will the Minister provide a bit more detail on how the Global Plastic Action Partnership will help to alleviate pollution and poverty?

Dr Coffey: At the Commonwealth summit, we highlighted more than £66 million that we will be spending to help Commonwealth countries in particular to tackle this issue, including by increasing the professionalism of waste management. The Global Plastic Action Partnership goes beyond that to cover the world. It is a public-private partnership. I am pleased to say that we have invested £2.5 million in it, and we are now getting funding in from Canada, PepsiCo, Coca-Cola and Dow Chemical—and more companies are joining.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The amount of UK plastic going into our oceans remains an international scandal. Following the publication of the long-awaited 25-year environment plan, will the Minister set out when we will see legislation to enshrine those warm words into law and to make sure that action on plastic is not only firm but in the statute book and enforceable against those who are still putting plastic into our oceans at home and abroad?

Dr Coffey: It is suggested that about 80% of the plastic litter that goes into oceans around our country—it goes out of our rivers and into the sea—comes from land-based litter, so it is something on which we are focused with our litter strategy, and we will keep working on that. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the Prime Minister has announced that there will be an environment Bill in the next Session.

European Food Safety Authority

8. Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on UK participation in the European Food Safety Authority after the UK leaves the EU. [907143]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): After our departure from the EU, our priority will be to maintain the UK's high standards of food safety. We are considering options for the future of risk assessment and scientific advice in the UK as part of the exit negotiations. We are seeking to retain the long tradition of close scientific collaboration with the EFSA. The Secretary of State meets Cabinet colleagues weekly at Cabinet, and through relevant Sub-Committees, where discussions take place on the future relationship that the UK will have with the EU and associated bodies.

Stephen Pound: I appreciate that the Minister has already addressed a similar question from the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), but this contribution should not be seen in any way as evidence of collusion between me and the Scottish National party. As we move from—to use Fintan O'Toole's phrase—the “epic dream” of Brexit to the nightmare reality, we find ourselves having to deal with more and more aspects of minutiae. I implore the Minister not to forget the dairy farmers of Northern Ireland and, particularly in this area, to concentrate on discussions with Cabinet colleagues so that we do not let down those dairy farmers, who face a terrible future as a result of that disastrous decision of June 2016.

David Rutley: I had never really thought of the hon. Gentleman as colluding. He is incredibly independently minded—we respect him for that—and forthright in his views.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We will do all that we can to support dairy farmers across the UK, not least in Cheshire, where I also have many dairy farmers. Of course, we will be working across the board not only to ensure that the best possible standards of food safety are maintained, but to support agriculture as we move to a world outside the EU.

Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme

9. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What progress the Government have made on reintroducing a seasonal agricultural workers scheme. [907144]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Government have announced that we will introduce a new pilot scheme for 2019-20 to enable up to 2,500 non-European economic area migrant workers to come into the UK to undertake seasonal employment

in horticulture. On 18 September, DEFRA published further details on the pilot and opened the selection process for operators through a request for information. The industry had until 17 October to respond, and we will now be working with colleagues in the Home Office to develop the pilot.

Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Minister very much for his reply. Recently I visited PDM Produce, which is in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard). It produces millions of lettuces a month for the UK market and imports from Europe in the off-season. It is really concerned because while it welcomes the new pilot, that is not nearly enough to ensure that it can continue to produce for the UK market, which could have an impact on our balance of payments and the prices of lettuces and salad in the shops.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raises an important point, but he should acknowledge that this is a pilot involving the small number of 2,500 people. Typically, when the previous SAW scheme ran from 1945 until 2013, in the region of 20,000 to 30,000 people came in under the scheme each year.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The charity Focus on Labour Exploitation—FLEX—has warned that the scheme to which the Minister referred involving temporary visas for non-EU workers to work on British farms could lead to a sharp rise in exploitation if there are ties to a particular employer. Later today, to mark Anti-Slavery Day, I will lead a debate on ending the exploitation and slavery of workers in the supermarket supply chain. Is the Minister aware of those concerns and will he follow this afternoon's debate? This is one of the worst sectors for modern slavery and the exploitation of workers, so can he make sure that he is on the case?

George Eustice: The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority regulates all labour providers, including by looking at issues such as accommodation and its costs. There was no evidence that this particular scheme was abused, but there are issues of the type of abuse that the hon. Lady talked about. The GLAA always takes strict action when it finds that is necessary.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Why on earth can we not find enough British workers to do these seasonal agricultural jobs?

George Eustice: We have full employment and the lowest unemployment since the early 1970s. It is a very scarce labour market, and it has always been the case that some sectors in horticulture have required overseas labour—seasonal labour—to support their needs.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Given the massive gap between how many seasonal agricultural workers are required and the numbers involved in the minuscule pilot, how will the Minister cherry-pick the minority of businesses that can work on the pilot and have their fruit and veg picked, while the majority will see the fruit and veg left to rot in the fields?

George Eustice: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. We still have free movement from the European Union at the moment, and most businesses are able to meet

their labour needs from the EU. The pilot will be for non-EEA countries, and if it is successful, we shall be able to roll out a broader scheme.

Animal Cruelty: Prison Sentences

10. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): When he plans to bring forward legislative proposals to increase the length of prison sentences for animal cruelty. [907145]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): The Government will increase the custodial maximum penalty for animal cruelty from six months' to five years' imprisonment. The legislation needed to implement the increase will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Diana Johnson: Ten months ago, the Secretary of State told me that he would examine proposals to expedite legislation to introduce an increase in the sentence for animal cruelty. Given cross-party support, the support of the general public and the brilliant campaigning of Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, can the Secretary of State now give us a timetable for when that will actually happen?

Michael Gove: I know that the Leader of the House, who will be here shortly, will have heard that eloquent plea from the hon. Lady, and I add my voice to hers.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Animal cruelty extends to the way in which an animal is slaughtered. When will there be legislation to ensure that halal meat is properly labelled in supermarkets?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend raises an issue of great concern to many. One of the things that we are doing is consulting religious communities and others to establish what changes, if any, may be required.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): There is a fairly simple way of ensuring that this measure is implemented: introducing and then supporting a private Member's Bill. Will the Secretary of State support any Member who introduces such a Bill?

Michael Gove: That decision is above my pay grade—it would be made by the Chief Whip and the Leader of the House—but, as I indicated to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), I am passionately keen to see an end to animal cruelty.

Mr Speaker: Mike Wood? Not here. Well, we cannot conclude these proceedings without hearing from Mr Tom Pursglove.

Forests: Development Leases

12. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the provisions of the 125-year leases for developments between Forest Holidays and the Forestry Commission to protect the environment surrounding those developments. [907148]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): In response to concerns that have been raised about Forest Holidays, my Department has initiated a review of the governance and commercial arrangements for its management of its estate.

Tom Pursglove: Local people in Corby and East Northamptonshire feel strongly that Fineshade wood, which is stunning, tranquil and extremely well used, must be preserved for generations to come. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me, and representatives of the Friends of Fineshade, to discuss what can be done to ensure that Forest Holidays' long-standing interest in the site finally comes to an end?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend represents some of the most attractive woodland in the country. Not just Fineshade wood but Rockingham forest make Corby and East Northamptonshire a place of pilgrimage for many who want seclusion and peace in a rural environment. I should be delighted to meet his constituents, and I think that his concerns are very well placed.

Topical Questions

T1. [907150] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): You and I, Mr Speaker, are very keen to ensure that there is appropriate protection for endangered species. We all know that charismatic megafauna and apex predators—the big beasts that attract public attention, and those at the top of the food chain—are increasingly under threat. That was why, at last week's illegal wildlife trade conference, a London declaration commanded the support of more than 50 nations, all pledged to support our world-leading ivory ban and the other measures that we take to ensure that the species that we value are protected as part of an ecosystem that we can all cherish.

Mr Speaker: I am deeply obliged to the Secretary of State, I am sure.

Liz Twist: How does the Government's strong support for fracking, against the wishes of communities who are worried about their local environment, fit in with the Secretary of State's vision of a green Brexit?

Michael Gove: It fits in perfectly. One thing we all know is that we will need a mix of energy sources in the future. Thanks to the leadership of this Government—I must single out for praise my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth—we have seen a dramatic reduction in carbon dioxide emissions alongside economic growth, but hydrocarbons are a critical part of our future energy mix, and hydraulic fracturing will be an important part of that. We need only look at countries such as Germany that have, as a direct result of pursuing the wrong policies, increased greenhouse gas emissions and also not played their part in both dealing with climate change and ensuring that we have the required electricity for ultra low emission vehicles and everything else that will be part of a green future. It is absolutely critical that we are hard-headed and realistic; Conservative Members are, unlike sadly, on this one occasion, the Opposition.

Mr Speaker: We are having an oratorical feast today. It is just a terrible shame that the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) is not here, because I feel sure that he would have added to the flow of oratory.

T2. [907151] **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement on the convergence funding review, which hopefully will lead to fair funding for Scottish farmers, and also his further announcement about ring-fencing future agricultural funding so that my farmers are protected and not lumped together in other Government funding. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Scottish National party to work with this Government to make sure that Scotland is included in the Agriculture Bill so that we get a fair deal for my farmers and our constituencies?

Michael Gove: I thank my hon. Friend and other Scottish Conservative Members who pressed for this review and collaborated to make sure its terms of reference were right. As a result, they have guaranteed a brighter future for Scottish farmers with a level of funding in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that is higher than that in England absolutely guaranteed in the future. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the Scottish Government and their Minister, Fergus Ewing, who is a great man in many ways, have, sadly, missed the opportunity to put forward an amendment to our Agriculture Bill in order to ensure that Scottish farmers have certainty in the future. Welsh Labour has collaborated and its statesmanship is to be commended; what a pity that once again the Scottish Government are letting down rural Scotland.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): When did the Minister receive the Godfray review on the Government's bovine TB strategy? When will he publish it, and will he commit to publishing it in full?

Michael Gove: Recently, shortly and yes.

Mr Speaker: We are grateful.

T5. [907155] **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): When does the Secretary of State expect to announce a plastic bottle deposit scheme?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): My hon. Friend is a great champion of the environment, especially in Cheltenham. He will be conscious that this is not a straightforward scheme to introduce. I recognise that many people will have seen such a scheme in other countries around the world, and while the front end is very simple, the back end is more challenging. We want a system that works across the four nations of the United Kingdom, and we are continuing to work on that.

T3. [907152] **Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Once we leave the EU, what steps do the Government plan on taking to tighten the rules surrounding the pet travel scheme in line with the Dogs Trust recommendations in its latest report, "Puppy Smuggling—when will this cruel trade end?"?

Michael Gove: I received a copy of that report just this week. The Dogs Trust does fantastic work. We have worked with it already on dealing with some of the problems of puppy farming, and once we leave the EU—when I hope we will be a listed country for pet travel—we can also review other steps that we might take.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Secretary of State will remember meeting me recently to discuss the issue of pollution in the River Windrush, which is a matter of great concern to the people of West Oxfordshire, as shown by the strong attendance at West Oxfordshire District Council's recent water day. I applaud my right hon. Friend's speech in March in which he took the water companies to task for their performance, but will he elaborate on what steps he is taking to ensure that they improve their performance across all areas?

Michael Gove: I was grateful to my hon. Friend for raising his constituents' concerns about the condition of the River Windrush, and he is absolutely right to do so. We have subsequently got a commitment through Ofwat, the regulator, for all water companies to spend more on making sure that the environment that they safeguard is protected.

T4. [907154] **John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree with those experts who argue that the UK has sufficient incineration capacity and that to increase it further could imperil recycling rates?

Michael Gove: The balance between the two is delicate. What we must do is recycle more.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I commend the Government on banning microbeads, but may I urge them to now turn their attention to microfibres, Mr Speaker? I do not know whether Mrs Speaker does the washing, but every time we do a wash, 700,000 microfibres could go down the drain. I am joining the Women's Institute to host an event on this in Parliament on 30 October; will the Minister join us?

Mr Speaker: I always feel better informed, and almost improved as a human being, when I hear the hon. Lady offer her disquisitions on these important matters.

Dr Coffey: I should like to thank my hon. Friend, who was an excellent Parliamentary Private Secretary in our Department. She is now able to ask questions in the Chamber again. I have already met the WI to talk about this matter, and there are certain things that people can do, such as using fabric conditioner to reduce the amount of microfibres that get released from synthetic clothing. She will be aware that we are considering a number of issues, and that is why we have had a recent call for evidence on the impact of tyres and brakes, which are also a notable source of microfibres in our marine systems.

T6. [907156] **Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): Regardless of our differences about our future relationship with the European Union, the Secretary of State and I will agree that a thriving food and drink sector is an endpoint that we want to get to at the end of whatever the negotiations will bring. Does he think that an extension to the transition period would be helpful in achieving that goal?

Michael Gove: I know that they talk of little else in Crail, Anstruther and Leuchars. The one thing I believe in is that it is vital that we leave the European Union at the earliest possible point so that we can ensure that we are outside the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, and that we take back control

to ensure that Scotland's food and drink manufacturers, along with food and drink manufacturers across the United Kingdom, can enjoy the benefits of being global Britain.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: It is very good to see the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood). I understand why he was delayed, but it is good to see him here in the Chamber.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. We know that 82% of the beer that is drunk in our pubs is brewed in the UK. Jodie Kidd and other publicans will be presenting a 105,000-signature petition to Downing Street today to back the Long Live the Local campaign on beer duty. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Chancellor is fully aware of the contribution that our beer and pub sectors make to British farming, as well as to the wider economy and society?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend does brilliant work as the chairman of the all-party beer group, and he is absolutely right to say that we must look at beer duty. In particular, a case has been forcefully made for looking at duty relief for small brewers in order to maximise growth in that sector, so that we can all enjoy great British beer.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The European Food Safety Authority currently sets standards and issues detailed guidance on the safety and composition of infant formula. Can the Minister tell me what is going to happen once we leave the EU?

Michael Gove: Yes: we will do considerably better.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Since Tuesday morning, a burst pipe has been spewing raw sewage into the sea near the UK's premier surfing beach, Fistral, in Newquay. Despite taking some initial action, South West Water now says that it will take several days to resolve the issue. Does the Secretary of State share my concern that this is going on for so long, and what action can we take to hold water companies to account to prevent such things from happening?

Michael Gove: I absolutely am concerned, and I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), will be talking to South West Water later today to see what can be done.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We have just had a reference to water, so we have to hear from Ben Lake.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Will the independent review into the allocation of domestic farm support, which was announced this week by the Government, also consider processes by which future financial frameworks will be agreed? To that end, would the formation of a dedicated intergovernmental body be something that the Government could explore?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman has made this point before, and it is a very fair one. I know that the Welsh Government have an opportunity to nominate a

member of the panel, and I hope that that panel member will have an opportunity to talk to the hon. Gentleman about that matter.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the Minister's earlier comments about seasonal agricultural workers, but can he tell the House what discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on the future labour requirements of the seafood processing sector, and the food processing sector in general, particularly in areas of low unemployment such as the north-east of Scotland?

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I am aware that the catching sector in Scotland has some particular issues around the maritime exemption and Filipino crews. That is something that colleagues in the Home Office are looking at. When it comes to the needs of the food industry more broadly, the report by the Migration Advisory Committee pointed out that existing EU citizens will be able to stay, and also that tier 5 youth mobility can be used in this case.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On 20 March, at the Dispatch Box, the Secretary of State told us that

"in December 2020 we will be negotiating fishing opportunities as a third country and independent coastal state".—[*Official Report*, 20 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 163.]

Given this morning's comments by the Prime Minister and the Minister for the Cabinet Office about extending the transitional period, how confident is the Secretary of State now that he will be able to meet that undertaking?

Michael Gove: Invincibly so.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I was encouraged by my right hon. Friend's reference to the small brewer relief scheme. Does he agree that it is one of the factors behind the amazing growth and success of the UK's craft brewing sector, which includes such brilliant breweries as the Bluestone Brewing Company in my constituency?

Michael Gove: I know that brewery, not from having visited it, but from having sampled its products. It does amazing work, and my right hon. Friend is right to champion craft beer. Mr Speaker, I hope that you and I will have the opportunity to share some very soon.

Mr Speaker: Well, that sounds like an invitation that I cannot possibly resist.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the schoolchildren and adult volunteers who spent two days planting a new orchard at the Charterhouse, one of Coventry's medieval buildings, as part of a larger restoration and renewal scheme? Does he agree that the orchard is a fantastic community initiative and, as part of the wider project, a great educational resource for my city?

Michael Gove: If I may say so, it is an exemplary use of parliamentary time to praise young people for doing the right thing, and I salute the hon. Lady for reminding us of what young people can do to inspire us about the future of nature.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Secretary of State's previous answer leads nicely into my question because he recently visited my constituency and met young Alfie Royston, who is doing so much to encourage other young people in the area to deal with the menace of plastic. Does he agree that we need to do more to harness the energy and enthusiasm of our young people in order to combat the problem?

Michael Gove: Young Alfie is an inspirational leader and voice for environmental improvement. His school, Tollbar Academy, is one of the best performing in the country. Both that school and that young man are lucky to have in my hon. Friend an effective champion and a brilliant constituency Member.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Every community has the right to a decent, clean and safe environment. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the My Coldhurst Group and the Ghazali Trust on cleaning up their areas to make them safe for young people to play in?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. We all have a part to play, and I congratulate the hon. Gentleman. He had a distinguished track record in local government before coming to this place, and his leadership in this area is exemplary.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Splendid.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Wonga Loan Book

1. **Frank Field** (Birkenhead) (Ind): What progress the Church of England has made on bringing together organisations and people of good will to buy the Wonga loan book. [907121]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his extensive work on this issue. The Archbishop of Canterbury has been in discussions with the charity and finance sectors about how to minimise the potential harm to Wonga's former customers who are unable to pay back their loans. We are hopeful that debt collection best practice will be applied in recovering any outstanding debts.

Frank Field: I thank the right hon. Lady for that reply. With reference to the written answer she gave me about how the commissioners are using their huge portfolio of funds to push firms in the right direction, does she accept that the list of firms whose annual general meetings the commissioners turned up at to push social justice was short and rather disappointing? Will she meet me urgently to see how that programme can be extended?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman, and I would have been delighted to discuss his idea about the Wonga loan book before it was in the public domain. The Church of England paid close attention to his proposal and took the view that others are better placed to take the matter forward. However, going to AGMs is not the only intervention that Church Commissioners can make when trying to influence business and corporate policy in an ethical direction. That can also be done in writing and meetings do take place with a large number of companies.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): To reduce future reliance on loan companies such as Wonga, what is the Church of England doing to encourage personal financial education in its schools?

Dame Caroline Spelman: That is a good question. We obviously want to try to prevent the sort of situation that has arisen for Wonga's customers. The Church of England's primary focus is on tackling indebtedness in three ways: teaching children about financial literacy through the Just Finance Foundation, working to increase access to responsible credit, and supporting organisations such as Christians Against Poverty, which provides advice and debt counselling.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What else can be done to get more Church of England investment into ethical businesses? Could the Church play a hands-on role in assisting ethical businesses in some of our most disadvantaged communities?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church Commissioners are advised by the ethical investment advisory group and a very clear direction is given to asset managers about the sectors of the economy that the Church will not invest in on ethical grounds—for example, pornography and tobacco. The Church has recently played very close attention to the practice of the extractive industries and has had not a little success through its shareholder engagement in getting companies involved to change their policy towards tackling climate change.

Religious Freedom

2. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to promote religious freedom. [907123]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England welcomes the appointment of Lord Ahmad as the Prime Minister's special envoy to promote religious freedom; the Church called for this and it fulfils a long-standing request from faith communities in this country. I look forward to working closely with him. Next month, the Church of England plans to convene a reference group between its bishops and staff, the legal profession, theologians, ethicists and academics to explore the issues of religious freedom.

Fiona Bruce: Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the recent landmark unanimous judgment of the Supreme Court in the case of *Lee v. Ashers Baking Company Ltd* and others and the religious

freedom it has confirmed for Christians here in the UK not to be coerced into expressing views contrary to their sincerely held biblical beliefs?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Whatever one's views on marriage, everyone should be equal before the law and, of course, I would argue, equal in God's sight. The Church of England agrees that no one should suffer discrimination in the provision of goods and services on the grounds of age, race, gender, sexuality or any other personal characteristic. I think that it is striking that the Supreme Court found that there was no discrimination in this case, but instead found that the key issue was the right to freedom of expression.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): What additional measures does the Church intend to try to put in place to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to visit a place of worship on their preferred day?

Dame Caroline Spelman: It may be of interest to the hon. Gentleman to know that yesterday the Archbishop of Canterbury made a speech in the House of Lords about religious tolerance. The Church has consistently made the case that people should be able to worship unimpeded in this country according to their faith. The Archbishop said something very telling; he said that society needs to learn how to disagree well and that we need a society where rich beliefs and traditions can rub up against each other and against secular ideology in mutual challenge and respect.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What work is the Church of England doing with other Christian Churches and other faiths—with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and so on—to stand united on behalf of religious freedom around the world and against the persecution of religious minorities in every country, whatever the majority faith? I have to say with great sadness that Christians are the most persecuted minorities around the world.

Dame Caroline Spelman: As hon. Members will know from this Question Time, the Anglican Church around the world regularly speaks up on behalf of persecuted Christians. I regularly take questions from hon. Members about countries in which persecution is an issue. Last Saturday, the Archbishop of Canterbury was invited to speak in Nigeria ahead of the elections there to call for peace. He never misses an opportunity to make the case for persecuted Christians around the world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the right hon. Lady knows, people of all faiths and none across the world are subject to persecution for their religion or beliefs. Can she share with the House what the Church of England is doing to support the welfare of non-Christian communities around the world and to advocate for their right to freedom of religion or belief?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I think that particularly in the middle east, where Christians are often a persecuted minority, we speak up regularly about their plight. The Anglican Church also speaks out on the persecution of other denominations. The campaign that Christians

have supported for the better protection of the Yazidi minority is just one example in that region of how we must be prepared to speak up for others.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The recently published commission on religious education set out a framework for updating RE and teaching the importance of religious freedoms. What steps is the Church of England taking to implement its findings?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church is very supportive of improved religious literacy in our schools. If ever there was a time to understand better the world we live in, it is now. This is the time when we need to equip our children, whatever their faith or background, to better understand what sometimes underpins the conflicts that exist around the world. So this is a timely intervention and I am pleased we have moved away from a now rather old-fashioned view that, if we just stamped out the teaching of religion, everything would be fine—nothing could be further from the truth.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Northern Estate Programme

3. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What recent progress has been made on the Northern Estate programme. [907124]

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): Work has started on changes to Commissioner's Yard Gate, where an additional secure vehicle access point for deliveries and construction traffic is being constructed. Planning approval and listed building consent have been obtained for preparatory work on 1 Derby Gate. This building will be refurbished and adapted to make it suitable to be used for accommodation for Members, and I believe work will start around the end of this month, when the last occupants are moved out.

Christian Matheson: We missed an opportunity with the refurbishment of the Elizabeth Tower, when the work was given to a known blacklisting company. May I therefore ask the hon. Gentleman and the House of Commons Commission whether consideration will be given in the contracts being drawn up for the Northern Estate project to ensuring that companies that are unrepentant blacklists are not allowed to do work on this site?

Sir Paul Beresford: I think we will continue with the procedures we have used before and pick the suitable candidate to do the suitable work on the basis of a number of measures.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I know from speaking to a number of parliamentary colleagues that certain aspects of the estate, including the Northern

Estate, are not great for people with disabilities. What work is being done to make sure this place is more accessible, particularly for colleagues who have a disability?

Sir Paul Beresford: Sorry—this must be something to do with my antipodean background—but could the hon. Gentleman please repeat the question, because I did not follow it?

David Linden: I am very popular today. I was saying that a number of parliamentary colleagues who have disabilities find it difficult getting around certain parts of the estate. Given that we are doing this refurbishment work, what can be done to make sure that those with a disability are able to move around more freely and that this place is accessible?

Sir Paul Beresford: Sorry, but could the hon. Gentleman please do it very slowly, in an antipodean English?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I think the answer might be that the hon. Gentleman could reply in writing, when he reads the record.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I will try to get this on the first go—

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Oh no, you're Welsh! [*Laughter.*]

Chris Elmore: I am Welsh, so God help the hon. Gentleman. Will he confirm that, as part of the Northern Estate refurbishments, he will be doing his utmost, as will the commission, to make sure that we use local procurement, find as much of the workforce as we can from within the United Kingdom and make sure that where there are skills gaps we work with the further and higher education sector to find training for local employees and groups?

Sir Paul Beresford: That makes eminent sense to me. I know one of the firms particularly well and it is using that approach, particularly for training, including of apprentices, so that we can benefit as a community as well.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Gainsborough, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

Leaving the EU: National Audit Office

4. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the National Audit Office on the potential effect on its work of the UK leaving the EU. [907125]

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Brexit is a major task for Departments, and over the past 18 months the NAO has produced 15 reports looking at aspects of Brexit. Recent NAO work has provided evaluations of progress at the Department for Transport and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. In the coming years, the NAO will continue to scrutinise the work of Departments as they implement Brexit. The UK's exiting the EU has also led to new financial audit work, not least the audits of the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Department for

International Trade. The NAO currently undertakes audit work on the UK's administration of funds paid under the European common agricultural policy. That work will end after the UK leaves the EU.

Martin Vickers: I thank my hon. Friend for his comprehensive answer. I know he shares my view that the sooner we leave the EU, the better and that a longer transition is totally unacceptable. Does he agree that it is important that the NAO is able to work with similar bodies, both in the EU and outside it, post Brexit?

Sir Edward Leigh: In this job, I shall not be tempted down the path of transition, but I can confirm that the NAO will be just as free to share good practice and will continue to compare notes with both European and international audit bodies. The NAO is an active member of the International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions, which promotes good practice among Government auditors worldwide, and it is also part of a European regional group of supreme audit institutes. Those strong professional links will not be affected by Brexit, so that is another small plank of "Project Fear" done away with.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Churchyards: Community Use

5. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What plans the Church of England has to encourage more community use of churchyards. [907127]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): This year, the Church Urban Fund showed that mental health and loneliness are a growing issue in our local communities. Parishes are being encouraged to use their churchyards and green spaces to support community gardening projects to promote wellbeing, caring for their community's mind, body and spirit. The Church of England is working with the *Church Times*, the Guild of Health and St Raphael, and the Conservation Foundation to launch the Green Health awards to showcase best practice.

Kevin Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. Paignton churchyard is one of the most historic and beautiful places in Torbay, yet the cost of maintaining safe access to it for the community can end up falling on the congregation. What support does the Church of England offer to its local parishes to ensure that they can maintain and enhance access to such special places?

Dame Caroline Spelman: In respect of where the responsibility for safe access lies, there is a distinction between churchyards that remain open for use, which are the Church of England's responsibility, and those that are now full, for which the responsibility shifts to local government. In the case my hon. Friend raises, the Church of England would be very supportive if it is still an active churchyard, so to speak.

I am delighted to say that in my hon. Friend's diocese there are two Green Health award nominees: St Sidwell's church in Exeter and All Saints in Okehampton. I encourage him to look at other churches in this constituency that might be candidates for such awards.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Emergency Childcare Provision

6. **Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate the Commission has made of the cost to the public purse of emergency childcare provision for Members and House staff. [907128]

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): It costs some £54,000 annually.

Meg Hillier: The measure to introduce emergency childcare fills me with some nervousness. If Officers of the House or, indeed, Members need emergency support, we should be inculcating a culture of providing those Officers of the House with time off to deal with their children, rather than encouraging them to buy in childcare when that may not be the right thing to do. In addition to the costs, how many Members or members of the House staff have availed themselves of and drawn down this emergency childcare provision?

Sir Paul Beresford: My cynicism matches the hon. Lady's cynicism, but it is a trial. I shall write to her with the actual figures because I was not able to get them, although I was staggered to find out that the service gives parents in the House the opportunity to access 1,450 nurseries, 2,900 child minders, 1,000 holiday clubs and hundreds of nannies. As a parent, which the hon. Lady is, she will realise that sometimes everything goes wrong with childcare and, going by my experience with my children, who are now grown up, it is always at the last, disastrous minute.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Breaches of Electoral Rules: Fines

8. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Minister for the Cabinet Office on the potential merits of increasing electoral fines for breaches of electoral rules. [907130]

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): The Electoral Commission has ongoing dialogue with the Minister for the Constitution and has raised the

issue of the cap on its ability to levy proportionate fines. The commission would like its maximum fine to be increased to a level that provides a genuine deterrent to campaigners who may be tempted to break the UK's political finance laws.

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Lady for that answer and welcome that response. The Scottish National party is the only major party never to have been fined. As the hon. Lady pointed out, the Electoral Commission has complained that the fines issued to other parties did not match their crimes. Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) asked the Prime Minister about the clear breaches of electoral law in the EU referendum. When does the Committee expect tougher legislation to be introduced to prevent the Vote Leave-type of misconduct from happening again?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the fact that the commission has repeatedly warned that the ability to fine campaigners a maximum of only £20,000 per offence could increasingly become seen as the cost of doing business for well-resourced political parties and campaigners. The Minister for the Constitution wrote to the commission in response to its recent report on digital campaigning and said that the Government would carefully consider the recommendation. The commission continues to urge the Government to introduce legislation to strengthen its sanctioning powers for future elections and referendums.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Last year, figures from the Electoral Commission showed that there were very few cases, or indeed allegations, of electoral fraud. Does that not demonstrate that the perception of electoral fraud is far, far greater than the actuality of electoral fraud?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend makes an important point. No one wants to see barriers put in place to participating in elections and referendums. The commission has been involved in looking at the pilots that were undertaken around voter ID in recent elections and it will continue to make recommendations to Government to make sure that all people are able to take part in elections.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): My constituents have asked me who the Electoral Commission is accountable to, because it seems to have completely ignored my constituents in the recent consultation on boundary changes.

Bridget Phillipson: Through the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, the Electoral Commission reports to this House. I am sure that the commission will be happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss any concerns that he or his constituents may have on any issues of electoral law, but issues around boundaries are not within the remit of the Electoral Commission.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The instances of alleged frauds around Vote Leave are very high profile, but what more can be done to target local government elections, where often it feels on the ground that the spending limits are being breached and nobody is challenging this to ensure the integrity of local elections?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. There will be occasions where such matters are a matter for the relevant police force. I am sure that the commission would encourage anyone with evidence of misconduct or breaches of electoral law to make that report to the relevant authority. I am also sure that the commission would be happy to discuss any concern that she might have directly with her.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

First World War Centenary

9. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What plans the Church of England has to commemorate the centenary of the end of the first world war. [907131]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): This, I think, will be the last set of questions before we reach 11 November, which will be the culmination of four years of the Church of England marking the centenary of world war one. On that day, we will be encouraging parishes to ring their bells and commemorate bells and to commemorate every name on the war memorial. The Church has been distributing national resources to every parish with suggested liturgies, and also supporting the “Ringing Remembers” bell-ringing campaign. At an earlier Question Time, I mentioned that even hon. Members might like to consider becoming a bell ringer to mark such an auspicious occasion.

Alex Burghart: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. I grew up with my great grandmother, who lived through the first world war, and I knew some of her friends who were widowed in it and some of her friends who never married because of it. Will she ask the Church of England to remember the home front in its thanksgiving services?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The home front was a very important part of the great war and we should remember, as we do, not just the lives laid down in conflict but the sacrifices made by so many. May I use this opportunity to remind hon. Members present that the Parliament choir will be singing jointly with the choir of the German Parliament in the event to mark the centenary of the Armistice on the evening of Wednesday 31 October? As I understand it, every seat in Westminster Hall has now been sold, but there is always an opportunity for returns, if hon. Members have not thought to come to that event. I think and hope that it will be a very special occasion.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Soldiers of all faiths and of no faith came together to help us in the great war. What plans does the Church have to include all faiths in this commemoration, so that we can bring people together?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The resources I referred to on the Church website to assist parishes in preparing for the marking of the Armistice include a really interesting monologue entitled, “Steps towards Reconciliation”, which looks at ways to bring people of very different backgrounds together. The Archbishop of Canterbury supported the call by the former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, that all faiths be represented at the Cenotaph to show, in an act of solidarity, that people of all faiths and of none will never forget the sacrifice that was made to keep us free.

Employment and Support Allowance Underpayments

10.39 am

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement on the updated figures on the employment and support allowance underpayments.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): The Department is correcting some historical underpayments of ESA that arose while migrating people from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance. We realise how important it is to get this matter fixed. The mistakes clearly should not have happened and it is vital that the situation is sorted as quickly as possible.

For the initial stage of the exercise, we expect to review around 320,000 cases, of which around 105,000 are likely to be due arrears. We now have a team of more than 400 staff working through these cases and have paid around £120 million of arrears. We expect to complete the vast majority of this part of the exercise by April 2019, and we have to date completed all cases where an individual is terminally ill and has responded to the review, thereby ensuring that they receive due priority. The additional cases will be undertaken throughout the course of 2019.

The announcement in July to pay cases back to the point of conversion requires us to review an additional 250,000 cases, of which we estimate around 75,000 could be due arrears. We will undertake this work throughout the course of 2019. An additional 400 members of staff will be joining the team throughout this month and November, and we will be assigning further staff throughout the review of the 250,000 cases. That will enable us to complete this very important activity at pace.

The Department has prioritised checking the claims of individuals who, from our systems, we know to be terminally ill. To date, we have completed all cases from the initial 320,000. Where an individual is terminally ill and has responded to the review, we want to ensure that they get that money as soon as possible. We are therefore now contacting cases identified as most likely to be have been underpaid according to our systems. Some of those cases will undoubtedly be the most complex ones.

The Department yesterday published an ad hoc statistical publication, setting out further detail on the progress we have made in processing cases, and revised estimates of the impacts of the exercise, including details on the number of claimants due arrears and the amounts likely to be paid. Yesterday, I also updated the frequently asked questions guide and deposited it in the Library, and I will continue to update the House.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank Mr Speaker for granting this urgent question.

Yesterday, it emerged that up to 180,000 ill and disabled people have been underpaid vital social security dating back to 2011. In July this year, the Government initially estimated that 70,000 ill and disabled people were underpaid, but it is now clear that more than double that amount were underpaid £5,000 on average, after having been wrongly migrated from incapacity benefit to contributions-based ESA, thereby denying

them the additional social security support payments such as the severe disability premium. It has taken the Government six years to acknowledge these mistakes and seven years to find out how many disabled people have actually been affected. Some disabled people will wait 10 years to receive back payments.

The Department for Work and Pensions now estimates that it will pay up to £1 billion as a result of this shambolic error, so will the Minister tell us what mechanisms the Department has in place to ensure that the timeline for repayment is followed? Will she ensure that she will keep this House updated? Will her Department pay compensation to those who have been pushed into rent arrears, debt and destitution? What support will the Department provide to the estates of the ill and disabled people who have tragically passed away before receiving their back payment? How much of the Government's total expenditure on social security is spent on underpayments, and what actions are the Government taking to put this right? Given the scale of the error made transferring people to ESA, how can the Government ensure that they will get it right when transferring up to 1 million disabled people on to universal credit? Perhaps the most important question is this: will the Minister apologise to the almost 200,000 disabled people and their families who have been denied vital social security support?

Sarah Newton: We first came to the House to talk about this issue last December, and we have regularly updated the House since. I myself have already apologised. Clearly, this was a dreadful administrative error in the Department and should not have happened. The permanent secretary has also apologised to the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office for the administrative mistakes.

It is important to recognise that, when people were transferring across from IB to ESA, a very paternalistic approach was taken, meaning the claimant was not involved in the transfer at all. All the funding they were receiving from the Department was transferred across, so nobody had anything taken away from them; rather, people missed the opportunity to receive additional support by way of an additional premium. We are now making sure, by reviewing these cases, that people get everything they are entitled to, because it is important that our benefits system benefits those who are entitled to it.

The hon. Lady raises important questions about what we have learned. We have learned a great deal from this exercise. As we have regularly told the House and Select Committees—the permanent secretary was before the Work and Pensions Select Committee only yesterday answering questions—the culture and mechanisms in the Department for spotting errors have been fundamentally reviewed. As we have discussed at length—this is a matter of public record—people in the Department and stakeholders came forward and pointed out some of the problems with the migration, but the Department responded in the belief that they were a series of one-off errors.

By 2014, it was recognised that some people were not being migrated accurately, and guidance was put in place. These were administrative errors that occurred in the Department, and officials took the appropriate action to the best of their ability. In fact, it was thanks to the good housekeeping of the DWP that the scale of

the error was spotted. It was during the routine work undertaken on fraud and error that it was detected. At that point, Ministers were told, and they then undertook the administrative exercises that have led to the situation today.

As the Minister responsible now, I am looking towards the next huge migration of people—from ESA to universal credit—and the Secretary of State has made it absolutely clear that we will take an extremely careful test-and-learn approach and make sure that this time we involve the claimant in the migration. That is how we will avoid the situation reoccurring.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The Minister has rightly apologised, and I, too, apologise, because I was the responsible Minister during part of the migration. Mistakes happen in all Governments—they happened during the 13 years Labour was in government and before that when we were in government. The question is how we handle it. In a Department with a budget in excess of £250 billion a year, mistakes will be made, but will the Minister make sure, where compensation payments are required—because there will be people who have suffered—that we admit it and address it, rather than taking a partisan attitude, which I am sorry to say we have heard here today? Mistakes were made before, and mistakes have been made now. We have to address that today.

Sarah Newton: I appreciate what my right hon. Friend says. As I have made clear from the start, and as is completely supported by the Secretary of State, my focus is to fix the problem as soon as possible. We have put in considerable additional resource to make sure people get back payments as soon as possible. As far as possible, we are reaching out and getting the money to those who will most benefit from it.

I also want to reassure the House that the families of people who would have benefited from this additional payment and who tragically have died are being contacted. We are trying to find their families so that they can have that money.

Then there is the whole issue of whether people have missed out on passported benefits; I think that is the point that my right hon. Friend was raising. Each passported benefit is the responsibility of the Government Department concerned, and it would be very impractical for us to find out whether people accessed particular schemes. For example, the Department of Health, as we all know, has a low-income prescription scheme that some people might have accessed and some might not have done. We are going through the process of, wherever possible, making sure that people get the money that they should have as soon as possible. We have ongoing discussions with the other Departments that have passported benefits to make sure that people on low incomes get those benefits.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is absolutely staggering that this error has happened on the DWP's part. The fact that it was allowed to happen over so many years should be shocking, but actually it is not, because I and many of my colleagues see, week in, week out—every single week—the absolute ineptitude of the Department for Work and Pensions. I have a lot of respect for the Minister, but to suggest that this was

somehow due to a housekeeping issue on the part of the DWP really is laughable, because it has been an absolutely unacceptable situation.

Will the DWP be undertaking investigations to find out what impact having less money has had on these people? How many of them were forced into poverty, and how many had to use food banks? How many suffered physically or emotionally as a result of this catastrophic error, and was their condition impacted? What investigations are the Department undertaking to ensure that similar errors have not been repeated? How is the Minister strengthening the Department's internal mechanisms to ensure that these errors can be rectified more quickly in future?

Sarah Newton: The permanent secretary has been discussing with the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office the very substance of the hon. Gentleman's question about strengthening procedures within the Department to make sure that this does not happen again. The National Audit Office made a series of recommendations to the Department about strengthening procedures within the Department which the permanent secretary has accepted and which are now in place. For example, if members of staff or stakeholders raise concerns about something going wrong or some unintended consequences with regard to the administration of benefits, they are referred to a committee in the Department and those matters are properly considered. We have much wider and deeper stakeholder engagement. It is particularly important now, as we move forward in designing the new benefit of universal credit, that stakeholders work with disabled people themselves—who are obviously experts on their own condition—and with us to shape those processes to make sure that we absolutely get them right. I am absolutely determined to make sure that that is the case.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I welcome the Minister's apology and the comments she has made about system learning—that is extremely important. How long does she envisage it will take before everyone affected is repaid the money they are owed?

Sarah Newton: We are working as fast as we possibly can, and we confidently expect everyone to be paid by the end of next year. As I say, we prioritised the people who we think are most likely to have been affected by the underpayments so that they can have their money fastest. We have regularly updated the House. We released the statistics yesterday so that the House could be fully apprised of the situation, and I will continue to do that.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker, for having to head off to the Select Committee meeting in a moment.

Will the Minister confirm how much of the £1 billion underpayment now being cited is due to payments made before October 2014, thanks to the Child Poverty Action Group's successful court action, and thanks only to that? When Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs makes someone overpay tax going back years due to official error, they are paid interest and often compensation. Will the Minister confirm that these ESA recipients, who are often in a much worse position than taxpayers, will receive similar interest payments backdated to when their payments should have been made?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. I know that she does fantastic work on the Work and Pensions Committee, and no doubt we will discuss this further at the Committee.

Let us be really clear about what happened. The advice that the Department got was that section 27 of the Social Security Act 1998 applied. That was why we felt we had to make the decision to back-pay to 2014. When additional information came forward from the National Audit Office and the Child Poverty Action Group about official error, the Secretary of State took the decision that, of course, we must do what the law says and go right back to the point of conversion. It was not in any way that the Government were trying not to do the right thing. We have proactively been utterly transparent and open with the House about this error, and we want to fix it as soon as possible.

The hon. Lady asked about the two phases. The first group of people that we are looking at date back to pre-2014 and the second group are from 2014. We have started to make payments to both groups of people, and so far we have paid out £420 million to the pre-2014 group.¹

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): We are talking about some of the most vulnerable people in society, who will be assisted by either carers or charities. Can my hon. Friend update the House on what assistance is being given to charities and carers? Is there a helpline or somewhere that people who may not be contacted by the Department can seek help and assistance?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for the most disadvantaged people in society, so I would expect no less a question from him. To reassure him, I visited the main centre in Oldham where we are contacting people who we feel may have been affected and then beginning to collect information, so that we can ensure that we pay them what they are owed. We are being very careful to ensure that we send letters, and in the letter there is information about a helpline that people can call.

We are very happy to speak to people's carers. As my hon. Friend says, some people with severe disabilities may not be able to engage with us, and people with mental health conditions may be anxious and not want to engage with us. I was incredibly impressed by the care, compassion and professionalism of my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions in Oldham who are undertaking this very important exercise.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The National Audit Office did not find the Department to be transparent when it was raising concerns about this; it found it to be defensive. Unfortunately, that has characterised the Department for a number of years around universal credit, as the NAO has pointed out in the past. With this much bigger transfer ahead, which the Minister mentioned, are there any proposals to change the culture of the Department and to be more open when problems of this kind are raised?

Sarah Newton: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's question, and I deeply respect the work that he has done throughout his time in Parliament to stand up for the most vulnerable people in our society. I

can reassure him that we are learning a lot of lessons from what happened when we migrated people from incapacity benefit to ESA. I think he was in the House when the Labour party created the work capability assessment and ESA. We have been working very hard to improve that benefit and to ensure that we learn lessons.

These problems arose because of the way that the migration was handled, and I am determined to ensure that when we go forward into UC, claimants are involved, to ensure that they are not missing out on any of the benefits to which they are entitled. We are working very closely with disabled people, people with health conditions, charities, citizens advice bureaux and disability rights organisations to ensure that we get that process absolutely right.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Can my hon. Friend confirm how those affected will be communicated with and how quickly? Is appropriate guidance and advice being cascaded to commonly used community advice services?

Sarah Newton: Once we scan the cases of those who have been underpaid to see who is most likely to benefit, we write to them and give them a telephone number so that we can work with them to complete their form as quickly as possible. We of course very much welcome the support that people get from carers and other professionals to do that. There is a telephone line, and we do work very carefully and considerately to make sure that people can work with us as easily as possible.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My constituent L has been without ESA since September 2017 and has been surviving on personal independence payments. After lodging an appeal with a sick note, he should have been put on the appeal payments rate, but he was not, despite the intervention of his support worker, until I intervened, which is not satisfactory. He is now receiving the appeal rate, but even if his appeal was successful today, he would be owed over £4,000—money he needs—and he still has no appeal date. I know the DWP staff are doing their best, but they have told my staff that L has slipped through the net. Is the system not supposed to be the net? Does the Minister think this is acceptable?

Sarah Newton: I clearly do not think that that case is acceptable at all. Clearly, there was a mistake there. I am pleased that the hon. Lady has been able to intervene and that the gentleman is now getting the benefit to which he is entitled. We are always working to improve our processes and our systems.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I commend the Minister, who is a decent person? She is an excellent Minister, and she is doing a great job of dealing with an issue that predates her period as a Minister by an awful long time. She should be commended for the work she is doing in trying to put this matter right. That is in stark contrast, I might say, to the Labour party.

My hon. Friend the Minister will recall the scandal of tax credits, when half the people were paid incorrectly—some underpaid, some overpaid and millions paid the wrong amount—and those people are still, in many

1. [Official Report, 22 October 2018, Vol. 648, c.2MC.]

cases, owed those debts today. May I commend her for the work she is doing? She should not allow herself to be sidetracked by Labour Members, who sound all indignant when it suits them, but when they were in office and tax credits were introduced—I believe the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) was in government at the time—they made a complete Horlicks of it and never fully cleared up the mess they created.

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. It is an honour and a privilege to have this job, and I am absolutely determined that we will do everything we can to make sure that people get the back payments they rightly deserve. He makes a very good point about the absolute devastation that tax credits caused to so many people's lives, and he is quite right to remind us of that. I want to point out that when people were transferred from IB to ESA, nobody had a loss of income. What we are talking about is money to which they might have been eligible at the time but did not get at the time, but everybody transferred across on the benefit they had.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I say to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) that I am sorry, but two wrongs do not make a right, and his party has been in government for eight years—I repeat, eight years—now.

This involves hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable people in our society, which I am afraid to say makes me angry and very sad. Given the time that has elapsed since this came to light, some if not many of the individuals who are known to be terminally ill will, sadly, have died. Their loved ones will have lost a loved and treasured family member in the knowledge that they had to endure increased hardship due to wrongly withheld benefits. What are Ministers doing to console those families and to compensate them for their loss?

Sarah Newton: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that these are some of the most vulnerable people in society. That is why we have put in place everything that we can to reach out to them and make sure that they get the benefits they absolutely deserve to have, and where people, tragically, have passed away, that their families receive those benefits. I have apologised, the Secretary of State has apologised and the permanent secretary has apologised. This mistake should not have happened, and we are absolutely determined to sort it out as swiftly as we possibly can.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am afraid that the Minister coming to the Chamber and praising the Department for good housekeeping is extremely ill-judged and inappropriate in such a serious situation. Of course, this is just the top of the hill. I have had vulnerable constituents waiting for up to a year, and receiving reduced payments or nothing at all. Before this scandal even came out, one of my constituents had to be paid £2,000 backdated, but only—like my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire)—after my and my team's intervention. Will the Minister tell us how many claims are allowed following an appeal, and how long is the current waiting time for those appeals?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Gentleman is now bringing up cases of people who applied for ESA more recently—I think that is what he is talking about—which is different

from the people who were migrated across from incapacity benefit to ESA. Clearly, it is really important that we get the decision right first time for everyone. That is what we absolutely want to do: make sure that people applying for ESA are treated with respect and dignity, and get the right result.

I always look at the claimant experience, because behind every statistic is a real live person. The independent data shows that, when asked how they experienced the work capability assessment, over 90% of ESA claimants are satisfied. Obviously, some people, about 9% of people who apply for ESA, take their cases to appeal because they are not satisfied with the results. About 4% of those cases are upheld. Often, that is a case of more medical information being brought forward. I do not want there to be any appeals; I want to make sure we make the decisions right first time. That is why we put in place independent reviews and put in a huge amount of work to improve the work capability assessment and improve the benefit. *[Interruption.]* From a sedentary position, people are shouting out, "How long is the waiting time for appeals?" *[Interruption.]* I think the custom in the House is that Members rise to their feet to ask a question. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Lots of Members want to get in. We need short and accurate answers.

Sarah Newton: I want to come on to answer the question about the waiting time for appeals. That is the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice. I am working very carefully with the MOJ to reduce the amount of time people have to wait for appeals. It is coming down. In the last set of statistics I saw, it had come down by 9%. Over 200 judges have been recruited to the tribunal service, so we can see improvements—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Can I just say that it is not fair to keep going? I am sure there will be a written question to which there will definitely be an answer.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will the Minister confirm that the money will not come from existing budgets? Will she also make representations to the Chancellor to ensure the extra spending will not impact on additional spending urgently needed in other areas, such as universal credit?

Sarah Newton: I very much want to confirm that there is no impact on any of our existing benefits claimants. For anybody who is on benefits now, their money is not impacted by this whatsoever. We are absolutely making sure we have the right resources, both in staff and in paying out these benefits. It will not have an adverse effect on existing claimants.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Due to the serious nature of this issue, I am surprised that there has had to be an urgent question, not a ministerial statement. I am also disappointed that the Secretary of State is not here, because of the seriousness of the situation. Thirdly, I am very disappointed that the Minister is talking about action at pace, when it seems that it will be months and months and months ahead before this will be resolved. My question is this:

[Diana Johnson]

what is the impact of disability premiums on tax credits? Will they also be repaid by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs?

Sarah Newton: Let us be clear: the Secretary of State came to the House last December and we have made a series of statements. Just yesterday, there was a written statement. We have put out information. The choice of urgent questions is a matter for Mr Speaker; it is not a matter for us. We have regularly updated the House with written ministerial statements. We had oral questions on Monday, so there was the opportunity for Opposition Members to raise these questions then. There was an opportunity again during yesterday's debate. We are regularly in this House. We are absolutely accountable to Parliament and will continue to update the House regularly.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): For the record, as stats were published yesterday, this could not have been raised on Monday. The Secretary of State advised that the disabled would be better off under universal credit. Where can those calculations be found? Other statistics have shown that the disabled will be worse off—this affects 750,000 people. Furthermore, constituents have written to me regarding work capability assessments and feel that leading questions have been asked and wrong decisions made on claims. However, the Minister said that on ESA, the Government have tightened what they are doing now, things have been looked into and they are trying to make it more streamlined and more consistent. On the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), I would like to know what safeguards are in place to ensure that vulnerable people are protected and assessments are fair.

Sarah Newton: The work capability assessment was at the heart of the hon. Lady's question, and it has been the subject of consultations and huge amounts of stakeholder engagement. We are absolutely determined to continuously improve the work capability assessment. Healthcare professionals who undertake the assessments are all medically qualified and they are all trained. We have a huge amount of stakeholder engagement working with us constantly to improve the work capability assessment and in fact, the whole claimant journey through ESA.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Melanie Onn.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker; that was unexpected—I thought I was in trouble.

I have to say, I am a little disappointed with the Minister. This is such a sensitive and incredibly important issue; a little more contrition at the Dispatch Box really would not have gone amiss. I am pleased, however, about the Department's acceptance that where there are errors on its part, back-payments will be made. In that spirit—of accepting the principle of back-payments when errors are made—may I ask whether this will require primary legislation? I asked about kinship carers and back-payments when erroneous decisions had been made by the Department, and I was told that primary legislation would be required to make those back-payments. Is the same true for these ESA back-payments?

Sarah Newton: I reassure the hon. Lady, if she has any doubt in her mind, that we take this matter extremely seriously. We want to make sure that everybody who is underpaid gets their payment as soon as possible. We absolutely have to get this right. We talked about how vulnerable some people are and the complexity. It is really important that we get this right. There is a lot of legislation around official error and the laws that apply to underpayments and how they should be repaid.

The hon. Lady has raised a specific case that I am not familiar with, so the best thing to do is for me to write to her on that specific case, because I do not want to mislead the House in any way.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): A constituent of mine, a young woman with fibromyalgia, had her ESA stopped and was told by the DWP to move over on to universal credit while waiting for a mandatory reconsideration. My understanding is that if she had done so, she would not be able to move back on to ESA even if the mandatory reconsideration was successful. How are people being tracked through this labyrinthine system and how certain is the Minister that everybody will get back-payments who is entitled to them, particularly if they have moved from one benefit to another over this period?

Sarah Newton: It is always very difficult to comment without the full details of the specific case. As the hon. Lady knows, I am always happy to meet Members of the House and go through particular cases. If I may talk in general terms, ESA within UC is the same: people apply, they have a work capability assessment and they are assessed. I reassure her that the process is the same and that if the Department makes mistakes, we do back-pay, as we have heard today. But let us meet on that specific case, so that I can give her the best possible advice for her constituent.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister's apology is welcome, but it brings little comfort, as she will appreciate, to anyone who has been affected. At least she is acknowledging that things could be resolved.

There has been much talk today across the House about whether this is our fault or the Government's fault, and everything else. I make the point to the Minister that in September last year a UN report on the Government's policies on disabled people by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities said that those policies were creating a "human catastrophe" for disabled people. That is something that has never been put to a Labour Government. Does she not understand that this massive underpayment of ESA is only reinforcing the fact that the Government are destroying disabled people's lives?

Sarah Newton: I utterly reject the suggestion that we are destroying the lives of disabled people. We did not agree with the United Nations at the time, because we did not think that it had taken into consideration all the evidence that we had given to it. I published a full response to the UN, which I hope very much that the hon. Gentleman will read. It is in the Library, and it shows the huge amount of support that we are giving to disabled people.

Benefits for disabled people in our country have never been higher, but we are not at all complacent. We know that there is more to do. I want all disabled people in our country to be able to live their lives independently and play their full part in society, and we will continue to ensure that that is the case.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): A constituent who rang my office this morning was concerned that if they received the money that was underpaid, it might then be clawed back from other benefits. Will the Minister confirm that that will not happen?

Sarah Newton: That is a very good question, and I can assure the hon. Lady's constituent that it will not happen. The full details are in the "frequently asked questions" section in the Library.

Business of the House

11.15 am

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

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

MONDAY 22 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Offensive Weapons Bill.

TUESDAY 23 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Civil Liability Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 24 OCTOBER—Consideration of a Business of the House motion, followed by all stages of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill.

THURSDAY 25 OCTOBER—General debate on folic acid fortification, followed by a general debate on the inclusive transport strategy.

FRIDAY 26 OCTOBER—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 29 October will include the following:

MONDAY 29 OCTOBER—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Budget statement.

TUESDAY 30 OCTOBER—Continuation of the Budget debate.

WEDNESDAY 31 OCTOBER—Continuation of the Budget debate.

THURSDAY 1 NOVEMBER—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

FRIDAY 2 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

Colleagues will also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, the House will rise at the close of business on Thursday 14 February and return on Monday 25 February.

Today the restoration and renewal Bill will be published in draft, and I think the House should be proud that progress is at last being made on proposals that will safeguard Parliament for generations to come. Today is also World Menopause Day. Greater awareness of the impact on millions of women is important if we are to ensure that women at all ages and stages can lead fulfilling and productive lives.

Finally, I am sure that the whole House will want to congratulate you, Sir Lindsay, on your visit to Buckingham Place yesterday to receive your knighthood.

Valerie Vaz: Congratulations from our side of the House too, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business. Let me start by paying tribute to Patricia Hollis, who has sadly died. She made an incredible contribution to public life. I know that she will be missed by the Labour party, but I also know that the whole country is at a loss without her amazing talents.

I am pleased to learn that the Offensive Weapons Bill will be back on Monday, but I think that it would have been helpful if the Government had informed the Opposition in time. There were three statements last Monday, and two points of order on the change of business. There were also three hours remaining, during which we could have debated the Bill, but the House

[Valerie Vaz]

rose early, at 7 pm. Will the Leader of the House ensure that all parties are told of any change of business as soon as possible?

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the February recess dates. It is half-term for many parents. May I try again, and ask her to discuss the Easter recess dates with her colleagues?

The Leader of the House said that on Wednesday the House would debate the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill. Will she join me in welcoming members of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which will hold its 57th plenary session this weekend? They will come to Parliament next Tuesday, and will meet Mr Speaker—and hopefully you as well, Mr Deputy Speaker. Both the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) have worked hard to promote co-operation between the UK and Irish Parliaments, which will be very important in the forthcoming months.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) is the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery, and wanted to remind us that today is Anti-slavery Day. The Walk Free Foundation estimates that there are 136,000 victims of modern slavery in the UK; in 2014 there were 13,000. The charity Anti-Slavery International estimates that there are 2,118 children identified as potential victims of child trafficking in the UK, a 66% increase on the year before. But the charity has said that the UK Government do not have a coherent plan for preventing child trafficking. May we have a statement on what the Government are doing to tackle modern slavery in the UK?

It is Black History Month and tomorrow is wear red day, a campaign by Show Racism the Red Card. I and many other hon. Members signed a petition for the removal of a sociology textbook approved by the exam board AQA, which is presumably also approved by the Department for Education, which perpetuated an untrue racial stereotype about African-Caribbean men. The book has now been withdrawn.

Why does it take a petition or legal action by the Child Poverty Action Group about employment and support allowance underpayments for vulnerable people to get the money to which they are entitled? Now, after pressure, universal credit has also been delayed. We needed the reassurances that the Leader of the House gave last week that we can debate regulations on the Floor of the House in the usual way, but I want more than that from her—I want to be told that we are going to debate the managed migration to UC, whenever that happens, on the Floor of the House and have a vote.

The Government clearly cannot manage their Departments, nor, it seems, can they be fiscally credible unless they are taking money from the vulnerable. We have seen that in Tory-controlled Northampton. The shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has asked about this: can the Leader of the House say what NEA Properties, a company owned by cash-strapped Northamptonshire County Council, spent £1.5 million on? Nobody knows what that is about. It is said it was spent on unspecified “projects”; there were no external checks.

Turning to the European Union, can the Leader of the House update the House on whether the Government are on top of the 800 statutory instruments that need to be laid before Parliament before the UK exits the EU? The Journal Office has said that only 33 negative SIs relating to the UK’s exit from the EU have been laid and only 46 proposed SIs are currently going through the European Statutory Instruments Committee. Last week a Delegated Legislation Committee sadly took one hour to discuss one SI, and the Minister present did not even have the necessary information about the impact of the SI, nor whether the Government had conducted an equalities assessment. Can the Leader of the House give us a timetable for when the EU SIs will be laid and the affirmative ones debated?

Is Parliament sovereign? Last night we learned that the Prime Minister cannot win in a straight vote without fixing the rules. The Government have fought at every stage to avoid a vote on a final meaningful deal. Our clever shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union added those words for a reason—“a meaningful vote”, he said, not a meaningless vote. Has anyone checked with “Dicey on the Constitution”? Can the Leader of the House confirm that the Government are not using the Procedure Committee to take sovereignty away from Parliament by not giving Parliament a meaningful vote on the final deal? This is not a minority dictatorship; this is a parliamentary democracy, and Parliament is sovereign. This is the most outrageous power grab by the Government that has ever been seen. Will the Leader of the House make a statement to the House on the constitutional position of not allowing an amendable motion, and will she do her constitutional duty of being the House’s representative in Cabinet?

Staying with the EU, there is good news: we congratulate England on beating Spain, in Spain, for the first time in 38 years. Who says you can’t win with kids? And it seems that the full English special is back on the menu, and in Climate Change Week, the “fracking three” are free. We have had “Girl with Balloon” shredded, and now it seems that Banksy’s latest is “Woman with Chequers Plan shredded.”

Andrea Leadsom: I should like to start by agreeing with the hon. Lady about Baroness Hollis, who has passed away—she will be much missed. The House owes her a great debt of gratitude for her campaigning on behalf of the poor and vulnerable in our society.

The hon. Lady asked about Monday’s business on the Offensive Weapons Bill. As was explained at the time, a group of important amendments was tabled, but a knife had already been agreed for 7 pm, which would have allowed less than half an hour to debate those amendments. It was felt better to reschedule the debate and, as she will have noticed, I have indeed rescheduled it for next week.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Easter recess. I am pleased to hear that she is happy about the February recess, but I am not surprised to hear that she has something else to complain about. That is par for the course for her, I am sorry to say.

I completely echo the hon. Lady’s welcome for the members of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. We look forward to hearing what they have to say, and we all celebrate the co-operation between the British and Irish groups.

The hon. Lady highlighted the importance of Anti-slavery Day, and she is absolutely right to say that it is an opportunity to raise awareness of the scale of modern slavery in the United Kingdom and abroad. There are an estimated 40 million victims worldwide, which shows that these crimes are far from having been consigned to the history books. As she will know, the Government have made tackling modern slavery a top domestic and foreign policy priority, including by introducing the first Modern Slavery Act in 2015, which was introduced by the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary. This is an important priority for the Government.

The hon. Lady mentioned Black History Month. She might be delighted, as I was, to read in the press that more is being done to ensure that more of the history of black races in the world is being brought into our history books. That is incredibly important, as the history books have been far too white-focused, and it will be interesting to see how that imbalance is addressed.

The hon. Lady asked about debating statutory instruments on the Floor of the House. She knows that it is a matter of parliamentary convention that when the Opposition make a reasonable request for a debate on an SI on the Floor of the House, time is allowed for such a debate. I think the Government have demonstrated in this Session that we have been willing to provide such time. In fact, we have agreed to more such requests from the Opposition than at any time since 1997.

The hon. Lady mentioned Northamptonshire County Council. She will be aware that that is my own local county council, and this is an issue that I am incredibly concerned about. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has brought in commissioners to deal with the specific issues of Northamptonshire County Council, and the local councillors are making proposals on how to ensure that my constituents and all other Northamptonshire residents get the best value for money as well as good services.

The hon. Lady asked specifically about the statutory instruments relating to the Brexit process. I had a very good informal meeting with the sifting Committee yesterday, and I was able to assure its members that we will be giving them as much information as possible on the flow of statutory instruments relating to Brexit, and that, having changed the process for monitoring the flow and quality of SIs, I am confident that this will be manageable, that it is in line with other parliamentary Sessions, and that all those SIs will be brought forward in good time for exit day.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about the meaningful vote. The letter that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union wrote to the Procedure Committee on 10 October was in response to a letter from the Committee to the Prime Minister asking for views on the meaningful vote. The House will be aware that the question of whether such debates should be organised through a business of the House motion, and the form of any such motion, will be in the hands of the House itself, which has the power to amend, approve or reject such a motion. It is also important to recognise the need for the House to consider the question that will in reality be before the United Kingdom, which is whether or not to accept the deal that the Government have negotiated with the European Union. I encourage all hon. Members to look at the incoming letter from the Procedure Committee dated

17 September and the response from the Secretary of State, as well as, importantly, the appendix that sets out the legal position.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The news of Wednesday's business is most welcome, but will the Leader of the House say why it is necessary to conclude all stages of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill in one day? The matter to which it relates now dates from January 2017, and it is vital to get things right.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Bill will address certain pressing matters, so a swift process has been considered necessary, but there will be an opportunity to debate that next Wednesday.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. We welcome your knighthood and heartily congratulate you on surviving the sword to the shoulders without any mishap.

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. She has certainly been busy this week, has she not? It was she who hosted the pizza putsch—the Cabinet's calzone coup—where the Brexit mutineers ensured over garlic bread that whatever the Prime Minister cobbles together will be wood-fired. Amid all this Margherita madness, nothing changes, and this whole disastrous Brexit is approaching its depressing end game. There are no good toppings left—just the anchovies and the pineapple. Whether Brexit is crispy or deep pan, it is already unpalatable to the EU, to this House, and most definitely to the pizza-munching Cabinet mutineers.

The Leader of the House clarified a couple of things about the meaningful vote. We are grateful that the motion will be amendable, but there must be no suggestion that there will be a binary choice between a disastrous Brexit and the horrors of no deal. This was all about taking back control and the sovereignty of this House, so it must be up to the House to determine the biggest decision that it has made for a few decades. We must be reassured here and today that there will not be a binary choice.

Finally, who once said:

"I don't think the UK should leave the EU. It would be a disaster for our economy"?

Was it Michel Barnier, Pete Wishart, or Andrea Leadsom? May we have a debate on cognitive memory recall, and perhaps ask the Leader of the House to lead for us on that one?

Andrea Leadsom: I love the hon. Gentleman's interventions. I must say that I am really grateful to the many right hon. and hon. Members and members of the press who have been so determined to find out exactly what went on in the Leader of the House's office on Monday night, and I think I can fully reassure all colleagues on three very important points: first, we went for a thin and crispy base; secondly, there were absolutely no cheesy bites; and, thirdly, I made sure that there were fresh carrot sticks for all my guests. I hope that I have now cleared that up.

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

The hon. Gentleman asks about the meaningful vote—he is right to do so. On the one hand, anything other than a straightforward approval of the deal will bring huge uncertainty for businesses, consumers and citizens but, on the other hand, any motion of the House is a matter for the House to decide. As we have noted on many occasions, the Speaker will decide whether to accept amendments in the usual way.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about my comments, which I did anticipate, because he tweeted that he was going to ask me—[*Interruption.*] Yes, it was helpful. I want to address the matter seriously, because a lot of people are concerned. When I was a Back Bencher, I established with Conservative colleagues something called the Fresh Start Project, which was about seeking fundamental reform of the European Union, and it could be said that we really took our duties seriously. We travelled the EU and met like-minded politicians from both sides of the political spectrum. We really did our homework, and proposed a profound, fundamental set of reforms right across all areas of the EU, with a genuine desire to see a reformed EU that the UK would remain in. As someone who grew up as a member of the EU, as an awful lot of people in this country did, it seemed that reform was the No. 1 priority.

It became apparent during the discussions between the previous Prime Minister and the EU, however, that reform is simply not on the table. That was very clear, and that was when my opinion changed. The European Union cannot expect to trap countries into its ambitions, which is why I am a very proud Brexiteer and very keen to promote the superb future that the UK will have once we leave the European Union next March.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): There was misreporting about our Procedure Committee yesterday. We wrote to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, and on no occasion did he ask us to change the rules. The situation, as outlined by the Clerks, is very clear: if there is no deal, the Government must lay a motion in neutral terms under section 13(4) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Such a motion is unamendable, and attempts to politicise the office of the Speaker are completely outwith our rules and procedures. If there is a deal, there will be a vote under section 13(1) on an amendable motion, but if the Government are defeated in that vote, it defeats the deal.

In either case, Brexit proceeds under our procedure. It is now unstoppable and nobody in Parliament—[*Interruption.*] No, under the existing Act, nobody in Parliament can stop it, except the Government. Will the Government give me a categorical assurance that, whether or not there is a deal, or whether a deal is defeated, Brexit proceeds at the end of March and the Government will not delay it by a single day?

Andrea Leadsom: The United Kingdom will be leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019. To clarify again: once a deal with the EU has been agreed, Parliament will have a vote on the withdrawal agreement and the terms of our future partnership. Parliament will have the choice to accept or reject that deal. If Parliament accepts the deal, we will introduce an EU withdrawal

agreement Bill to implement the agreement in domestic legislation; if Parliament chooses to reject the deal, the Government will be unable to ratify the agreement.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am surprised by the revelation that the Leader of the House provides carrot sticks to her guests—carrot and stick all in one handy bite.

I am also a little surprised that the Leader of the House did not announce the provisional business for the short week commencing 5 November, which will be the last opportunity to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the great war before 11 November 2018. I had hoped for some clarity on that.

I welcome the fact that the first debate on Thursday 25 October will be on folic acid fortification, which was the subject of a Backbench Business Committee application by my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) to commemorate Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Awareness Week. I hope that the Chair will look favourably on him and call him early in the debate.

I have been thinking about this for a long time, and I do not like to abuse my position as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, but may we have a debate in Government time on local government finance? The Government have, over the past eight years, incrementally withdrawn the revenue support grant from local authorities, and they continue to do so, but they have done nothing to rectify the other side of the equation, which is council tax, the council tax base and how council tax is raised. The situation is having a much more detrimental impact in some councils than others. We need to air that in a debate so we can see how to get a real solution, which will benefit councils that have experienced the greatest losses.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for lobbying for a debate to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day. I have had representations from many hon. Members and I seek to find time for such a debate. I will make an announcement on that next week.

The hon. Gentleman asks for a debate in Government time on local government finance, and he might find time to raise that issue during the Budget debates.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): May I also congratulate you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on your richly deserved great honour? Tomorrow is breast cancer care day, and we will all be wearing something pink. Some of us look nicer in pink than others, but it is an important day as we highlight breast cancer, which is still a killer for so many of our constituents.

May I declare an interest and request a debate on the persecution of veterans who served in Northern Ireland, as I did through the '70s and '80s and in Operation Banner? It is fundamentally wrong that our ex-servicemen are being treated like terrorists. It is scaring them to death to be dragged into a judicial process that was resolved years and years ago. They have been forgotten, I am afraid, by Governments of parties on both sides of the House. They did not ask to go to Northern Ireland; they were sent. There were sent to do a job to keep the peace, and it is fundamentally wrong that they are being prosecuted today.

Andrea Leadsom: I am extremely sympathetic to my right hon. Friend's comments. Without any doubt, we owe a vast debt of gratitude to the heroism and bravery of all our soldiers and police officers who upheld the rule of law and were themselves accountable to it. He will appreciate that the current system in Northern Ireland is not working well for soldiers, police officers or victims. I encourage him to raise his question directly with Ministers during Defence questions on Monday 22 October or Northern Ireland questions on Wednesday 31 October.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Yesterday the chair of the inquiry into infected blood, Sir Brian Langstaff, published a letter to the Cabinet Office in which he calls for decisive action on the financial support available to those infected and those affected. The inquiry is likely to take several years to reach its conclusions, but people do not have financial security at the moment and there is different support in the different nations of the United Kingdom. I wonder whether we might have a statement from the Cabinet Office in response to Sir Brian's letter.

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who has been tireless in looking into this issue and raising it in this place. Some of my constituents have suffered due to this appalling contaminated blood problem, and she is absolutely right to raise it. If she wants to write to me, I can take up the matter directly with the Cabinet Office on her behalf.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): David Thompson started wearing women's clothes and a wig and changed his name to Karen White so that he could be moved to a female prison. Unbelievably he was, from where he sexually abused four female prisoners. His conviction was confirmed in the courts last week. Please may we have a debate on how we can stop this madness, which created four unnecessary female victims of crime? If it is not stopped, we will create further unnecessary victims of crime. This is putting women at risk, so please may we have a debate to find out how we can stop it from ever happening again?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important issue. The subject of the abuse of legal gender recognition processes has been raised a number of times in several different ways. The Government want to make the legal gender recognition process less intrusive and bureaucratic for transgender people, but at the same time to ensure that we protect women from abuse. As I understand it, the consultation is ongoing until tomorrow and I encourage my hon. Friend to feed his concerns into that.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On 1 November, importantly, cannabis-based medicines will be able to be prescribed without licence, but some patients, including Bailey Williams, a young boy from my constituency whose mother is Rachel Rankmore, have consultants who appear to be unwilling under any circumstances to prescribe cannabis-based medicines. May we have a statement from the Health Secretary about whether we can make available to these patients NHS facilities and consultants who would be willing to consider prescribing such medicines in order to relieve terrible suffering and save lives?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman says. As he will know, the Home Secretary acted very quickly to ensure that cannabis for medicinal purposes could be made available very quickly and he has taken steps to do that. However, I encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise any specific concerns he has about NHS professionals who may be unwilling to prescribe directly at Health and Social Care questions next Tuesday.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Lincolnshire's excellent police and crime commissioner, Marc Jones, has alerted me to an organised, ruthless and serious network of foreign criminals who have established the illegal supply of tobacco and alcohol on an industrial scale. These illegal cigarettes have already led to fires and fatalities in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House ask a Treasury Minister to come here, so that we can ensure that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is looking at the way these things are supplied—shops exist solely for the purposes of money laundering—and a Home Office Minister to come here, so that we can make sure that, post Brexit, with the end of free movement, these people are deported posthaste?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is raising a very serious issue—the rise in organised crime—which I know will be of concern to many hon. Members. He will be aware that the Government have invested significantly in new cyber techniques in order to be able to catch, trap and round up these organised crime gangs. He is right to raise this point and I encourage him to raise it directly with Home Office Ministers on Monday week, 29 October.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): In response to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), the Leader of the House gave us the menu for the pizza meeting last Monday night, but she did not say whether she had any champagne. Now to get serious, Orbit, a housing association, has houses in my constituency, but when I correspond with it, it uses the Data Protection Act to deny me answers on behalf of my constituents. What are we going to do about that? May we have a debate, some sort of statement or an amendment to the legislation, because this really is not good enough, as it is distancing Members from their constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is raising an important point about the responses that MPs, who are there to represent and support their constituents, receive from social housing and other public sector organisations, which might, on occasion, be seen to hide behind data protection rules. He is right to raise the matter. There should not be any limits for Members of Parliament who are legitimately representing the interests of their constituents, and I suggest he raises the issue at Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions, which will take place on Thursday 1 November.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Genomics England, a company wholly owned by the NHS, is carrying out its 100,000 genomes project, the largest of its kind in the world. It is sequencing the genomes of NHS patients with rare diseases and cancer. It is a

[*Andrew Jones*]

nationwide project, but my local trust, Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust, is participating in it. The project is designed to develop a new genomics service for the NHS and boost medical research. Please may we have a statement from a Health and Social Care Minister on this excellent project and how it will contribute to transforming the care that patients will receive?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is raising an incredibly important development in the world of genomics and big data and how we can transform healthcare. This is a very exciting time and I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate, because it is important that all right hon. and hon. Members get the chance not only to feed in their views, but to be informed about some of the amazing advances that are coming down the track.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Ian Murray.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Thank you very much, Sir Deputy Speaker. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] It is always good to crawl. The Leader of the House said to the shadow Leader of the House that the EU withdrawal Bill could be amended, rejected or accepted, but in the answer to the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), when she read her notes, she omitted the word “amended”. So may we have a meaningful debate on the meaning of the word “meaningful”? Will she confirm that the Government’s EU withdrawal deal will be amendable?

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that the House will be well aware of the fact that whether or not debate ought to be organised through a business of the House motion, and the form of any such motion, is ultimately in the hands of the House itself. The House has the power to amend, approve or reject such a motion, but it is also very important to recognise the need for the House to consider the question that is before the United Kingdom, which is whether or not to accept the deal that the Government have negotiated with the EU. Anything other than a straightforward approval of the deal would lead to great uncertainty for businesses and citizens, because any changes might mean that the Government are not in a position to ratify the deal.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): A constituent of mine was mis-sold an interest-rate hedge by Barclays bank. He was eventually paid back the money that he had paid and offered compensation of £37.50. He was then forced to sell his properties at well below their market value, despite my asking for a bit of time so that they could be sold at a reasonable price. I have written to Barclays twice to ask it to look again at the case because of the situation that they put my constituents in, but the bank has not replied to my letters. May we have a debate on banks and other institutions that simply do not respect MPs who are trying to do something on behalf of their constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises such an important point. As a member of the Treasury Committee and then as the City Minister, I was absolutely disgusted to see some of the really harrowing stories about

businesspeople who lost their livelihoods and years and years of work because of the mis-selling of all sorts of interest-rate products, including interest-rate swaps. It really was disgraceful behaviour. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Financial Conduct Authority has looked into this issue and there have been several reviews, but I absolutely agree with him that it is not acceptable for a bank simply not to reply to his request for further investigation. The Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), was looking interestedly at my hon. Friend when he asked his question, so I gently suggest that it would be a good subject for a lengthy Back-Bench debate. I am very happy to provide the time for that and would very much like to take part in such a debate myself.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on the future of the post office network? We have seen accelerated bank closures, and ATMs are disappearing in towns and villages throughout the country. The Government, and the coalition Government before it, boasted about the resource that they put into the network, but that resource has been used to close it down. We need a vision and a Government who allocate the time to direct that vision.

Andrea Leadsom: I hope I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the overall number of post offices is not reducing. On 11 October, the Post Office announced that 40 post offices—[*Interruption.*] Do hon. Members want to hear the answer? Perhaps they just like to shout me down. I am trying to answer the hon. Gentleman’s question. The overall number of post offices is not reducing. On 11 October, the Post Office announced plans to relocate 40 post offices into WHSmith stores in 2019, and WHSmith will also move to a franchise arrangement for 33 post offices that are already sited in its stores, taking the total number of post offices operated by WHSmith in its stores to more than 200.

A separate issue is when sub-postmasters decide to retire and there is a problem with finding somebody to take over the post office, but I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the change and the relocations into WHSmith stores are intended to maintain a good service for all our constituents, who often find that the opening hours of their village post office are better than those of a high street bank, and that is of benefit to them.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Stirling is an epicentre of volunteering. I am proud to tell the House that Stirling is the sole UK city candidate to be Europe’s capital of volunteering in 2020. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the volunteers in Stirling and up and down the United Kingdom who give so freely of their time, talent and means to serve in our communities? Will she support Stirling’s candidacy? May we have a debate to celebrate the massive contribution that volunteers make to the life of our country?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an excellent point. I would love to join him in paying tribute to the fantastic volunteers in Stirling and right up and down the country. The Government do recognise the huge importance of volunteering and we continue to support and encourage it. We have recently published our civil society strategy, which sets out our aim to enable everyone

to provide their own voluntary contributions throughout their lives. I wish Stirling great success with its candidacy for Europe's capital of volunteering in 2020.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): As we speak, Possibilities for Each and Every Kid in Glasgow is about to celebrate its 18th birthday. This year, it was awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service for its work encouraging young people into volunteering, outdoor play and creative arts. It has also done lots of work in schools, transforming breakfast clubs in schools such as Dalmarnock Primary. May we have a debate on the contribution of organisations such as PEEK to young people's health and wellbeing?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join the hon. Lady in congratulating that organisation on its excellent work and wishing it the best on its 18th birthday. She is right, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), to raise the important work that volunteers do right up and down the country. I share her pleasure in celebrating its success and encourage Members to seek opportunities, perhaps through a Westminster Hall debate, so that we can all share in some of the local successes in our constituencies.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): On Monday, I met representatives from the National Federation of Retail Newsagents and they echoed the concerns of shopkeepers in my Cleethorpes constituency that retail crime is not being prioritised by some police forces. They also expressed concern that, with the growing demands on the police, perhaps from the further extension of hate crime legislation, retail crime might slip even further down the list of priorities. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on retail crime and on how the police will respond to it?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right that our high streets need as much support as possible and that includes protecting them from crime. All incidents should be reported to the police to enable them to gather the intelligence necessary to be able to deal with these criminals. Often, the police are concerned that these crimes go unreported, so I encourage all those experiencing retail trade crime to report it. I can tell him that we are working hard with industry and the police, through the national retail crime steering group, to make sure that retailers have the tools that they need to prevent and manage particularly violent incidents and to allow the police to target their resources appropriately.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The Home Affairs Committee has rightly criticised the Home Office for its data handling and for losing people's immigration documents. Can we have a chance to scrutinise Ministers on this? I say that on behalf of a constituent who now has to replace two passports, four birth certificates, three DNA tests and a marriage certificate.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to the hon. Lady's point. It is unacceptable when documents get lost in that way. I encourage her to take up her constituent's issues at Home Office questions, which are on Monday 29 October.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Today is the last day of Navaratri and those of us who have been dancing the Garba and Dandiya raas feel healthier and fitter as

a result. I say to colleagues not to despair because Sharad Purnima and Diwali are coming up, so there is still more chance for greater fitness. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing Hindus, Sikhs and Jains happy Navami as we celebrate the triumph of light over darkness and good over evil? Can we have a debate in Government time on how we can use the benefits of dance to overcome childhood obesity?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I join him in wishing his constituents and others around the country happy Navami. With my own pizza-eating habits, I shall certainly be needing to take advantage of any dancing opportunities that I find.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Last week, I asked the Leader of the House when we would have a debate on the public health model that the Home Office announced we would be adopting to reduce youth violence. She helpfully said that she would consult with Home Office colleagues. Will she update the House on how those discussions went and when we are likely to have this extremely important debate?

Andrea Leadsom: I have taken up this issue with Home Office colleagues. I believe that I asked the hon. Lady to write to me if she had a specific question that she wanted me to raise with them. It is Home Office questions on 29 October, so I encourage her to raise the issue directly with the Department then.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Can we have Government statement about payday lending and the role of the Financial Conduct Authority? A recent BBC piece told the story of Danny Cheetham, whose initial £100 loan spiralled to a debt of £19,000. Many constituents have written to me with concerns about this issue, so please can we have a statement from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury about the role of the FCA, which appears to be asleep at the wheel?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that a cap was put on payday lending interest rates, although I would sympathise with him if he were to say that it is still too high; this is a genuine problem. The Government has done as much as possible to facilitate new entrants to the lending market. The Budget debate will be a good opportunity to raise this matter directly with Ministers, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to do so.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Many constituents have raised with me in recent days their dismay at the amount of tax being paid by online giants, with reports suggesting that Facebook will only be paying £7.4 million in tax. My constituents and the constituents of the Leader of the House all pay their tax, so can we have an urgent debate to ensure that these online giants start paying their taxes? Will she also press the Chancellor to ensure that he addresses this matter in the Budget in 10 days' time?

Andrea Leadsom: All hon. Members will be very sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman's point. We all agree that it is only fair that online businesses pay their fair share of taxes. The Chancellor has already made some warm noises towards addressing this issue, and I will remind him that the hon. Gentleman has raised it today.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Can we have a debate in Government time on the application of section 21 of the Housing Act 1988, because it is being used in a cavalier and callous fashion? There is a cowboy company operating in Derby known as Enabling Homes, but it is actually enabling homelessness. Last week, it completed a purchase on a block of flats in Mackworth in my constituency, and the very next day it issued section 21 notices to the tenants, evicting them in two months' time—just in time for Christmas. This is a scandal, so can we please have a debate?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very concerned to hear the hon. Gentleman's story. I agree that he should look into this matter very carefully, and I am sure that he will do so. Perhaps he will apply for an Adjournment debate on that specific issue, but I also encourage him to take it up directly with Ministers at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that there is not some fundamental problem that needs to be addressed.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Civil Nuclear Constabulary is a specialist armed police force dedicated to protecting civil nuclear sites across the UK, such as Hunterston in my constituency. The Civil Nuclear Constabulary will

"deter any attacker whose intent is the theft or sabotage of nuclear material whether static or in transit",

potentially risking their own lives for our safety. Can we have a statement on the great concern caused by the fact that raising the retirement age of these officers to 67 and 68 will render their service "unsustainable", according to the chief constable of the constabulary?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to the Civil Nuclear Constabulary. Having been an energy Minister myself, I have met some officers so I know that they take high risks and have to be very carefully trained. It is important that we recognise the fact that people are living longer and that public sector workers are all working for longer periods. Some of these officers are redeployed into other areas as they reach the end of their working lives, but the hon. Lady may well wish to raise the matter directly with Ministers at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. If she wants to write to me, I can take it up with them on her behalf.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): There are fresh reports in the press today about contamination of Pret a Manger products—in this case, seafood, which can be a serious allergen in vegetarian flatbread. These serious breaches of safety have killed people, including my constituent Natasha Ednan-Laperouse, but nothing is happening in Government. We have been told there is a review, but can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about what is being reviewed, the terms of reference and when it will report, before more people die?

Andrea Leadsom: First, may I say how sorry everybody was to hear of the death of the hon. Gentleman's constituent. It was a terribly tragic event, and we send our deepest sympathies to her family. He is right to raise the importance of the accuracy of food labelling. I believe a statement was made at the time, and we have

just had DEFRA questions, at which I hope he was able to raise this directly with Ministers. If he wants to write to me, I can take it up with them on his behalf.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Every year in the UK, about 1,300 blood cancer patients need a stem cell transplant from an unrelated donor in order to save their lives. It is possible to join the stem cell donor register at 16, but I am concerned to learn from the charity Anthony Nolan that young people often do not know about the register or hold misconceptions about stem cell donation. May we have a debate about adding stem cell donation, alongside organ and blood donation, to the statutory guidance on health education for secondary school pupils?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady makes an excellent suggestion, and one that I personally would support. I was delighted recently when in my own constituency we achieved one of the largest groups of donors in the country. She is absolutely right, however, that we need to do more to make people aware of what donation means physically and what it could mean for those they help. I would certainly support that, and I encourage her to take it up at Health questions next week.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Can we have an urgent statement on the assistance the Government can offer to those communities devastated by Storm Callum at the weekend and the possibility of drawing down support from the EU solidarity fund? Towns and villages in the south of Ceredigion and in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) were particularly impacted by unprecedented levels of flooding, and assistance with the clean-up and the reconstruction costs is urgently needed.

Andrea Leadsom: I am aware that the hon. Gentleman sought an urgent question on this subject, and I think we were all horrified at the photos in the news of the appalling flooding in his area. It is Welsh questions next week, and I encourage him to take up that matter directly with Ministers.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Leader of the House for giving us an insight into "The Italian Job" meeting that took place, but I should manage expectations: it is going to take a hell of a lot of carrots to see through this darkness.

It is half-term next week and the week after, and some MPs will be taking charge of their children while also coming into the House to vote. Can we look at the arrangements whereby our children have to go through security screening coming into the building, in a way that MPs do not?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point—not the first point; the second one. I am meeting the head of security in Parliament this afternoon to raise a number of issues, including the security arrangements. Obviously, we have to take security very seriously—we cannot cut corners—but there has to be a balance between enabling people such as Members' children to come in, as well as young work experience students and so on, and protecting everyone who works in this place. I plan to raise that this afternoon.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), the closure of York's only Crown post office, which has been based at 22 Lendal since 1884, was announced last Thursday, without any consultation with key stakeholders, including the high street. Clearly this will have a devastating impact on our city centre. Given the lack of statement from a Minister, may we have a debate in Government time to discuss the future of our high streets and post offices?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the post office closure in the centre of York. Obviously I do not know the precise circumstances or whether there are other post offices—I am sure there must be—in York. *[Interruption.]* No post office counters whatsoever? Well, I am genuinely sorry to hear that, and I encourage the hon. Lady to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise the matter directly with Ministers.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I am sure that the right hon. Lady is an avid reader of the *Grimsby Telegraph*, as everybody in the House will be—if not, they should be—and will have seen this week a really dreadful story about an attack on police officers. A young man of 25, Josse Jackson, has been sentenced to 12 weeks for attacking two police officers, including a policewoman, spitting blood-filled spit at them, saying that he had AIDS and hepatitis C, and threatening to bite them. He got only a 12-week sentence. The chief constable and the Labour police and crime commissioner, Keith Hunter, have called for stronger sentences for these kinds of attacks, following a weekend when 11 police officers were injured. May we have a statement or debate about professional impact statements, looking at the experiences of people who work in the public sector, on the frontline, to see how that can improve the strength of our sentencing?

Andrea Leadsom: All hon. Members will be disgusted to hear of the event that the hon. Lady talks about—it is really horrifying, and no police officer should have to tolerate such awful abuse. I am very sympathetic to the points that she makes. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who is here on the Front Bench, has heard what the hon. Lady said and would be very happy to meet her to talk about this further.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On 23 May, I asked the Prime Minister about the proposed sale of Wembley stadium, and she told me that it was not a matter for Government. Yesterday it was announced that the sale is not going ahead, and the Sports Minister expressed disappointment. I have been applying for a debate on this matter every week for about six months, because there are important questions involved, not least the Government's position. If the sale goes ahead, there are questions about securing fans' interests for the future. Critically, now that the sale is not proceeding, what is the strategy for investment in grassroots football that was predicated on it? May we have a statement from the Government on all these very important issues?

Andrea Leadsom: I well understand that the hon. Gentleman has grave concerns about the future of Wembley. We have Department for Digital, Culture,

Media and Sport questions on Thursday 1 November, which is just over a week away, and I encourage him to raise the issue directly with Ministers then.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The Leader of the House may be aware that Traidcraft, the fair trade company based in Team Valley in Gateshead, is going through difficult times. It is important that we keep fair trade organisations such as Traidcraft running and healthy. Will she arrange a debate in Government time on the importance of fair trade so that the House can discuss this matter, and will she join me in encouraging colleagues to buy something from the Traidcraft catalogue for Christmas in order to help it?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very happy to join the hon. Lady in encouraging hon. Members to buy from fair trade catalogues. I think we all support fair trade with developing nations, and it is important that we continue to do that. The hon. Lady might like to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise directly with Ministers what more can be done to support this area.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House be kind enough to join me in welcoming the family and friends of John Pitcairn Mackintosh, a former MP for Berwick and East Lothian? The Speaker has allowed us the use of his premises tonight to celebrate John Pitcairn's life, which was cut so tragically short 40 years ago this year. May we have a debate in Government time to celebrate the former parliamentarians of this House and take the opportunity to learn from their experiences in the decisions that we need to make in the near future?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very happy to join the hon. Gentleman in welcoming the family to the Speaker's apartments today. I also agree entirely that it is only by studying the past that we learn the lessons for the future. We would all do well to remember that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Judith Cummins.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Thank you, and congratulations, Mr Deputy Speaker.

We are one year on from the Government announcing tougher sentences for dangerous drivers, but despite repeated calls from across the House for the legislation to be brought into force, we are still no further forward. One family member of a victim said:

"The Government's delay in implementing tougher penalties has denied my family the justice that we need."

Will the Leader of the House tell us when these families can expect the justice that they deserve?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her campaigning on this subject. I know that it means a great deal to her, and the whole House appreciates the work she has done. I do not have a further update for her right now, but if she would like to write to me, I can take it up with the Department on her behalf.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Thangam Debbonaire.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Sir Deputy Speaker, or however we are supposed to say it, and congratulations.

On 3 May, 12 July and 6 September, I asked the Leader of the House for the whereabouts of the immigration Bill, which we must have before 29 March. On 6 September, she said that it would be published after the publication of the Migration Advisory Committee report “and in good time”. That report was published on 11 September. It is now 18 October. Where is the immigration Bill? Does the Leader of the House see any sign of it coming this side of the new year?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is a member of the Opposition Whips Office, and obviously she always has the usual channels in order to raise these issues. I say to her again, as I have said before, that all legislation is being brought forward in good time and as necessary to prepare for the United Kingdom leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Earlier in the week, the Home Office published data that shows that there has been a huge surge in hate crime directed at people in England and Wales because of their religious beliefs. Figures recorded by the police show that over 8,000 incidents of this type of hate crime were recorded in 2017-18—up by a whopping 40% on 2016-17. Only yesterday, our noble Friends in the House of Lords had a debate to discuss this growing religious prejudice and intolerance in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Will the Leader of the House agree to a similar debate, in Government time, on this pressing issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that all forms of hate crime are completely unacceptable. As he will be aware, the Government's hate crime action plan has improved the response to all forms of hate crime. The refresh that was published yesterday ensures a renewed commitment to victims remaining at the heart of our work. As part of that refresh, we have committed additional funding to continue to protect places of worship, alongside just over £1.5 million for projects to tackle racially and religiously motivated hatred. In addition, we have asked the Law Commission to undertake a review of the coverage and approach of current hate crime legislative provisions. Later this year, we will launch a wide-ranging national hate crime public awareness campaign to address the issue. I congratulate

the hon. Gentleman on securing a debate on 25 October on the subject of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think colleagues have suggested that Mr Doughty come last, so thank you for that. I call Stephen Doughty.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you, Sir Lindsay.

On Brexit and the business of the House, the Leader of the House's suggestion of a simple binary choice and, indeed, the attempts by the Government to choke off the control of this House over the Brexit decision are unacceptable, as the many thousands of people who will be marching through London on Saturday know all too well. But the Brexit mess has also impacted on important business on the Offensive Weapons Bill. I was pleased to hear her say that the Bill is coming back on Monday. Will she ensure that we have adequate time to debate new clause 1 on attacks on shopkeepers and retail workers, many of whom are suffering horrific attacks with knives and guns? The new clause is supported by many Co-operative MPs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), and others. It is a very important matter, so will she ensure we have time to discuss it?

Andrea Leadsom: Absolutely. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the reason the business was pulled on Monday was precisely because we were concerned that there would not be sufficient time to discuss some of these very important issues, such as the one he raises. To be very clear again with regard to the meaningful vote, once the deal with the EU has been agreed, Parliament will have a vote on the withdrawal agreement and the terms of our future partnership. Parliament will have the choice of accepting or rejecting that deal, and, as we have said before, the Speaker will decide on whether to accept amendments to the motion in the usual way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can I just say thank you very much for all the kind words and kind comments—it is much appreciated and I do take it on board. To be quite honest, just to add to the pizza story, I tripped over the boxes and there was none left whatsoever.

Point of Order

12.19 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During yesterday's Prime Minister's questions, and again during yesterday's Opposition day debate on social care, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) suggested that the joint report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee recommended the adoption of a German-style social insurance system. He also suggested to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) that the report states that national insurance would not be a suitable vehicle for funding social care and that any social care programme should be "separated from Government".

What the Committees actually said in their recommendations was that any social care premium could be contributed to

"either...as an addition to National Insurance, or through a separate mechanism similar to the German model"

and that

"The Social Care Premium could be managed by central government, and audited by the National Audit Office, or managed separately by a statutory body or not for profit insurance based funds, as is the case in Germany."

I would not want the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to have got the wrong impression from the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton on both Committees' recommendations. Can you advise me on how the record could be clarified so that it reflects a full, fair and proper reading of the Select Committees' recommendations?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. He has corrected the record, and it is now there for everybody to read. I think that that will deal with the matter for now.

BILL PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND (EXECUTIVE FORMATION AND EXERCISE OF FUNCTIONS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Bradley, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Secretary Javid, Secretary Gauke, Secretary Mundell, Secretary Cairns, Mr Shailesh Vara and Oliver Dowden, presented a Bill to facilitate the formation of an Executive in Northern Ireland by extending the time for making Ministerial appointments following the election of the Northern Ireland Assembly on 2 March 2017; and to make provision about the exercise of governmental functions in, or in relation to, Northern Ireland in the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 275) with explanatory notes (Bill 275-EN).

Backbench Business

Ending Exploitation in Supermarket Supply Chains

12.21 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned about the practice of modern slavery and the exploitation of labour in the supply chains of supermarkets in the UK; notes this week marks world food day and anti-slavery day; recognises the global leadership that the Government has shown in tackling modern slavery in supply chains in the Modern Slavery Act 2015; and calls on the Government to help ensure that steps are taken to protect the workers and farmers who produce food.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting the time for this debate and to my co-sponsors, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery, and the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy). Unfortunately, neither of them is able to join us.

From the recent industrial action by staff at McDonald's, Wetherspoon's and TGI Fridays to the International Labour Organisation's estimate of more than 1.1 million victims of slavery working in the agricultural sector, that is all part of the same picture, showing that the cheap food we often take for granted all too often comes at a human cost. Today is World Anti-Slavery Day, and Tuesday was World Food Day, so this is a fitting time to start looking seriously at how we end this exploitation.

Long after the Morecambe bay disaster in 2004, when 21 Chinese illegal migrant labourers drowned while picking cockles, the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority is still finding cases of human trafficking and slavery in the UK food industry. Earlier this year, a Cornish gangmaster who systematically exploited her workers—skimming off their pay, sending them to work double shifts with insufficient breaks and charging them to live in unsanitary caravans—was shut down by the GLAA. In Kent, 16 Lithuanian farm workers won a case against two gangmasters who forced them to work under threats of violence and kept them in squalid living conditions. Two other Lithuanian workers were trafficked to work in a meat processing plant, had their pay withheld and were subjected to violence. Their traffickers were sentenced to just three and a half years in jail.

There are numerous other examples from the meat-processing sector. A chicken factory in America was discovered to be employing illegal and under-age workers, blackmailing them to work for minimal pay in unsafe conditions under the threat of deportation. Quite often it is undocumented migrants who are most vulnerable to exploitation. Workers at the chicken factory were found to be wearing nappies at their post because they were not allowed to take toilet breaks.

The tomato industry is also rife with exploitation. Some 60% of UK tinned tomatoes come from southern Italy, where illegal gangmasters, who are part of organised crime, control worker recruitment and supervision. This is an extremely lucrative business, profiting from what an Italian prosecutor described as "conditions of absolute exploitation". By contrast, in Florida, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has transformed the tomato sector,

[Kerry McCarthy]

aiding prosecutions of slavery operations, forging alliances between farm workers and consumers, and leveraging consumer power to put pressure on the big supermarket buyers to end exploitation. That has now been rolled out to other American states, and it is a fantastic organisation.

The seafood sector is particularly notorious. In Ireland, a permit scheme for fishermen has seen African and Asian men trafficked on to trawlers, doing 20 hours a day of manual labour, legally bound to the employer and too scared to speak up for fear of arrest or deportation. Ireland now has a tier 2 ranking for trafficking—on a par with Indonesia and India—due to the Government's failure adequately to protect victims and successfully convict traffickers.

The Environmental Justice Foundation uncovered horrific examples of slavery in the Thai seafood sector. Workers were tortured and abused, with wages, food and sleep withheld. Some men were kept at sea for months on end, being transferred from one ship to another without ever seeing dry land. They were force-fed methamphetamines to keep them working for longer, and bodies were thrown overboard when they were unable to go on. Some 59% of fishing workers had witnessed the murder of a fellow worker.

There is also evidence of Rohingya migrants from Myanmar being trafficked from camps, and even detention centres, and sold to Thai fishing vessels as slaves, yet millions of pounds' worth of seafood products are still imported to the UK from Thailand every year. I want to make it clear that this is not just something happening overseas that has little to do with us. These are products on our supermarket shelves, and we are eating them without realising their links with slavery.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The problem in the maritime industry is much closer to home. Around our shores, vessels working in and out of British ports are employing migrant labour—sometimes illegally and sometimes legally—and paying those workers as little as \$400 or \$500 a month. That is much less than the minimum wage in this country, but those vessels are working in and out of British ports, supplying goods and produce to the British market.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I have been talking to Nautilus International, the seafarers' union, which has highlighted cases where people working on those ships are exploited. That is an issue in the oil sector, for example.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is detailing some horrific abuse. Unfortunately, I have seen examples of modern-day slavery in the agricultural sector in my constituency. Will she join me in praising the work of the Co-operative party, and particularly its charter on modern-day slavery? The charter raises issues of responsible procurement in food supply chains and the need to ask difficult questions about, for example, abnormally low tenders being given to ensure that modern-day slavery is not being used in those food supply chains.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I chaired a joint event last night between the APPG on human trafficking and modern slavery

and the APPG on agriculture and food for development. One point made powerfully was that while we want the Government and the supermarkets to act—I will come to that in a moment—we must also look at procurement. The Government could be incredibly powerful if their procurement policies made it clear that they would not source from companies that could not give absolute assurance that there was not slavery in their supply chain.

I mentioned the Thai fishing sector. The Foreign Office should be doing more to support human rights defenders such as Andy Hall, whom I have been in contact with for many years. He has exposed some of the worst practices in food producing there, starting with the pineapple sector, and I think he is now writing about the chicken sector. He has been threatened, harassed and pursued through the courts as a result, and I do not think the Foreign Office is doing enough to support him.

The examples that I have given are clearly abhorrent and illegal, but it is also unacceptable that small-scale farmers and workers producing Indian tea and Kenyan green beans—common items in our supermarkets—are earning less than half of what is needed to ensure a basic but decent standard of living. When women working on grape farms in South Africa were surveyed, 90% reported not having enough to eat in the previous month. These are things that we take for granted; a grape is, to an extent, a luxury item, yet the women producing them cannot feed themselves or their families. If buyers were prepared to pay just three cents more per melon to a producer in Honduras and less than two cents on a banana in Guatemala, that would give those workers a living wage.

A big part of the problem is the supermarket model itself. It provides us with unparalleled choice. We can buy products from all over the world, all year round, at low prices and at our convenience. Retailers are increasingly operating in challenging circumstances, under threat from the discounters and online competition, and this is leading to over-consolidation. Tesco and Carrefour have teamed up to buy products. The planned merger between Sainsbury's and Asda would see them control more than 30% of the UK groceries retail market. They have promised that, if the merger goes ahead, they will cut shelf prices on key items by 10%, which will cause yet more downward pressure on prices for suppliers. Supermarkets now keep an increasing amount of the money their customers spend—as much as 50% in some cases.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her leadership on this issue. On the Asda-Sainsbury's merger, is she concerned that Sainsbury's is withdrawing its Fairtrade brands in its supermarkets?

Kerry McCarthy: I was not actually aware of that point, so I thank my hon. Friend for bringing it to my attention. I am very concerned to hear that that is the case.

As I was saying, supermarkets now keep as much as 50% of the money their customers spend, while the share that reaches workers and food producers has fallen, sometimes to less than 5%. Oxfam's research has found a direct correlation between drops in the prices paid by the supermarkets to suppliers and the risk of

increasing human rights violations in supply chains. This is basically propelling a race to the bottom on wages and rights. Slavery and labour exploitation typically happen towards the bottom of supply chains, where things can get very murky and there is a lot less transparency. It is not just the cost savings that are not passed down; there is also a greater risk in that we are much more likely to see pesticide poisonings and other health and safety violations.

For example, the import price for pineapples from Costa Rica to Germany, primarily for supplying Aldi and Lidl, fell by about 45% between 2002 and 2014, despite increasing production costs. Oxfam has documented conditions on two pineapple farms in Costa Rica, which included poverty wages, subcontractors demanding monthly commissions, penalties or dismissal for workers who wanted to organise, and pesticides being sprayed while workers were in the fields.

There are other unfair practices that contravene the groceries supply code of practice's principle of fair dealing. Fairtrade's research into the banana sector found that banana farmers bear the cost if the retailers' forecasts are wrong. In the worst instance, banana farmers reported receiving late changes to orders in 40 out of the 52 weeks in the year. Feedback Global has revealed the unrealistic specifications buyers use to reject produce from vegetable producers in Kenya, where on average 30% of production is discarded at farm level and another 20% prior to export—that is 50% of their produce—largely on cosmetic grounds. There is virtually no domestic market for these crops and alternative buyers cannot be found at short notice.

What can we do about this? For a start, we as consumers can do more. We can buy Fairtrade, which is the only initiative that requires a minimum price for producers and has a mandatory trader standard. We can use our consumer power to demand more of our supermarkets, using the Oxfam "Behind the barcodes" scorecard to track their progress. As the chief executive officer of Divine Chocolate has said:

"We live in times where, on the one hand, the turnover of the world's biggest supermarket group is higher than the Gross National Income of Norway or Nigeria, and, on the other, where most of the world is dependent on smallholder producers for at least 80% of its food. Supermarkets have a responsibility to those producers, and we have more power than we think to call them to account."

The food sector can certainly do more. In the EU, just 10 supermarket groups account for over half of all food sales. Just 50 food manufacturers account for half of all global food sales. If they act, that will make a huge difference.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful and, actually, a very upsetting speech. In particular, she mentioned Kenyan bean farmers, and a lot of us thought we were doing some good when we bought those beans. Does she agree that, along with the supermarkets, we need to look at the wider catering industry, food processing and cafés, which often like to portray themselves as fair and good trading environments? Does she also agree that we need some system that enforces such regulations across the sector?

Kerry McCarthy: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. I am focusing today on supermarkets because that is where it is easiest for customers to interface and

because they so powerful within the market. However, there are many big food manufacturers and others throughout the supply chain, as she says, that need to step up to the mark as well.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): When I was serving as a councillor, I took part in opening a supermarket in the Asda chain, and it was fascinating to talk to those involved about how they judge customer satisfaction on, for example, gluten-free or vegetarian foods. Does my hon. Friend agree that, when the giant supermarkets look at opening such stores, if customers demanded fairer trade and better deals with those they were purchasing from, those supermarkets would start responding to customer demand?

Kerry McCarthy: One point is that there is just so little transparency. A limited range of goods is covered by Fairtrade certification. It tends to cover commodities such as coffee, cocoa, bananas and so on. We need far greater transparency. During the horsemeat scandal, there were stories about lasagne selling for £1 that had traversed about 13 or 14 EU countries, with dozens of small products going into making this probably highly unappetising meal. It is so difficult to trace that, but we do need to make a start.

Stephen Doughty: I am one of the vice-chairs of the all-party group on Fairtrade. Further to the points made by my colleagues, is my hon. Friend aware that in the Sainsbury's case, it was actively attempting—in my view—to deceive consumers by labelling its tea as "Fairly Traded", when it was not in fact certified as Fairtrade tea by the Fairtrade Foundation. In fact, Sainsbury's was severely criticised by the Advertising Standards Authority, and I think one of its adverts was banned. I, my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and others raised this with the ASA. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is totally unhelpful for supermarkets and others to be doing that and actively trying to deceive consumers?

Kerry McCarthy: I absolutely agree. I also think that big companies can have a Fairtrade brand that might account for 5% of its sales, but the rest of their coffee or tea does not carry that certification, so what does that say about the conditions under which that share of the market is produced?

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): My hon. Friend has reminded me that, in the supermarket trade, food that is all made in the same place is given different labels for different supermarkets. We should also be looking at how that is exploited.

Kerry McCarthy: I agree. That is very much about the complexity of the supply chain and the need for greater transparency.

If the supermarkets and the big food companies act, that could make a huge difference. Oxfam has found that all the major supermarkets in the UK—Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda, Morrisons, Lidl and Aldi—lack sufficient policies to protect the human rights of the people they rely on to produce our food. Oxfam's "Behind the barcodes" scorecard provides supermarkets with a rating based on their transparency, accountability and treatment of workers, farmers and women. Aldi languishes at 1%,

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while Morrisons and Lidl are at 5%. The highest scoring is Tesco, at a still fairly unimpressive 23%. However, I was pleased that Tesco came along to the joint APPG meeting yesterday, and it seems very willing to try to improve that score.

There are key actions supermarkets can take, from conducting human rights due diligence in line with UN guiding principles on business and human rights to respecting living wage and income benchmarks in supplier negotiations. Needless to say, they should be paying their own staff the living wage too. Supermarkets need to end the fantasy of social audits, which are almost entirely for PR purposes. They need to engage constructively with trade unions throughout the supply chain that are working to ensure real living wages, root out bad practices and provide a route for whistleblowers—whether that is Unite and the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union in the UK; Nautilus, the seafarers union, which has already been mentioned; or global framework agreements with the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers Associations.

The Government can also do more. With the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the UK became the first country in the world to require large businesses to report on the steps they are taking to eliminate slavery from their supply chains, but there have been only 13 convictions in the past 18 months. The Government must do more to ensure that all businesses are compliant with the law, with tough financial penalties if they are not. A new evidence briefing from the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner and the University of Nottingham has found that just 19% of the agriculture sector is abiding by the terms of the Modern Slavery Act.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to mention the role of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, and I am sure she agrees that the independence of that role is critical to its success in unrolling the strategy and holding the Government to account. The first commissioner, Kevin Hyland, who did a great job, took a strong stance in calling for enhanced application of the transparency in supply chains section, but he cited Home Office interference as one reason he has resigned from his post. The job application for his successor impedes that independence by requiring them to set a programme of work with the Home Office and to have their performance appraised by the Home Office. Does she agree that it is vital that the Minister gives us the assurance that the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner can operate with true independence?

Kerry McCarthy: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and I certainly hope that the Minister will reply to it in her winding-up speech.

As I said, only 19% of the agricultural sector is abiding by the terms of the Modern Slavery Act. By contrast, the rate of compliance with the new gender pay gap reporting rules was 87% on day one of the first year of reporting.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I am delighted to say it is now 100%.

Kerry McCarthy: If we can get 100% on gender pay gap reporting, we ought to do an awful lot better on modern slavery reporting.

The Home Office review of the Modern Slavery Act is welcome, and I hope it will result in much-needed measures to strengthen it and its implementation. I welcome the appointment as chairs of the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who unfortunately has had to go back to his constituency, where “Songs of Praise” is being recorded, otherwise he would be here.

If the Government want to lead on this issue internationally, a law of due diligence, whereby companies need to demonstrate they are actively seeking to end slavery in supply chains, would be a good place to start. A wider definition of supply chain liability is needed, so that real or feigned ignorance is not a justifiable excuse when instances of slavery are revealed. We also need better support for victims. I very much support Lord McColl of Dulwich’s Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill, which would extend the proposed 45 days of additional support to 12 months. We can see how victims of slavery are terrified of coming forward because of the risk of deportation.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way one more time—she is being very generous. I am interested in the point she has just made about supermarkets taking responsibility. Does she think that the onus needs to be on supermarkets, and that ignorance of slavery further down the supply chain should be their responsibility? They should be more proactive in going out there and seeking evidence that there is no slavery, rather than waiting to be caught out.

Kerry McCarthy: I certainly think that. At the all-party group yesterday, we heard from someone from ASOS, the online clothes firm, who talked about all the measures it takes. It has really complex supply chains, sourcing products from all around the world—not just finished garments, but material, zips and buttons—yet it seems to be able to do it, so I do not see why supermarkets cannot. They should be doing it on food safety and on other issues as well, so they ought to be doing it on modern slavery.

The Agriculture Bill will require more data from the agri-food sector on supply chain fairness. That will get some information out there that can be used, like the Oxfam scorecard, to put pressure on the supermarkets to change their practices. However, there is nothing in the Bill about such data being used for a legally enforced purpose. Having been a member of the Public Bill Committee, I hope we can change that. I raised this issue this morning at Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions and I got a response from the Farming Minister about the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, but I am slightly concerned that he did not seem to link it in with discussions about modern slavery. I would hope that as a result of this debate he and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), can have a conversation. The International Labour Organisation has said that the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector is the fourth largest sector for the incidence of slavery, so it certainly needs to be on DEFRA’s radar.

I also asked the Farming Minister in Select Committee whether he would support the EU's unfair trading practices directive, covering the whole of the supply chain, which will extend to producers selling into the EU from overseas. Naturally, the Minister told me that the Government would prefer to deal with this on a national basis, but we do need a firm commitment that the Government will follow the EU's lead and establish themselves as a good and responsible customer so that we do not end up losing the preference of suppliers post Brexit—why would they sell to us when they do not get the same protection they would get from selling elsewhere? Another step the Government can take is to support the adoption of a binding UN treaty on business and human rights that holds companies legally accountable for human rights violations along their supply chain.

There is another reason for holding this debate now. There are too many in this place who enthusiastically extol the opportunities of getting our hands on even cheaper food in the post-Brexit world, but that would come at a terrible price: a race to the bottom on food standards, food safety, animal welfare and environmental protections, and the continued exploitation of workers around the globe. The key message I want to get across today is that cheap food comes at a cost, and the cost is often met by the workers. Cheap food is not the solution to food insecurity. Food bank use is driven by low pay and insecure work, benefit freezes, sanctions and delays, and spiralling housing costs. Something has gone very wrong when a local advice centre tells me it has been helping a client who could not afford to eat, but she could not get to the food bank because it was only open when she was at work—at Tesco.

We also need to be cautious, as I mentioned at DEFRA questions this morning, about Government plans to bring in seasonal migrant workers to fill labour shortfalls after Brexit. Focus on Labour Exploitation—FLEX—has warned that temporary migration programmes that tie workers to a single employer would mean workers are unable to defend themselves if they are paid less than promised or if they are expected to work longer hours and in worse conditions than initially agreed.

In conclusion, I represent a city, Bristol, that was built on the back of the slave trade, the hideous and now unimaginable trade in Africans and in slave-produced commodities such as sugar, chocolate, coffee, cotton and tobacco. Bristol is now one of the leading fair trade cities in the world and at the forefront of efforts to stamp out modern slavery. Our city is home to anti-slavery organisations such as Unseen and TISCReport that are, like Mayor Marvin Rees, committed to stamping out this horrendous crime, making the commitment to be the world's first transparent city at a time when most did not even know what that meant. Slavery is not just a terrible episode in history. Some 13 million people were captured and sold as slaves from the 15th century to the 19th century while slavery was legal, but the "Global Slavery Index" estimates that more than 40 million people live as slaves today.

When the current Prime Minister came to office, she vowed to personally work to eradicate this "barbaric evil" and

"great human rights issue of our time".

But as with many promises, I fear that the Government's ambition may be slipping. I hope the Minister can provide some reassurance today that that is not the case.

12.46 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Supermarkets have decimated high streets, destroyed livelihoods and distorted the food chain. The exploitation to which the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) drew the attention of the House is not an aberration and is not marginal to supermarkets; it is intrinsic to their business model.

In my lifetime—I should say my short lifetime—I remember parades of shops on council estates, like the one on which I was brought up, across the whole of the country; shops run independently by people who knew their customers and knew those who supplied them. They had an interest in ensuring that their practices were sufficiently ethical to maintain their customer base and to preserve quality relationships with their suppliers. In my lifetime, farmers and growers in my constituency could sell the goods they made to a variety of people in a variety of places. They could go to local markets. They could sell in local produce auctions. They could walk away from deals if they were not fair, reasonable and ethical. In my short lifetime—I emphasise that again, Madam Deputy Speaker—our high streets were vibrant places. Our towns and cities were made lovelier by the variety and particularity that one found there. Sadly, all of that is no longer the case. What Napoleon called a nation of shopkeepers has become a nation of automated checkouts with contactless cards. We are all worse off as a result.

I want to deal in particular with the exploitation that the hon. Lady mentioned, and which I have said is implicit in the food chain model we have created. It is inevitable that farmers and growers must sell to the handful of places available to buy their goods. A report issued in 2000 by the Competition Commission demonstrated that a business able to control as little as 8% of the market has sufficient means to engage in exploitative trading practices. The big supermarkets do not control 8% of the market or even double that. Combined, the five big supermarkets control the vast majority of the United Kingdom's grocery market. That concentration of power, made worse by Tesco's recent absorption of the wholesaler Booker, magnifies and exaggerates the potential for exploitation right through the food chain, with my farmers and growers in Lincolnshire unable to walk away from bad deals as they have nowhere else to sell their produce. We know what those bad deals look like: up-front payments and delayed payments for the goods that suppliers provide, and sometimes, suppliers being obliged to fund "marketing campaigns" on behalf of retailers. Payments are now delayed for an average of 45 days, which puts small and medium-sized businesses on the brink of survival, as the supermarkets routinely engage in these practices.

The Agriculture Bill is welcome. Clause 25 gives new powers to Government—thanks to the insight, will and vision of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, no doubt—to take action against supermarkets that behave in the ways I have described. I have implored him to use those powers with alacrity and determination, for they are needed. The supermarket adjudicator, introduced when I was a Minister in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, has also made some progress, although I would like to see her powers extended and used more liberally.

[Mr John Hayes]

However, we must do much, much more, because as well as the exploitative practices that the hon. Member for Bristol East raised and which I have tried to amplify, we must consider the character of our high streets. Most towns now suffer from out-of-town developments that draw people away from the small shops that remain. With footfall decreasing, fewer shops can survive, because they rely on busy town centres to attract their customers.

Hon. Members know the scene as well as I do in large parts of Britain, with boarded-up shops, boarded-up banks and decimation in many places. People who do shop at out-of-town estates are forced to drive there, as they can no longer walk or cycle to the shops. They are encouraged to buy in large volume because they visit the shops infrequently, so there is then the problem of over-purchasing and food waste. We are told that around 30% of the food purchased ends up being thrown away. Encouraging over-buying more than offsets the claim from supermarkets that they have driven prices down. They may have kept prices down, but people no longer buy what they need; they buy much more than they need and much of it goes to waste.

Kerry McCarthy: Food waste is not just about the food that has been bought; the issue exists throughout the supply chain. From farm gate to fork, between 30% and 50% of food is estimated to be wasted. A lot of it never even gets on to supermarket shelves, and that is an absolute scandal. If food waste was a country, it would have the third highest carbon footprint in the world.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. There are any number of cases, for example, of suppliers having food rejected that they have grown to supply supermarkets, because it has not met the standard or because the supermarket has changed the volume that it requires. Much food goes to waste that was grown to meet the supermarket's original need or requirement. That is another example of the sharp practice that I described.

The truth is that in constituencies across the country, this is the secret exploitation which dare not speak its name. Farmers, growers and food firms—primary and secondary producers—dare not say what I am saying today, because they know that if they did, they would no longer be permitted to sell their goods to the few people available to buy them. That is why the supermarket adjudicator finds it so difficult to get evidence. Even with the confidentiality that is part of her remit, people are still reluctant to tell the truth, because they so fear what the supermarkets might do in retaliation.

It is time for the Government to act. The Agriculture Bill is helpful—I was delighted when I read clause 25, as I said—but we need to think about planning reform. We need to encourage people back into town centres and to our high streets. We need to give the adjudicator additional powers to deal with these exploitative terms of trade. We need to protect the workers in supermarket businesses in the way that was highlighted by the hon. Lady, whom I congratulate on bringing this matter before the House. We also need to recognise that far from extending choice, supermarkets have restricted it. If the only place someone can go to buy their groceries conveniently and affordably is a single store in a single place, how is choice extended and protected?

The Government really need to step up, and no Minister is more capable of doing so than my great friend and Lincolnshire neighbour who will respond to this debate. I ought to pay tribute, too, to the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who will sum up for the Opposition, because she is also a friend—there is no favouritism here. I know that they will both want to use this opportunity to expose this dreadful secret, as I have called it—this thing that dare not speak its name, this exploitation at the very heart of all that supermarkets do and are.

Before I close—this case is so self-evident that its amplification demands brevity rather than loquacity—I want to say that around the corner there is another spectre: the amalgamation of two supermarkets, with Sainsbury's and Asda coming together. I spoke a moment ago about the consolidation of the market that resulted from the takeover of Booker by Tesco. This further step would give the combined business 30% of the market. I call upon the Competition and Markets Authority, which did so little about the Booker case, by the way, and which I have written to recently, to recognise in the investigation that has been announced that further consolidation of the groceries market will be injurious to the interests both of consumers and of those who supply them, with all the ill effects for the workers and customers that have been highlighted in this debate.

Let me end—I am coming to my peroration, and I like to give notice of that so that enthusiasm can build—by saying this: two futures are available to us, and we must choose which path we take. We can once again have vivid, vibrant, vital, vivacious high streets, full of eclecticism and particularity and full of choice, or we can have the dull, deadening, draining ubiquity of supermarkets, of out-of-town megastores. That choice is available to us, but we will only choose the first, to the immense benefit of the people, if we are determined to take decisive action to make that come true.

There is a cruel deception—this is an easy thing to misjudge—that the future lies in hands other than ours, that it is pre-determined, that we are somehow simply acting out a script written for us. In fact, the future can be as joyful as we choose it to be, and if it is not fixed, influenced and shaped by the people in this House, we will be failing in our duty to pursue the national interest for the common good.

12.59 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): During the Second Reading debate on the Agriculture Bill, I asked what was the point of seeking to protect our environment, animal welfare, human health and workforce rights through high standards imposed on our food creators in this country if we then allow food produced under less stringent regimes to undercut those high standards, and end up importing all our food from abroad.

Today is Anti-Slavery Day, and the Modern Slavery Act 2015 was enacted when our present Prime Minister was Home Secretary. If we are to give any traction to the laudable aims of that Act, we need to ensure that food producers, wherever they are in the world, cannot profit financially from slavery. I well recall the shock that I felt when we saw the news that Chinese cockle-pickers had been swept out to sea and drowned in Morecambe bay. Those people were virtually unpaid, and their lives

were recklessly endangered, and ultimately squandered, by gangmasters who had no compunction about breaking immigration law, health and safety regulations and minimum wage law, all in the cause of providing cheap cockles for whichever market they were selling to.

That was a headline case, but there have been plenty of stories of workers from other countries being exploited by gangmasters working in this country. Fruit pickers, vegetable pickers and other seasonal agricultural workers have been prominent among them, and that still goes on. There are workers who are nominally paid the minimum wage, but are charged for their journey to this country and their journey to work each morning, and charged over the odds for squalid housing. All those sums are deducted from their wages at source by the agents who have recruited them and are hiring them out to the organisations for which they are working.

If we are to protect people working in this country from exploitation—if we are to ensure that everyone working in this country is paid a decent day's pay for a decent day's work—the Government must do far more to enforce the minimum wage by not just advising employers that they are breaking the law, but prosecuting and punishing them. Far more resources need to be put into investigating suspected offenders. There should be proper support for the victims of slavery and wage exploitation to encourage and enable them to act as witnesses, and there should be no easy ways to avoid the minimum wage by charging inflated rents for accommodation that is tied to employment, or exorbitant sums for transport to work.

I want our standards in this country to be something of which we can be proud, but if that is to happen, we need to ensure that we are not exporting slavery and exploitation to the third world by importing cheap goods produced under slavery conditions. Clearly the British minimum wage does not apply in other countries, but there are minimum conditions that should apply. If food is being produced through the use of indentured labour—labour provided under duress by prisoners, child labour, or even outright slavery—we have no business importing it and therefore giving financial support to the gangsters who are using those methods.

This is where the purchasing power of the supermarkets is so important. There is no excuse for them to pretend not to know or care about the conditions under which their food is produced. The big supermarkets in this country have ample resources with which to check the provenance of the food that they sell. We expect them to show due diligence throughout the supply chain in order to ensure that the food is safe to eat, and if they are doing that, they ought also to show due diligence in ensuring that it is produced fairly, without undue exploitation of the workforce.

I do not eat shellfish, but if I did, some of the stories that I have heard of exploitation in the far east, with young people being tricked, or even kidnapped, and then held as slaves to fish for shellfish on offshore platforms, would be enough to put me off. British people do not want to eat food that has been produced through the use of slave labour. British people do not want to see their fellow humans being exploited in this country either, and we want to know that those who work will be paid fairly for it.

It is time that the supermarkets realised that these things are important to their customers, and carried out thorough due diligence on all the products that they

sell. I believe that they should be required to do that so that when we buy food in this country, we can know that it is not only safe, but ethically produced.

1.4 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for tabling this important motion, but is it not sad that, in these supposedly enlightened times, we are still having to discuss the brutal practices of slavery? Forced labour, domestic servitude, people-trafficking—there is nothing modern about this. It is an age-old story of individuals being dehumanised and exploited by fellow human beings.

Workers have hard-fought rights in the United Kingdom, but it is easy for a blind eye to be turned to something nasty that is happening to people further down the line: those whose labour helped to put those shiny products on our supermarket shelves. When profit alone is king, there are always unscrupulous businesses that will callously treat people as commodities. Unless there is credible action to stop it, there will always be brands that will do the shady deals and say, “Nothing to see here,” or, “Nothing to do with me.” We need to shine a light on forced labour and the exploitation of workforces, and hold the companies at the top of the line responsible, too. In that way, we can drive these sickening practices from the supply chain.

I am not just talking about the appalling cases of people trafficked into slavery, such as those we have heard about involving Burmese and Cambodian crews on Thai fishing boats. Millions of workers are forced to labour for almost nothing in appalling conditions that violate their human rights. Oxfam's excellent research reveals the shocking poverty and human rights abuses that are behind many common products on our supermarket shelves. For example, there are South African women farmers who pick grapes for our wine but cannot even feed themselves and their families. The highest-paid supermarket chief executive will earn more in less than five days than those women do in their entire lifetimes—let that sink in. Where women are the main labourers, the risk of exploitation is even worse.

The Oxfam researchers found that less than 6% of the consumer price was reaching small-scale farmers and growers, with supermarkets capturing over half the value of the products, which is more than in the Netherlands, Germany and the United States. Profits paid in dividends had dramatically risen in the UK since the 1970s. Business models are ever more strongly focused on increasing returns for shareholders instead of looking after the interests of all stakeholders.

The Modern Slavery Act was a much-needed, welcome piece of legislation. I commend the Government for the action that they have taken so far, and the Prime Minister for her own commitment on this issue. Those, I think, are efforts that we can all support.

Some supermarkets have taken steps to identify and deal with issues in their supply chains. I note, for example, the efforts of Marks & Spencer to improve transparency with an interactive supply chain map, including information on trade union membership recognition from its primary suppliers. There are also good news stories, such as the growing success of the Fairtrade market in the UK. More agreements are

[Deidre Brock]

being reached with the big supermarkets to expand their Fairtrade products, which is fantastic news, but that, unfortunately, makes the news that we have just heard about the decision of Sainsbury's to pull out of its commitment to Fairtrade even more disappointing.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend welcome the efforts of the Scottish Fair Trade Forum to encourage more suppliers to take on Fairtrade, and to persuade small as well as larger businesses to supply such products in their shops?

Deidre Brock: I certainly do. I am well aware of that, having attended Fairtrade coffee mornings in my constituency for the last couple of years. It is great to see people really getting behind the Fairtrade initiative.

Clearly, as the Government recognise, the picture is patchy, and there are many issues relating to how the measures in the Modern Slavery Act are working on the ground. Encouraging transparency and fairness is simply not enough. We know that agriculture, fishing and forestry businesses are amongst the highest-risk offenders in respect of forced labour worldwide, but a year after the Act came into force, only 19% of agriculture companies were doing all that is required to comply with section 54. Even when businesses do comply, it can be seen as little more than a box-ticking exercise—very little effort is made to get to the root of the problem. Companies must be made, not just encouraged, to comply. As all who have suffered at the hand of austerity since 2007 would agree, light-touch regulation is not enough.

The discovery of slavery in supply chains should hit businesses where it hurts most, and highlighting their brands, their profitability and those all-important dividends should be key. We should be shouting from the rooftops the names of those who take a stand, and holding liable all those who do not. We all have a responsibility to ensure that, wherever they come from, workers who help to put food and other products on our shelves earn enough to enjoy a decent, dignified standard of living.

1.9 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this important debate, and I am happy to have been called to speak in it.

It is time that we shone a light on the inequality and suffering that exists in the global supermarket chain, which is, as we have repeatedly heard today, nothing short of slavery. Of course, the real issue is that supermarkets have become hugely powerful, as the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) eloquently set out. Workers and small-scale suppliers and farmers across the globe, but perhaps particularly in developing countries where suppliers and workers are much more vulnerable to discriminatory policies, can face great suffering and unfairness due to this power imbalance. As the hon. Members for Bristol East, for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) and for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) reminded us, such exploitation is often closer to home as well, and is perhaps epitomised in our minds by the Morecambe bay tragedy involving the cockle-pickers.

We have heard much today—it was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock)—about Oxfam's important “Ripe

for Change” report, which presents new and alarming evidence of the suffering faced by women and men behind the supermarket barcodes. While it is positive that UK supermarkets help to create jobs in developing countries, that cannot blind us to the outrage of human and labour rights abuses in the supply chains of the foods we eat. My hon. Friend reminded us of that in powerful terms.

Oxfam reminds us of forced labour aboard fishing vessels in south-east Asia, poverty wages on Indian tea plantations, and the hunger faced by workers on South African grape farms, as was well set out by the hon. Member for Bristol East. We see gross global inequality and escalating climate change, which must be increasingly unsustainable.

The fact is that in this global market, supermarkets choose their products from all over the world, moving between countries and suppliers as the seasons change, with all sorts of fruit and vegetables being sold at all times of the year. But cheap food and all-year-round choice come at a price, and that price is that the big retailers exert huge and intense pressure on suppliers to cut costs while at the same time demanding the highest quality.

Prices paid to suppliers continue to be squeezed, as the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings set out, while there is inadequate support for small-scale farmers and workers from Governments in producer countries, and those factors have increased the risk of human and labour rights violations. This manifests itself in such practices as exploitative child labour and unpaid female labour, and if we could see them for ourselves every day as we bought our produce, it would make us feel very uncomfortable. As the hon. Member for Ipswich pointed out, supermarkets must know how their suppliers operate, and if they do not know, they should.

We all want our grocery bills to be as low as possible, but how many consumers are truly aware of the real cost of cheap groceries? All too often, the cost is that those who produce the food on our supermarket shelves are themselves trapped in poverty and face brutal working conditions, with many going hungry. Oxfam has indicated that, sadly, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Morrisons, Asda, Lidl and Aldi are increasingly squeezing the prices they pay suppliers, with less and less of the price we pay at the till reaching the small-scale farmers and workers who actually produce the food we eat.

Alarmingly, of the supply chains Oxfam looked at, none enabled people to earn enough for even a basic standard of living, and in some cases, including the production of Indian tea and Kenyan green beans, it was less than half of what they needed to get by, as the hon. Member for Bristol East reminded us. Women face routine discrimination, often providing most of the labour for the lowest wages. More than nine out of 10 of the grape workers in South Africa and seafood processors in Thailand surveyed—most of whom were women—said they had not had enough to eat in the previous month, and several Members, including the hon. Member for Bristol East and my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith, have pointed that out. We have heard from a number of Members about how the cheap food we buy in supermarkets comes at the cost of squeezing

prices paid to suppliers, which then creates huge suffering for the women and men who supply this food, trapping them in poverty.

Kerry McCarthy: All today's speeches have been excellent and I thank Members who have attended the debate.

We can draw a comparison with the clothes sector. We reached a point some years ago when people started realising that if we can buy a pair of jeans for £3 in a supermarket, something must be wrong, with somebody somewhere down the line being exploited if that product could be produced so cheaply. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to do the same with our food and start questioning why it is so cheap?

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The debate around how we change the culture of our cheap clothing and cheap food is about making sure that our consumers are as well informed as they can be when they go out to do their shopping, whether to buy clothes or groceries. When the public see the cost behind the cheap price, many are moved to change how they shop and what they buy.

Across 12 common products including tea, orange juice and bananas, UK supermarkets receive almost 10 times more of the checkout price than the small-scale farmers and workers who produce them. The UK supermarkets' market share rose from 41% in 1996 to nearly 53% in 2015 and, as the hon. Member for Bristol East demonstrated, this represents a race to the bottom in terms of what is paid to suppliers.

Oxfam and the Sustainable Seafood Alliance Indonesia examined the working conditions in prawn processing plants and exporters in Thailand and Indonesia respectively, which supply some of the world's biggest supermarkets, including the six UK supermarkets. Workers described forced pregnancy tests, unsafe working conditions, poverty wages, strictly controlled bathroom and water breaks, and verbal abuse.

Supermarkets should lead the way ethically if positive change is to happen in our food supply chains. That is why Oxfam's new supermarkets scorecard, which rates and ranks the most powerful UK supermarkets on the strength of their public policies and practices to address human rights and social sustainability, should be welcomed. These challenging benchmarks, based on robust and international standards, and widely recognised best practice on transparency, accountability and the treatment of workers, small-scale farmers and women in supply chains, will allow our consumers across the UK to make more informed choices. They will help to effect change in supermarkets' practices and encourage them to address the suffering in their supply chains. As we have heard, when consumers have more information, that affects how they purchase and what they buy.

Sandy Martin: Does the hon. Lady agree that while it is true that supermarkets should, ethically, carry out this due diligence, something in legislation requiring them to do so would be more powerful?

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely. In the past, what has worked best is a carrot-and-stick approach. The Government can lay down regulations and insist by law that certain things are done by supermarkets in the supply chain in this country, but the power of the consumer cannot be overestimated. This is a two-pronged approach, therefore, and we need both these approaches.

We need firmer regulation to protect the rights of farmers and workers. We have modern slavery legislation, but it is important that we continue to be committed to challenging all practices that put people at risk of suffering within our supply chains by convening other nations against modern slavery, as the UK has done at the UN for the last two years.

Engagement with the ongoing independent review of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, ensuring the promotion of transparency within global supply chains, and a commitment to the UN guiding principles relating to business and human rights are essential. Supporting the UN binding treaty on business and human rights is required, too, and I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say today. As the hon. Member for Bristol East said, many who fear a race to the bottom in food standards and who raise concerns about these matters think they will only be exacerbated post Brexit.

We can do more to mitigate and ease the suffering on a global scale in our supermarket supply chains. We should do what we can, and as a matter of urgency. I am sure that today's debate has raised the profile of this issue, and I hope that consumers will begin to exert pressure of their own in the choices they make, but we need to do more to ensure that supermarkets themselves are confronted with the part they play in this suffering and abuse of workers and small-scale farmers in some of the poorest countries in the world. That is how real change will come, but the UK Government must play their part, and I am keen to hear the Minister's response as to how her Government will address the very serious issues raised today.

1.20 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee, and to colleagues for their excellent speeches. What we have lost in quality we have certainly gained in quantity—or the other way round. [*Interruption.*] Or maybe not.

Human trafficking and modern slavery are thriving throughout our international economy, from our grapes and our coffee beans to the tuna we put on our sandwiches. The cost to human life and basic human rights is truly astonishing. Only 12% of Thai fishermen have said that they have fair working conditions, and an estimated 50% of Thai fishermen are known to have been trafficked. As we know, this is not just happening overseas. In Cornwall, in Kent and on the Cambrian coast in Wales, our car washes, our nail bars, our construction sites and the restaurants that we visit are all hotspots for the evil traffickers.

Oxfam's recent report, "Ripe for change: ending human suffering in supermarket supply chains", highlights the scale of slavery throughout the food and goods industry. In the UK, the grocery sector is one of the most diverse and sophisticated in the world, worth nearly £185 billion a year. Supermarkets have delivered low prices and year-round choice to many consumers in the UK, but they have done so by using their huge buying power to exert relentless pressure on their suppliers to cut costs while meeting exacting quality requirements, and they often use a range of unfair trading practices to do so. The depression of prices paid to suppliers, coupled with inadequate Government support in producer countries for small-scale farmers and workers, has increased the risk of human and labour rights violations and, as Oxfam has found, driven greater global inequality.

Mr John Hayes: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Does she agree that supermarkets have also extended the food chain so that it is now much less likely for someone purchasing a good to know its source? They pay lip service to traceability, but in a greatly extended food chain, exploitation is much more likely to occur.

Carolyn Harris: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I totally agree with him.

Taking Indian tea and Kenyan green beans as examples, the research by Oxfam found that workers and small-scale farmers earned less than 50% of what they needed for a basic but decent standard of living in their societies. The report also found that the gap between the reality and a decent standard of living was greatest where women provided the majority of the labour. In South Africa, over 90% of surveyed women workers on grape farms reported not having enough to eat in the previous month. Nearly a third of them said that they or a family member had gone to bed hungry at least once in that time.

In Thailand, over 90% of surveyed workers at seafood processing plants reported going without enough food in the previous month. In Italy, 75% of surveyed women workers on fruit and vegetable farms said that they or a family member had cut back on the number of meals in the previous month because their household could not afford sufficient food. In less than five days, the highest paid chief executive at a UK supermarket earns the same as a woman picking grapes on a typical farm in South Africa will earn in her entire lifetime. That is simply not good enough.

Large UK supermarkets lack sufficient policies to protect the human rights of the people they rely on to produce our food. Supermarkets need to act on human and labour rights, support a living wage and radically improve transparency of their own human rights and those of their suppliers. This is vital if our supermarket supply chains are not to be a breeding ground for trafficking. We must be persistent on this matter. Unfortunately, we cannot depend on supermarkets to do this on their own. We need the Government to enforce compliance with the Modern Slavery Act 2015. They must set out how they will measure decent work practices, reform company law and support the adoption of a binding United Nations treaty on business and human rights.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act is a very welcome provision, but does she agree that its effective enforcement will require a central register of all the companies that are required to comply?

Carolyn Harris: I most certainly do, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to that point. The Modern Slavery Act places a requirement on companies with a turnover of £36 million and above to publish a statement outlining what steps they are taking to tackle exploitation in their supply chains. However, the Act does not require companies to take action; it requires only that they make a statement saying what they are doing.

Kerry McCarthy: Perhaps I am pre-empting what my hon. Friend is about to say, but is it not also a problem that the companies' statements sometimes say virtually

nothing? They just have to tick a box to say that they have made a statement. They do not have to show that they are actually doing something to root out slavery in their supply chains.

Carolyn Harris: Exactly. There is also a huge lack of information held on companies that have provided a statement, with a significant amount of companies providing no statement at all. Only 50% of the agricultural companies that fall within the scope of the Modern Slavery Act's corporate reporting requirement have published a modern slavery statement, and only 38% of those statements were compliant with the requirements of the law, meaning that overall only 19% of the agricultural sector is abiding by the terms of the Act. Section 54 as currently implemented is not fit for purpose and has significant limitations. This is due to the inability to monitor compliance by businesses and no assessment of the quality of modern slavery statements being published. The Welsh Government have put together an ethical code of practice on supply chains and the Co-operative party has launched a modern slavery charter which looks at local council supply chains. These are both progressive moves, but it takes leadership at national level to ensure consistency in this approach.

The Government recently announced a new two-year pilot scheme to bring temporary migrant workers from outside the EU to work in the UK agricultural sector. The stated aim of the pilot is to ease labour shortages in the sector during peak production periods. Lessons from the UK's previous seasonal agricultural workers scheme and similar temporary migration programmes in other countries show how these types of schemes can create conditions in which modern slavery and labour exploitation can thrive. If the Government are going to introduce migration policies that will increase risks to workers, they must also take the necessary steps to mitigate and prevent such risks in order to ensure that modern slavery does not flourish in Brexit Britain. They must ensure that labour inspectorates have the resources to ensure they can inspect this programme and protect workers, and temporary workers must be provided with information on their labour rights and given support to raise cases of abuse.

We need to work together to end human trafficking and labour exploitation, and we must eradicate modern-day slavery. Companies must be held to account for the ethical impact of their activities, particularly where poor business practices directly contribute to the severe exploitation of workers. Currently, the traffickers are winning. Vulnerable adults and children are being exploited on an industrial scale across the UK and internationally. It is time to take action. We must stop this practice now.

1.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I thank the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing the agreement of the Backbench Business Committee to hold this debate. We can all agree that it has been valuable and has sent out clear messages to the businesses and people involved in increasingly complex international supply chains about the expectations not just of the House, but of the public at large. Although the hon. Member for Cardiff East said—[*Interruption.*] Forgive me, I meant the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn

Harris)—I am causing all sorts of trouble in Wales, sorry. My shadow number was right to say that what we have lacked in number we have more than made up for in quality and the range of issues raised across this debate. I hope Members will excuse me if I do not manage to answer all their points, but I hope to tackle a great many of them.

We are all agreed that modern slavery is an invidious and destructive crime that affects some of the most vulnerable people in society. This Government are determined to end this injustice and eliminate this exploitation in our communities and in the global economy. Since the passing of the landmark Modern Slavery Act 2015, we have seen more convictions and arrests every year and increased specialist support for victims. There are currently more than 950 live investigations into accusations of modern slavery, and the Government will invest at least £61 million this year alone into work to end modern slavery in the United Kingdom and abroad.

The quality of today's speakers will become clear as I attempt to answer many of their excellent points. The hon. Member for Bristol East set out the complexity of international supply chains, and I know that she and others support the Prime Minister's call at the United Nations last year for us to end slavery by 2030. It is an ambitious target to set ourselves, but the Prime Minister has clearly identified a will within the international community to do that. More than 80 countries have signed up to the call for action, and a great deal of work is flowing from that effort.

The hon. Member for Bristol East also mentioned seafood from Thailand, and I am pleased that she and other Members took the opportunity to educate and inform the wider public as to some of the conditions that we are learning of when it comes to how seafood is extracted from our seas. In fairness, some UK supermarkets, including Tesco and Morrisons, are members of the Seafood Task Force, an industry-led coalition of retailers, Governments and NGOs set up to address the human rights abuses and seafood supply chains that the hon. Lady so clearly identified in her speech. If she will bear with me, I will deal with her other points later.

Moving on with great excitement to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), my Lincolnshire colleague and dear friend in the House reflected in his usual stylish way on the changes to the high street during his "short" lifetime. He painted a picture of the high streets in our county as they were only a few years ago and then the differences that we now face, describing with chilling accuracy the business conditions that many of his and my farmers in Lincolnshire face at the hands of large supermarkets. He made particular reference to delayed payments. Since April last year, all large UK businesses have had a duty to report publicly on their payment policies, practices and performance, because the Government recognise the helpfulness of transparency in driving change. If he or any other Member is aware of supermarkets that are not playing their part, I ask them to let me and the relevant Ministers know, so that we can ask why they are not doing what they are obliged to do.

My right hon. Friend and other Members also mentioned the proposed merger of Sainsbury's and Asda. The Competition and Markets Authority is investigating independently, but I am pleased to note that the Select

Committees on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs wrote a joint letter in early May to the CMA raising concerns about the impact that the merger would have on the grocery supply chain and asking for details on the approach of any investigation. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy also wrote to the CMA in May to stress the importance of considering the possible impact on the supply chain, among other competition-related issues.

Mr John Hayes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her complimentary remarks, which were delivered with her usual style. Will she also consider making the groceries code statutory? The code is voluntary and is largely ignored. In my judgment, a statutory code would protect suppliers, with all the beneficial effects that that would have right down the supply chain.

Victoria Atkins: I hesitate to take responsibility for all the work of Government, as I fear that that is a matter for BEIS, but I will ask the relevant Minister to write to my right hon. Friend. Having listened to his speech carefully, I absolutely understand why he asked that question.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and the hon. Member for Swansea East both raised the important issue of women in supply chains, which I obviously take an extra interest in given my responsibilities as Minister for Women. Women and girls are often among the most vulnerable people working in global supply chains. They are more likely to be subject to sexual, mental and physical abuse, both within the workplace and while travelling to and from workplaces, and sadly they are regularly paid lower wages than their male counterparts. The Department for International Development is working to tackle the issue with its flagship initiative, the Work and Opportunities for Women programme. I know that acronyms are not allowed in the MOD, but the DFID acronym for that is WOW, and the programme will collaborate with British and global businesses, providing access to the latest expertise on women's economic empowerment to improve outcomes for women and enable them to build more resilient, sustainable and productive supply chains.

Turning to transparency in supply chains, it is an uncomfortable truth that forced labour exists in the supply chains of products on our supermarket shelves, which is simply unacceptable. I welcome Oxfam's research, which shines a light on the suffering of workers in supermarket supply chains. Agriculture and fishing is a particularly high-risk sector that is estimated to account for 12% of forced labour globally. Supermarkets and businesses in food supply chains clearly need to do more, but the truth is that no sector is immune from the risks of modern slavery. Almost all businesses will face the risk of modern slavery somewhere in their supply chains, which is why the world-leading transparency in supply chains provision in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 requires large businesses in the UK to publish an annual modern slavery statement.

Thousands of businesses are stepping up to the challenge and have published statements detailing the action they are taking to tackle modern slavery in their supply chains. Many are demonstrating their commitment by partnering with experts, changing their purchasing priorities

[Victoria Atkins]

and reporting transparently about what they have done. Companies such as the clothing company ASOS and the Co-op are leading the way in being open and transparent about where they have identified modern slavery risks and what actions they have taken to put them right and prevent the problem from happening in the future. For example, the Co-op's modern slavery statement disclosed that it had identified a case of modern slavery on a supplier's farm in Nottinghamshire. As a result of Co-op working closely with its supplier, the police, the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority and the Salvation Army, the victim was safeguarded and the perpetrator jailed for eight years.

I am also pleased to see that more and more companies, including Marks & Spencer, Unilever and Tesco, are signing up to the employer pays principle and taking steps to ensure that workers in their supply chain do not pay exploitative recruitment fees, which can often lead to debt bondage. Although large companies that meet the relevant turnover threshold are obliged under the Act to issue a statement on their supply chain, we are finding evidence that that is having a trickle-down effect on smaller businesses that do not reach the turnover threshold. It is a positive thing that companies are being required by their larger business partners to meet those standards so that the larger businesses can issue a statement.

I am conscious that, although thousands of businesses are taking their responsibility seriously, too many are still publishing poor-quality statements or are failing to meet their basic legal obligations. Today, the Home Office has begun to write directly to the chief executive officers of all 17,000 UK businesses believed to be within the scope of the Act. We have made it clear what their obligations are and how they can meet them. There are no excuses for non-compliance, and those businesses that continue to flout their legal obligations should understand that they can expect to face far tougher consequences.

Members have rightly said that this is about not just companies publishing statements, but the quality of those statements. Having written to those companies, the Home Office plans to audit the statements at the end of this financial year and to name non-compliant companies after that date. That is a significant development in transparency.

We will also be establishing a transparency in supply chains advisory group, with experts from the modern slavery sector and from the business community, to help inform our approach to tackling slavery in public and private sector supply chains. Later this year, we will be revising the business guidance on modern slavery reporting, and businesses can now register on the modern slavery contacts database for guidance and resources to help them report effectively.

Of course, the independent review of the Modern Slavery Act, chaired by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and a noble baroness, will consider how the transparency provision is working and what measures we can take to ensure it is as effective as it can be. I hope that that shows the Government's direction of travel on this important issue.

The crucial action for these companies to take is to set meaningful targets, report on them and strive to make year-on-year progress in addressing these risks. We recognise that identifying and addressing modern slavery can be a complex task, which is why we are strengthening the guidance we are giving to businesses. We are also funding projects run by experts, including the Ethical Trading Initiative and Stronger Together, to support UK businesses in training their suppliers and addressing the risks in their global supply chains.

The Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner is an important part of this analysis, and hon. Members have mentioned the commissioner's independence. As I have said in other debates, I have always found Mr Hyland to be incredibly independent and independent-minded, and I very much enjoy working with him. To reassure the House on this important appointment, we remain absolutely committed to the commissioner's independence, and we are considering how this role can be further strengthened as part of the modern slavery review.

The Government recognise the importance of labour market enforcement and have continued to strengthen their response to exploitation in the UK labour market. We have created the role of director of labour market enforcement, who is responsible for producing an annual strategy that provides an assessment of the scale and nature of non-compliance in the labour market and sets strategic priorities for the three main enforcement teams in this field: the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate, the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority and HMRC's national minimum wage team.

Sir David Metcalf took on the role in January 2017 and published his first full annual labour market enforcement strategy in May 2018. The Government are considering Sir David's recommendations for the three enforcement bodies and will publish their response shortly.

We have also given the GLAA powers, equivalent to police powers, to investigate serious cases of labour market exploitation across the entire economy in England and Wales. Just last year, the GLAA conducted more than 100 operations, leading to more than 100 arrests for suspected labour market offences across a range of sectors, including construction, hand car washes and hospitality. The GLAA has also done some excellent work in partnership with businesses to raise awareness of the signs of modern slavery and to share good practice within the agricultural, construction and textiles sectors. For example, the GLAA has partnered with Sainsbury's to deliver training sessions to its suppliers so it can better identify and manage risks in its supply chain.

Just outside my constituency in Lincolnshire, the GLAA has partnered with Boston College, an important college in our local area, to help educate young people not just to spot the signs of modern slavery in and around the fields of Lincolnshire, but to know their rights when it comes to their own careers and jobs. We need to get the message out that young people should not feel they need to accept jobs that pay poorly or in which the conditions are not acceptable. This is part of a programme of education that I hope will be followed up across the country.

Colleagues have rightly mentioned the seasonal agricultural workers pilot, and it is a key objective of that scheme to ensure that migrant workers are adequately

protected against modern slavery. The GLAA will license the scheme operators, and the Home Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will closely monitor the scheme to ensure that operators adhere to the stringent requirements we have set to ensure workers' safety and wellbeing, including paying the national minimum wage as a minimum.

The Government recognise that we have a responsibility to use all the levers we have to tackle this crime. As for any business, there are risks of modern slavery in the goods and services procured by the Government and the public sector. We are already leveraging our buying power and requiring bidders for central Government contracts to certify that they are compliant with the transparency requirement in the Modern Slavery Act. In June, the Cabinet Office announced that the Government's biggest suppliers will be required to provide data and action plans to address key social issues, including modern slavery. We are stepping up our activity to address modern slavery risks in our own supply chain, and we will be supporting the wider public sector to take action.

Of course, modern slavery is an international, indeed global, issue that requires a global response, which is why the United Kingdom is playing a leading role in tackling modern slavery away from our shores. At last year's United Nations General Assembly, the Prime Minister launched a global call to action to end modern slavery, and more than 80 countries endorsed that call to action and pledged their support.

Building on that work, at this year's UN General Assembly, the UK—in partnership with the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand—launched a set of principles for combating modern slavery in supply chains. The principles set out the steps countries should take to prevent exploitation in both public and private sector supply chains. We are sharing lessons from our world-leading transparency and supply chains legislation with other countries, and Australia has looked to the UK for our experience and is now introducing legislation similar to ours.

We are also strengthening our bilateral relationships to tackle this crime. Those who take an interest in this area will know that, sadly, Albania features highly when it comes to the number of people referred to the national referral mechanism. Last week, I met the Albanian Deputy Minister and committed to an ambitious £2 million package to support victims to rebuild their lives and to deter vulnerable people from falling into the hands of traffickers in Albania. Today, we are launching the second round of our modern slavery innovation fund, which will make £5 million available for new approaches to tackle modern slavery globally, and just yesterday the UK held its day of action for the Amina project, a cross-Europe project to prevent child migrants from becoming child slaves.

Colleagues asked about the draft EU directive on unfair trading practices, and although the UK supports the broad aims of the draft directive, it is important to ensure that the measures in it are proportionate and appropriate for each member state, so we have argued for greater discretion for member states in how they implement the provisions.

I have also been asked about the UN guiding principles on business and human rights, and we are proud to have been the first country in the world to produce a national

action plan responding to those guiding principles. As for the UN treaty, we are engaging in this process as part of the European Union and we are obviously carefully considering our approach to this proposed legally binding instrument.

To mark Anti-Slavery Day, buildings and businesses across the country will be lit in red tonight to raise awareness of this scourge on society, including buildings in Whitehall, Marble Arch in London, Cardiff City Hall—I apologise to the hon. Member for Swansea East—and the Etihad stadium in Manchester. That will raise awareness and give the message that this problem affects us all and that we should take an interest in this incredibly important issue.

To eradicate this crime from our communities and economy, Government, businesses and society need to work together. We should continue to be ambitious in our expectations and approach. No production line, however far reaching, should ever involve the exploitation of human beings, and we are determined to ensure that the rights of those who grow and produce our food are valued and defended.

1.52 pm

Kerry McCarthy: I will be brief. I thank the Minister for her response. She covered most of the points that were raised and I am sure she will go away and check whether there are any other points to which she could respond in writing. I have sometimes seen Ministers come along to the House and read from a piece of paper, showing no sign of having listened to the debate that they have just heard, so I thank her for not taking that approach and for giving a thoughtful and considered response.

I also thank everyone else who has contributed. As people have said, there might not have been a huge number of speakers, but everyone who contributed spoke with great passion and clearly felt very strongly about the issue. I am also grateful to have had the opportunity to speak at far more length than I am usually able to in this place, in that we often end up being called when a seven or six-minute limit has become a three-minute limit.

The food sector is a particular problem because of some issues that have been outlined today, and I urge the Minister to speak to her colleagues, particularly those in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy who are responsible for the supermarket sector. We need to discuss this not just in the context of modern slavery and trafficking issues in general, but with a specific focus on how the food sector operates and how that gives rise to some of the horrific abuses we heard of today. I would be grateful if she did that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House is concerned about the practice of modern slavery and the exploitation of labour in the supply chains of supermarkets in the UK; notes this week marks world food day and anti-slavery day; recognises the global leadership that the Government has shown in tackling modern slavery in supply chains in the Modern Slavery Act 2015; and calls on the Government to help ensure that steps are taken to protect the workers and farmers who produce food.

World Menopause Day

1.54 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered world menopause day 2018.

As always, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating the debate and all those from across the House who supported the application, including my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). Today is World Menopause Day, the day that the International Menopause Society, in collaboration with the World Health Organisation, has designated for a focus on the menopause—from hot flushes through to heart health and everything in between. It was only in July 2018 that the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who is in her place, discussed her experiences with the menopause in this House. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate her on her honesty and, I must say, her bravery in raising the matter in this Chamber. It is my hope that we will no longer have to note or make newsworthy such honest representations and statements.

Discussions and understanding of the menopause should be commonplace and should go almost unnoticed but not unactioned, which is the important point. Many women spend a third of their lives postmenopausal, often at the peak of their careers and still with huge plans and ambitions for the future. In fact, as the pension age for women increases to 68, our society is demanding that women have those careers and those ambitions. Women could now spend well over 20 years of their working lives living perimenopausal and postmenopausal. Three and a half million women over 50 are employed in the UK, and 80% of them will experience notable changes due to the menopause. Recent research has found that 50% of working women reported finding work difficult due to the menopause, and 10% give up work altogether as a result.

I embarked on a new career in my 50s as a newly elected MP. I was privileged to enter this House of Commons just over a year ago, and I cannot imagine embarking on a new career struggling with some of the symptoms that my female counterparts experience and suffering them without help and support. Indeed, it is unthinkable that society would ask men at the height of their careers to simply tolerate the symptoms, to carry on and, actually, to do so quietly. Why should women? All too often, the menopause is seen as something women need simply to cope with. They are afraid to discuss the symptoms openly with their friends, family and, sometimes most importantly, work colleagues, because they are afraid of being undermined and perhaps marginalised. Some 70% of women do not discuss their symptoms at work, a third do not visit their GP and 50% report that the menopause affects their mental health and their ability at work.

Michelle Heaton, who went through the menopause in her 30s, is a diligent and vocal campaigner who is doing an excellent job of raising awareness of the menopause today in a white paper report with Glenmark Pharma—a critically important document.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that raising awareness of early menopause among the

general public and, crucially, the medical profession is critical for women who need diagnosis and support while they are going through it?

Martin Whitfield: Absolutely, and I am grateful for that intervention. I will come to the matter of the medical profession in just a moment.

The report that Michelle is promoting is intended to increase understanding of symptoms and, in particular, the age at which the menopause begins. Too frequently, it is considered a condition of a certain age, which is so far from the truth. Indeed, when the symptoms start to show, we need to educate not just the general population but health providers in particular so they understand what is being presented.

Just yesterday, a colleague from the Scottish Parliament, Monica Lennon MSP, lodged a motion requesting “equal access” to the menopause clinics that exist up there. I compliment her and the unions for their work up there. They raise the issue that employers have been slow to recognise that those experiencing menopausal symptoms may need special consideration. For too long it has been a private matter. As a result, it is rarely discussed. Many managers will have no awareness of the issues involved, which means that many workers feel they have to hide their symptoms and are less likely to ask for the adjustments they need in order to work. I agree with the motion when it says that this must change. The menopause is an occupational health issue that rests on the desks of managers—male as well as female managers, and managers who are frequently younger than the person who presents before them. There needs to be education about this so that it can be dealt with sensitively but positively, as it will affect 50% of our population at some stage.

Gender equality is not just a women’s issue, it is an issue for society as a whole. We should all wish to live in a society that is fair and equitable for all. There is nothing equitable about a large proportion of our workforce being forced to suffer these health issues in silence. Women are often not comfortable disclosing these difficulties to managers, particularly if they are younger and particularly if they are male. Women still sometimes require time off work to deal with the symptoms, and many are not comfortable with disclosing the real reason for their time off, so it goes unnoticed by employers.

The menopause should be recognised as, among other things, an occupational health issue. With all due respect, employers have been far, far too slow to take on board the requirement to recognise those who are experiencing symptoms. Today is World Menopause Day and a number of things are being asked for, all of which are based on the simple hashtag that has been adopted today: #makemenopausematter. It is a simple request, and it spans schools and education, the workplace and our health professionals, who have a duty and obligation to understand the symptoms presented to them by women who are finding the menopause frightening and challenging and who often find it difficult to discuss the matter within their own families. Today is an opportunity to look at that and address the educational needs that the whole of society requires.

I stand here introducing this debate as a man, and it has to be said that it is time for men to show their solidarity and to break a taboo about talking about the menopause. I ask every man in this place, every man who is watching on and every man in the UK—let me

go further and just ask all men—to be brave enough to have the guts to say, “Can you tell me? Can you explain? Will you please share?” I ask them to do that while listening with sympathy and empathy. Sadly, I am all too convinced that if the menopause affected men, it perhaps would not be the problem it is today and we would not be having this debate—it would have certainly have been first raised in this House before July 2018.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My mother has six daughters, the eldest of whom turns 55 tomorrow—happy birthday, Claire. The youngest turns 44 at the end of the month—happy birthday Aimi. I am clearly intervening just so that I can say happy birthday to my sisters in the House. I get plenty of discussion about this issue at home, but I want to thank my hon. Friend for making the point that men need to talk about it, too. He has been brave in bringing this debate forward today.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for that intervention. It is true that men need to discuss this, but not dominate. It is also important that they listen. I have often stood here and been critical of social media, but if we examine social media today, we see that the support for World Menopause Day out there is very positive. A huge amount of work is being done; there is a huge amount of medical and academic research, and it is good to see people drawing attention to it. Today has also been an opportunity for women to share their experiences on television, radio and social media, which in itself is a huge step forward in breaking the taboo, and it is for men to listen.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the House. He is making some very good points, but I just want to ask that we do not lose sight in this debate of women who have the menopause brought on earlier in life than they may have anticipated by chemotherapy treatment. Some younger women also experience it earlier than others might expect, so we need to have an understanding of the full spectrum of the menopause and not just assume that it affects only women of a certain age.

Martin Whitfield: That is an excellent point. One of the most important things to come out of today, particularly with the work that Michelle is pushing forward, is that society's view of what the menopause is just happens to be wrong—I use those words carefully. We need open discussion, with women being able to talk about symptoms when they attend clinics and go to their general practitioner. On behalf of the NHS, I must say that a huge amount of good work is going on in explaining to women who present for other matters what the potential outcomes of treatment are, but this should never be a frightening experience for a woman to speak about, whatever her age. We should live in a society where women can share that and expect to be heard empathetically and with respect.

As I move on to the request being made of employers, let me say that society should be able to amend its ways to facilitate dealing with these symptoms, because women who are going through the menopause have enormous amounts to contribute, and employers should not see it as a barrier and as an excuse to leave work. We should have facilities and methods of support—it does not take

a lot to provide those. I know some of my colleagues have fans, but here we are in 2018 unable to cool or heat buildings to a point where they are acceptable to work in. These are the simple things that would make a huge difference to people's lives. As I have said, these are people who are still expected to contribute to society, to be driven and to make changes and take steps up—and why shouldn't they? The menopause should not be a blockage to that.

I am aware that others wish to speak, and it would be unforgivable for a man to steal all of their time. I would just like to finish by saying that I ask all men, myself included, to take up the challenge of discussing the menopause with the people close to us. We should discuss it openly at home and in the workplace, so that for once our mothers, wives, sisters and friends do not need to feel that they suffer in silence.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I was surprised and very pleased when I saw that a man had tabled this motion, and the hon. Gentleman has been courageous in standing up and saying what he has said. I am also delighted that we have a male Minister answering in this debate. We all look forward to hearing what he has to say, too. We are making breakthroughs in this place that people would never have imagined.

2.9 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Thank you so much, Madam Deputy Speaker. You speak so much truth and I am glad that you have put those words on the record from your position—they will carry a lot of weight.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who gave an absolutely brilliant and heartfelt speech that I know will resonate with all the women throughout the country and around the world who are watching this debate. They will be so happy that he, as a man, is championing this issue. If only every man was as warm, empathetic and well informed as he is, we would not be having this debate. I look forward to working assiduously with him and colleagues from all parties to reach that position, which I very much believe we will.

As has been said, we have already tackled many taboos in this place and in our society, and this is genuinely one of the last taboos. It is now okay to talk about mental health, and that is a really good thing. A lot of celebrities now talk about their mental health. It is all over social media, in the press and on the television. People are backing that, and people are coming forward to say, “It's okay not to be okay.” Somehow, however, menopause is still left out, and this debate is a fantastic chance to put that right.

I started on this journey pretty much as the hon. Member for Lothian East described—

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): East Lothian.

Rachel Maclean: East Lothian—I am so sorry. Please forgive me.

I was 50 when I was elected, so I was of course well within that perimenopausal/menopausal age myself. I did not conform to the menopause stereotypes, as I shall touch on later in my speech. There is so much ignorance

[Rachel Maclean]

out there. It is generally believed that someone has to suffer from the key symptoms, such as hot flushes and night sweats—that that is basically all that menopause is—but menopause is so much more than that. It is not just hot flushes and night sweats, and I am living proof of that. I have never had a hot flush or a night sweat, but I am most definitely menopausal. My symptoms revolve around quite debilitating migraines, sometimes on an almost daily basis when I am not able to manage the stress of this job. As was rightly said, this is an incredibly stressful job and an incredibly stressful workplace, and we cannot just take a day off and go and lie down in a dark room to sleep off a migraine, much as we all might like to, even if we are not menopausal. Many women working in other walks of life who are perhaps at the peak of their careers, or who work in any stressful environment, are not able to get the support that they need.

We saw a shocking demonstration of the ignorance in society from no less a figure than the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, who not long ago compared the economy with the menopause. He said that we are suffering a menopausal economy. He came back and defended that, saying that he did not mean it or whatever, but his casual use of those words demonstrated a fundamental lack of awareness of a leading figure in our country. It is not right. With that phrase, he made me so angry—and not only me but many other people. That made me think that I could not sit there and not be a voice for all the women out there who do not have the privilege of being able to raise the issue in this place.

So, I had my personal journey, and I started to look on social media and do some more research to educate myself. As the hon. Member for East—[HON. MEMBERS: “Lothian.”] I will get there in the end!

Alex Chalk: The East Lothian question.

Rachel Maclean: Yes; thank you.

The hon. Member for East Lothian said that social media plays a big part in this, and it is where I started my journey. From my research and conversations, I recognise that millions of women in this country do not feel listened to at this time of their lives. That was where my campaign started—from a place of wanting to represent those women.

We still have a long way to go. Last night, when I was voting in the Lobby, wearing this #MakeMenopauseMatter badge, I was approached by a very senior colleague, who shall remain nameless. His comment was: “Why—are you having a hot flush, dear?” That was said to my face. My goodness, does not that illustrate how we need to raise awareness? This is not a women’s issue; it is a society issue. It is for everybody, because every man works with a woman, is related to a woman or lives with a woman. People cannot just denigrate and belittle experiences that can be incredibly difficult for women to push through. I pride myself on being quite a feisty person. I am not afraid to say what I think and I definitely told that Member what I thought about that comment. I said, “Please, come to the World Menopause Day debate and find out why that comment is completely inappropriate and, hopefully, learn a bit more.” I am delighted to say that he is in a minority. I pay tribute to the many male colleagues from all parties who have been supportive of the debate and this issue.

I am not asking for a lot—perhaps I am, but I do not regard it as a lot. I regard these things as quite basic. The hon. Member for East Lothian has already touched on the key issues, the first of which is the workplace. We are in an extraordinarily unusual workplace where there are issues for not only the people who work here, but Members ourselves, but there are many more workplaces up and down the country. It is not too much to ask—is it?—for workplaces to be better prepared for women going through this change of life. The process can be extremely positive. If women get the support, understanding and empathy that they need from their colleagues, there is absolutely no reason why they cannot make this into a fantastic time in which they can move on to a new chapter of their lives, and flourish and contribute in different ways.

Martin Whitfield: The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that it is strange that our high schools and education system are perfectly set up to support young people through their teenage years, when substantial changes are going on in their bodies, and to launch them into their careers, but society seems unable to have the same sympathy and empathy at a different part of someone’s career?

Rachel Maclean: Yes, I completely agree. The hon. Gentleman must be psychic, because he has made a point that I was going to make. Before I do so, however, I want to speak about the workplace.

Let me pay tribute to some organisations that are doing an absolutely fantastic job in this regard. I have had quite a lot of contact with West Midlands police through various women who have championed this issue in the workplace. There is a lady called Lesley Byrne—Lesley, if you are watching, keep going! Yvonne Bruton has been running menopause awareness workshops for the police. Imagine the West Midlands police—a very male-dominated and, in many ways, traditional organisation. Female police officers are incredibly brave to say, “I have these experiences. I am not supported and I need adjustments to my working patterns.” They are working through the issues and finding ways to support their female colleagues. At the end of the day, we need good police officers and we need them to stay in the police force, to be motivated and to progress to higher levels.

That work is absolutely brilliant, and there is no reason why every single police force in the country could not talk to West Midlands police, find out what they are doing and disseminate the information among themselves. Indeed, there is no reason why other organisations cannot have a menopause policy, just as they have policies on childcare and maternity leave. It does not cost anything; it is a question of saying, “We’re here and we will listen to you if you need support.” That is my first ask.

My second ask is about education, which the hon. Member for East Lothian just spoke about so eloquently. We of course talk to young girls and boys—I presume this still happens; it is a long time since it happened to me—about puberty, periods, where babies come from and so on. We educate our young people about all those important issues to equip them for life and relationships; why can we not educate them about what happens at the end of their reproductive lives? It is very simple. I spoke

to a male colleague earlier who said, “I have no personal experience of the menopause, so how can I talk about it?” I said, “Well, okay, your mother went through it,” but then we did not talk to our mothers about these sorts of things. This needs to come into the school curriculum and to be part of what schools are talking about. Let us look at how we can do that, because surely it is not that hard.

The third aspect of my campaign is around access to advice in GP surgeries. This is where we really do need to do more. I have been absolutely inundated with people contacting me. I have heard quite horrific stories from women who did not get the treatment that is medically proven to be effective, which is hormone replacement therapy. HRT is available on the NHS and actually advocated for women in the guidelines of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. However, it seems that there is—I don’t know—a lack of awareness, a lack of information and a lack of empathy among GPs who are not prescribing HRT for women when they need it. I have heard story after story from women who went to their GP, saying, “Look, I am suffering these symptoms.” Again, the reason might be that they are not having hot flushes or night sweats, but they have the other symptoms that are associated with the menopause, and they are just not getting that treatment. GPs are sending them away. Why do some women battle for years to get HRT?

I am delighted to say that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), has already met me to discuss this issue. We very much hope to move things forward with the all-party group on women’s health, which is led by the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), and obviously with any other Member who wishes to take part. We really need to do more.

If I may, I will draw my comments to a close by quickly paying tribute to a few campaigners who have given me so much support and information.

Kerry McCarthy: The hon. Lady has been very brave in speaking out. So far our focus has been on dealing with the symptoms and the problems. Has she had the opportunity to look into whether diet-related changes could help to alleviate some of those symptoms rather than just medical solutions? In Japan and China, for example, there seems to be much lower incidence of things such as hot flushes, and some suggest that that might be because of the consumption of soya, which has oestrogen in it, although I am not quite sure how it works. Has she looked at that at all?

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Lady very much for her intervention. I am certainly aware that my research has only scratched the surface. She is absolutely right to say that diet has a strong connection with wellbeing and health at any point in life. In fact, I am seeking help from a nutritionist myself to try to tackle some of these issues, because they are all interlinked. Perhaps that illustrates some of the lack of understanding that we have generally.

In my list of people to whom I wish to pay tribute, I will, if I may, mention the menopause chef who came to my Menopause Café in Redditch. The Menopause Café is an amazing national organisation. It is about bringing women together to have conversations about the menopause.

I held mine in Redditch a couple of weeks ago. I encourage anyone to host a Menopause Café in their constituency. The experience was really moving. Women said that they had learned more about the menopause in that time than they had learned over five years. The menopause chef works out diets that meet women’s dietary requirements.

Diane Danzebrink, a fantastic consultant, tutor and coach, is very active in this space and does a lot of work in the area—I believe that other Members have met her. Dr Louise Newson, a GP, set up the country’s first menopause-only clinic, which is a fantastic innovation. We would all like to see such clinics more widely spread. Lynda Bailey, the co-founder of Talking Menopause, is one of the pioneers in the West Midlands police. Then there is the incredible Hot Flush, which describes the menopause as a club that no one wants to join. It does a lot to demystify some of the symptoms of menopause and to talk about them frankly. Let us just be honest about some of the things that can happen at menopause. Let us just be comfortable talking about things such as vaginal dryness, loss of libido, incontinence and pelvic floor weakness. These are not easy things to put on record standing here in the House of Commons. If women experience these things, it can negatively impact on their ability to form a relationship, to have a relationship with their partner and a whole host of other things. All those things can be connected to the menopause. More importantly, they can be alleviated with the right information and support. Why should women not have the right to a happy, healthy later chapter of their life in all aspects, including in their intimate life? I believe in that very passionately and think that it is so important.

Very quickly, let me mention Detective Chief Inspector Yvonne Bruton, who has pioneered this work in the West Midlands police. Liz Earle, a health magazine and beauty product founder, is also a passionate champion of this issue. Obviously there are many more people involved, but I do not have the space to mention them. Needless to say it is a space that is well populated by passionate women who are just keen to share their knowledge with others.

I will draw my remarks to a close. I could probably talk for hours, but I am aware that I am detaining the House. Let me thank again the hon. Member for East Lothian. I am so delighted that he contacted me and that he applied for the debate. I very much look forward to the Minister’s closing remarks.

2.25 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I also congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing this important debate—it seems to be a day for Scottish accents. I am delighted that he felt able to bring forward such an important matter. It was a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) who courageously outlined some of her own experiences and made a very wide-ranging and powerful speech. She advocated and highlighted so many other women who are doing their very best to give this subject the prominence that it most assuredly deserves.

I am delighted to be speaking about World Menopause Day and about this important subject. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) is, I believe, even more delighted. He is quite young, and I think that he thought that he would be replying to this

[*Marion Fellows*]

debate instead of me. My daughter is extremely apprehensive about the content of my speech, as she frequently accuses me of oversharing. She need have no fears today—or at least not too many.

I have been there, I have done that and I have got the T-shirt, and that really does cover my experience of menopause. I started early and it seemed to go on for quite a long time. I remarked earlier to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my mother was born in 1919, so how I was raised very much reflected the way that she was raised by a mother who was born in the 19th century, so no one talked about it.

I have some vivid memories. I was teaching in a further education college as I was going through quite a large part of my menopausal experience. Standing in front of 25 bored teenagers, I asked, “Is it hot in here, or is it just me?” I was told, “No, it’s just you”, to which I responded, “Well, I’m opening the windows anyway.” It really was good that I was in charge of that class.

Another story that, in many ways, illustrates how the menopause used to be discussed is through the brilliant comic creations of Les Dawson, Cissie and Ada. They only ever mouthed the words, “The change” when discussing their menopause experiences as well as those of other women. I am very glad that that is no longer the case. World Menopause Day is an important opportunity for women to speak out about their real experiences of the menopause, contributing to breaking the taboo around both the menopause and women’s reproductive health.

As we should all know, the menopause can have a significant psychological and physical impact on women, and it is vital that these effects and symptoms are taken seriously by health professionals and society at large and that women can access the right support. Women’s health issues often do not come under the spotlight owing to ongoing taboos around women’s health, and it is time for women—younger and older—to speak out in support of each other to raise awareness. The days when women are literally put outside the tent or igloo when they are past child-bearing age are long gone, but we still have these taboos. We must work hard to speak about our experiences and contribute to breaking these taboos.

This year’s World Menopause Day is about recognising the impact that the menopause can have on women’s sexual wellbeing. Both during and after the menopause, it is not uncommon for women to experience some sexual dysfunction, which can have a severe impact on their relationships, self-esteem and wider mental health. It is so important that women going through this can access the right support to reassure them that it is totally normal and they are not alone. Sharing experiences with other women is also extremely important, and women speaking to other women about their experience is to be encouraged, but we must engage with the wider world too. As I have said, the menopause can have a significant psychological and physical impact on women, and it is vital that these effects and symptoms are taken seriously by health professionals.

Rachel Maclean: I commend the hon. Lady’s bravery in speaking from the heart and from her personal experience. She is talking about the psychological impact of the menopause. Does she agree that women sometimes

report that they do not feel like themselves at all—that they experience depression and anxiety, and often feel effects on their memory, making it very difficult to perform in the workplace and often leading to their leaving work early?

Marion Fellows: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and this is a wonderful occasion to highlight such things and to motivate women to speak more frankly, because every woman has a different menopause. We all have to accept that and to share our experiences so that no one feels that they are the only one going through this.

The Scottish National party and the Scottish Government support World Menopause Day. Through the Scottish Primary Care Information Resource, the Scottish Government support general practice to identify patients with conditions such as osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease, which are clearly and directly associated with the menopause. We need to anticipate health needs for women in this situation and ensure the best possible care for them. There are some NHS menopause clinics in Scotland, located in Dumfries and Galloway, Fife, Grampian, Lothian and Tayside. In other areas, health boards provide menopause help through general practice and specialist referral if needed. The British Menopause Society really wants to encourage that, because doctors and other health professionals also need to be trained in how to talk to women and encourage them to talk about their symptoms.

There are also some great initiatives at a local government level. For example, South Lanarkshire Council is today launching its menopause policy, and it is to be very much commended for that. The council worked out that 68% of its workforce are women, who could go through the menopause at any point, and it sees it as its duty to take care of these women and to allow them to talk to managers. In fact, they are training managers properly to help with this issue. It can be very difficult for some women to talk to a younger man, as the hon. Member for East Lothian has mentioned.

South Lanarkshire Council’s plan includes the provision of fans for women to manage hot flushes and the ability to take time out when coping with low moods. There is also a requirement to ensure that women experiencing menopause have easy access to toilet facilities. This is not difficult; it is something that all employers should be doing. Women will have somewhere to rest or to go for a little while if they feel tired due to a lack of sleep caused by things such as hot flushes, and if they are suffering from anxiety at this time, they will also be able to access the employee counselling services. This is a great initiative that I wholly commend, and it should be emulated by other employers right across the country. This is exactly the kind of proactive support that both the public and private sectors should be adopting.

A BBC survey earlier this year found that 70% of respondents do not tell their bosses that they are experiencing symptoms when they are going through the menopause. I certainly did not, but then I am well beyond menopause and have seen quite a large variety of changes in how we speak about women’s issues throughout my lifetime, so I am really happy to be able to speak on the subject today. Employers must take the lead in creating a safe environment for women to speak up if their symptoms are making their work difficult.

It is actually better for employers to do that, because if they treat women with consideration at this time in their lives, they will get the best possible work out of them.

Martin Whitfield: Is it not the case, though, that a woman should never feel obliged to tell her employer? She should work in an environment that is open and sensitive enough for that to be understood, so that she has the confidence to share that, rather than it being an employment requirement to announce it.

Marion Fellows: Yes, I agree; but it does have to be a two-way process. Employers have to create workplaces where people feel confident talking about mental health issues and about the menopause.

Women's health issues often do not see the spotlight due to ongoing taboos, and it is time for women—younger and older—to speak out. Women are often expected to put up and shut up about the symptoms associated with the menopause or periods, and to feel that talking about it is inappropriate or just moaning, when it is clear that this attitude is just thinly-veiled sexism. The fact is that the menopause and periods, as well as other hormonal conditions such as polycystic ovary syndrome, can have a really debilitating effect on women day to day.

It is great to see fantastic initiatives such as the menopause cafés mentioned by the hon. Member for Redditch that are now up and down the country after they were started by Rachel Weiss in June 2017 in her home city of Perth in Scotland. Weiss was reportedly inspired by “Newsnight” presenter Kirsty Wark's documentary on the menopause, in which she talked about her own experience. This was a fantastic and brave project that no doubt touched many women across the UK who felt that their experiences were given a voice.

I draw the attention of the House to an article by Mandy Rhodes, the editor of *Holyrood Magazine* and columnist of the year. She has written, much more eloquently than I could, about some of her experiences, saying:

“One of my funnier moments in life was going to a menopause support group—a bit like an AA for women of a certain age—where one woman confessed she had no menopausal symptoms but was there to make friends. Why would you even do that? The idea that you might want to seek out new friends, from among a group of women who were in the middle of a hormonal-induced”—

expletive deleted—

“storm that had likely helped alienate them from all their own friends and family, smacked of a certain kind of desperation. But that is where this can take you...Over the last 20 years, many barriers have been broken down regarding a whole range of issues that impact on our working lives, including gender, race, physical and mental health. And whilst people feel more comfortable opening up about some of these issues, there are others that remain taboo. The menopause and the symptoms associated with it are, for many women, that last taboo. And it's something of a paradox that on the journey women have travelled towards equality, that that same generation of women”—

Mandy's generation, who are younger than me, it has to be said—

“who were at the fore of getting their voices heard in the fight for gender equality, are now, in middle-age, silenced by a uniquely female condition that has done more to disempower them than any male chauvinist could ever do. Many women live a third of their lives post-menopausal, often at the peak of their careers and still with big plans. And so, dealing with it...matters to us all.”

I echo that quotation in its entirety and recommend that hon. Members read that article, which is well written, personal and effective.

2.39 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) and the Minister on their bravery, and I say to every man in the Chamber today: welcome to the sisterhood.

Some 49.6% of the population worldwide are women, which equates to close to 3.8 billion of us, and with the vast majority of women—in the developed world at least—living way beyond menopausal age, it is about time this issue was taken seriously. For too long the menopause has been one of two things: a taboo subject that women do not dare to admit they are suffering from, or the punchline of a joke that is actually anything but funny.

Most women will experience the menopause at some time in their lives, and the severity of their suffering varies greatly. About 25% of women are lucky enough to barely notice any changes to their body or experience any of the well-documented symptoms, but for others the menopause can be an unbearable time—stressful, debilitating and completely life changing. Yet many women are completely unprepared for this phase of their lives, which is something that we desperately need to change for future generations. We need to be educating our children—boys as well as girls—so that they understand the impact the menopause could one day have on their lives and relationships.

The Government's draft sex and relationships education guidance includes advice on teaching young people about menstruation, but it makes no mention of the menopause, which is just as important and often more difficult. Will the Minister ask the Department for Education, as part of its consultation, to consider extending the guidance to include teaching on the menopause? In doing this, we could help to educate the next generation and put an end to the lack of knowledge around the menopause, which is having a hugely detrimental effect on those suffering today.

Also having a detrimental effect is the limited training given to GPs on this subject. Too many women struggle when doctors either do not recognise their symptoms, do not prescribe hormone replacement therapy—because they are relying on inaccurate and outdated information—or incorrectly diagnose those symptoms as depression and subsequently offer the wrong medication. This needs to change, and the Department of Health and Social Care needs to play its role and work with patients, experts, the NHS, the Royal College of General Practitioners, medical schools and all health professionals to better educate them about the menopause.

The NICE guidelines on the menopause were first published almost three years ago, yet many doctors admit that they are either not aware of them or have not read them. Women are therefore relying on the chance that the GP they visit is one of those who has. Healthcare should not be a lottery. Every woman suffering the effects of the menopause is entitled to the same quality of care, but the quality of that care in the UK at the moment needs serious attention. Current treatment options for women are woefully poor. Referrals to NHS menopause

[Carolyn Harris]

clinics take up to six months because of the limited number of places—the result of the ongoing cuts to services. For many women unable to take HRT, particularly those who have had breast or gynaecological cancers, there is no support at all.

It is not just medical support we are here to talk about. In the UK, the average age women reach the menopause is 51, but about one woman in every 100 experiences early menopause owing to medical conditions, treatment or surgery. The loss of fertility as a result can be devastating for some women, and their psychological health is as affected as their physical health. These women need to be offered counselling as well as advice on how to maintain their long-term health, which can be affected by early oestrogen depletion.

I have heard cases of women going into debt to fund appointments with private doctors and gynaecologists because they cannot access the care that should be available to them on the NHS. Even more worryingly, the Samaritans' 2017 report on suicide figures shows that the highest suicide rate for women is for those aged between 50 and 54. It cannot be coincidence that the age of menopause is 51. I find it deplorable that in this country something that affects so many people is so underfunded and misunderstood.

It is not just the treatment of the symptoms that needs serious attention. Life does not stop for women when they reach the menopause—I am testament to that—even if they are suffering from crippling side effects, and for many this means continuing to work. Women are working in greater numbers than ever, making up 47% of the UK workforce. About 4.3 million of these employed women are aged 50 or over, and this number is set to increase over the next few years. With studies showing that menopause symptoms can have a significant impact on attendance and performance in the workplace, employers need to start looking at what they can do to help these women and improve their own productivity.

Rachel Maclean: Does the hon. Lady also agree that it is in those businesses' and organisations' own interests to retain these members of staff, whom they have trained and invested in over many years, and who have so many skills and so much knowledge?

Carolyn Harris: I do, and I was just coming to that.

Employers have a duty of care to all their employees. While no respectable company would even consider running their business without a maternity policy, very few will have given any thought to the introduction of a menopause policy. Simple adjustments, such as relaxed uniform policies, flexible working conditions and temperature control in offices, could have a huge impact on a woman's decision to remain in work. It is a win-win situation: employers would benefit from retaining valuable, trustworthy and experienced employees, saving money on sickness cover and training new staff, while women would find it easier to cope with the physical symptoms of the menopause. With simple adjustments, such as being able to travel outside rush hour or to wear cooler, less restrictive clothing, they would also feel valued and supported in their professional roles, which in turn would help with the psychological barriers associated with the menopause.

Yet current figures show that two thirds of women going through the menopause say they have no support at all in their workplace. Some 25% of women say they have considered leaving their job because of it, and one in 10 actually ends up handing in her notice. Women in our emergency services, nurses, frontline retail staff and office workers—in fact, women from all sectors of industry—are leaving the workplace owing to a lack of support from their employers. These are not small businesses, but massive national and global companies. We need big business and workplaces to take this seriously.

Many unions are already championing the call for a menopause policy. An excellent example is the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, which I have worked with, and the very wonderful Julie Bird, who has encouraged Tesco to set up pilot menopause support groups. The scheme started in Swansea and is now being rolled out across the south-west.

Nottinghamshire police was the first force in the country to introduce a menopause policy that includes flexible working and lighter uniforms. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) talked about local authorities. I am pleased to say that I have just received a message informing me that my own local authority, City and County of Swansea—I think it knew I would want to say this—is going to introduce a menopause policy.

Martin Whitfield: These discussions can take place in local authorities, unions such as the CWU and the GMB, and employers such as the civil nuclear constabulary. This does not cost a lot of money, but it does require understanding.

Carolyn Harris: People need to talk. We must take the best practice from these examples, share them with other employers and ensure that menopause guidelines become compulsory for all businesses.

On this World Menopause Day, let us educate children—girls and boys—within the school curriculum so that for future generations the menopause ceases to be a taboo subject or a joking matter. Let us improve public understanding of the menopause and its symptoms so that women no longer feel that they need to suffer in silence. Let us ensure that our medical professions know how to diagnose and best treat these symptoms so that women's experiences are less painful and less distressing. Let us pledge to work towards a mandatory menopause policy within workplaces so that women can carry on with a normal life, however severe their symptoms may be. On this World Menopause Day, let us make a commitment to make a difference.

2.50 pm

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury (Nigel Adams): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing this very important debate on World Menopause Day. This is a very welcome opportunity to discuss, and raise the profile of, the menopause. Is it not encouraging that a man has come to this Chamber on World Menopause Day and introduced this debate? Who would have thought, a couple of years ago, that that would happen? Who would have thought that a male Minister would be responding to this debate? Well, a week ago, I did not

think I would be doing that, but it has been an absolute privilege for me to listen to the contributions made here today.

It is fantastic to see the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) in her place. She talked about how nervous her daughter was about what her speech might contain. I can tell the hon. Lady that there are those who are very nervous about what my speech might contain, not least in the Adams household, and also in the Whips Office. As Members can see, I am surrounded by Whips today, so I am going to stay on message, especially if I am to stay in the sisterhood referenced by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris).

I am here today on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). She has responsibility for women's health and would very much have liked to be here to discuss a topic that she is incredibly passionate about. She has taken a very close interest in women's health, including the menopause, and I know that she will be watching this debate.

The debate has provided us with a number of positive opportunities. First, we, as Members of Parliament, can play a role by helping to raise awareness of the menopause and by encouraging people to have more open conversations about this topic. This is a very significant life stage for every woman, as we have heard, and it has been all too rarely discussed in the House. Today, we have this opportunity to put that right.

Secondly, this debate gives us the opportunity to reflect on the positive things that employers and the health system are already doing to support women who are suffering from menopausal symptoms. More women are likely to have a better experience of the menopause if we share and promote the best examples of existing support.

We also have the opportunity to discuss what more needs to be done. We know, for example, that there are inconsistent levels of awareness around the menopause, and that that reflects a history of stigma attached to the issue. The benefits of tackling stigma head on and having the right menopause support in place are clear. That is the right thing to do for women who are suffering from adverse symptoms or who feel unable to have open conversations about how they are feeling.

Openness, as we have heard, goes for men as well as women. It is important that we improve how we educate men about the menopause for the benefit of their partners, relatives and colleagues—and, crucially, for the benefit of their own understanding. There is also a strong argument based on economic inclusion. Our national workforce is ageing, and positive action by employers will benefit employee engagement, productivity and retention.

We cannot stress enough that the menopause is a natural part of ageing and will be experienced in one way or another by every single woman. As we have heard from several Members, every woman will experience the menopause differently, and the types and severity of symptoms can vary. The menopause can occur naturally or be triggered or accelerated by medical interventions such as some surgeries or cancer treatments. The menopause can have physical and non-physical symptoms, but both can cause discomfort and, in many cases, social embarrassment.

There are clear consequences for wellbeing. Women experiencing troublesome menopausal symptoms report lower health-related quality of life and greater use of healthcare services than women without symptoms.

Let us look at the numbers. There are more than 3.5 million women between the ages of 50 and 65 in employment in the UK. One in four women in the workplace is going through or has gone through the menopause. Over half of those women report that they experience symptoms that impact their work. The number of women over the age of 50 continues to grow, and the employment rate for women in the UK has never been higher. Women go through the menopause at a life stage when they are often dealing with demanding responsibilities such as work, caring for elderly relatives and dealing with teenage and adolescent children. Difficult symptoms can really add to the challenges of life.

No two menopauses are exactly alike. That is why the guidance produced by NICE recommends adopting an individualised approach at all stages of diagnosis, investigation and management of menopause. NICE also recommends that information on menopause is given in different ways, to encourage women to discuss their symptoms and needs.

Hormone replacement therapy can be an effective way of relieving many menopausal symptoms, as well as preventing osteoporosis. Usually, women may start HRT as soon as they begin experiencing menopausal symptoms, and their GP can advise on the different types of HRT that are available. However, HRT is not always the most suitable treatment, and women can discuss alternatives with their GP. Psychological interventions can be helpful for symptoms of anxiety or for those suffering from low mood. When making judgments about treatment, healthcare professionals can draw on advice from the British Menopause Society, a specialist society affiliated to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

But we can always do more. I know that the Mental Health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock, is leading work on improving women's health and their experiences of healthcare. Her work partly focuses on raising awareness and breaking taboos—we have heard that word many times this afternoon—around common health morbidities, such as problem periods and incontinence. She is working closely with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to achieve that. I know that one of her concerns is that women's experience of the diagnosis and treatment of common gynaecological issues is not always what it could be. The all-party parliamentary group on women's health pointed that out in its report earlier this year, and I am sure that the Minister will have more to say about that when she returns to the Commons.

For many women experiencing the menopause, the best help often comes from other women. Services can build on that support so that women can make lifestyle choices that will help to give them a better experience of the menopause, including stopping smoking, exercising regularly and eating healthily. Partners in the healthcare system can also offer support. Menopause Matters is a website that provides up-to-date information about the menopause and treatment options, as well as hosting a forum for women to discuss their experiences of the menopause. The Daisy Network is a charity that provides information and support specifically for women who are going through premature menopause.

[Nigel Adams]

As has been mentioned several times this afternoon, we also need to look to workplaces as a source of support for women with menopausal symptoms. Many women report that they feel they do not have the opportunity to have open conversations with their employer about menopausal symptoms at work. That needs to change—I am specifically targeting these remarks at male managers in the workplace. This has to change. If two men can get up in the House of Commons and talk about the menopause, male managers in the workplace should be doing exactly the same.

We know from a 2017 review of the effects of menopause transition on women's economic participation that the menopause is not well understood or provided for in workplace cultures, policies and training. Sources of guidance are available for employers who want to do more to support women with menopausal symptoms. The Faculty of Occupational Medicine has produced a factsheet and infographic on menopause and the workplace, as requested by the chief medical officer in her 2014 report on women's health. It contains practical guidance for employers on how to improve workplace environments for menopausal women, and it stresses the importance of regular, informed conversations between managers and employees.

It can often be important for managers simply to acknowledge the menopause as a natural stage of life and reassure women that their employer is open to making adjustments that they may find helpful. Equally, some women may not be comfortable discussing their symptoms with a manager, and access to occupational health can also be very valuable. Specific actions that employers can take to help women experiencing menopausal symptoms include considering changes to working patterns or responsibilities, providing employees with sources of information about the menopause, and challenging taboos and negative expectations about the menopause.

There are good examples of employers—we have heard one or two in this excellent debate—who have taken action to make their workplaces menopause-friendly. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who takes a really close interest in this issue. She spoke so passionately this afternoon, as she has done previously in this House. She highlighted the example of the West Midlands police, which provides tailored support that helps women to build their confidence and stay in the workplace. As the hon. Member for East Lothian mentioned, she has spoken openly and bravely on this subject in the Chamber on several occasions. I know she is also working closely with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock.

I want to respond to the question my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch posed about GPs not prescribing HRT on some occasions for women who need it. HRT can help to relieve most of the menopausal symptoms. The guidelines from NICE—NG23 on the diagnosis and management of the menopause—recommend HRT as part of an individualised approach to treatment and management, and women must be able to access the treatment they need to manage such symptoms effectively.

My hon. Friend, like the hon. Member for Swansea East, correctly mentioned teaching children about the menopause in schools, which is absolutely critical.

The Government are making relationships education compulsory in all primary schools, sex and relationships education compulsory in all secondary schools and health education compulsory in primary and secondary state schools. The Department for Education has launched a consultation on the draft guidance and regulations, which closes on 7 November. I am sure my colleagues in the Department for Education will have heard the well-qualified remarks made this afternoon.

The draft guidance currently does not mention the menopause explicitly, but at primary level it includes teaching about puberty, menstruation and changes to the adolescent body, and at secondary level pupils will be taught about sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing, including fertility. The underpinning focus in these subjects is to equip young people to develop positive attitudes to health, relationships and wellbeing both now and as they progress through adult life.

Martin Whitfield: Does the Minister agree that when there is teaching about fertility in high school or secondary school education, the fact that the menopause is not mentioned almost plays into the taboo he mentioned earlier? Such a discussion is not had, and our children are therefore not getting a full picture or understanding of what is going to come to most of them.

Nigel Adams: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is absolutely crucial to have teaching about puberty, periods and reproductive health, which provides crucial opportunities for schools to refer to the menopause. I had no idea when my mother was going through the menopause, which was referred to as “the change”. She was very, very poorly. I remember being in the living room—my dad was at work—when the doctor was called. My mother was 50 years old and having a really bad experience. She was taken off to a mental institution. She was carted out of the house and ended up in what can only be described as a Victorian asylum. I am really glad that things have moved on in that regard—this was some time ago. It is absolutely crucial that we get to children early enough to make sure they understand the causes of a condition that affects every single woman.

Turning to the brilliant and characteristically brave speech by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, she referred to the fact that every woman has a different type of menopause. That is absolutely correct. She talked about breaking the taboo around menopause and women's health. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock, is leading work on improving the health of women and their experiences of healthcare. That work is partly focused on raising awareness and breaking taboos around common health morbidities, including problem periods and incontinence, not just the menopause.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw also talked about sexual wellbeing during the menopause. It is important that women experiencing menopause have access to support and advice on that. It is common for women to lose interest in sex around the time of menopause, but treatments are available. We have heard that HRT often helps. If it is not effective, testosterone supplements can be offered.

The hon. Lady also rightly talked about the importance of the workplace. The hon. Member for Swansea East also wisely focused on that area. Workplace policies

that take the menopause into account can benefit both women and their employers. The Government commissioned an evidence review into the menopause, which was published last July and highlighted the important role that employers can play in supporting women. Following that, the Women's Business Council developed a toolkit for employers of all sizes, which enables employers to make the right adaptations to physical workplace environments, supporting flexible working and raising awareness to tackle this issue.

I want to close by restating the importance of approaching the menopause as a natural and normal stage of a woman's life, while recognising that, as we have heard, for many women that life stage comes with some incredibly challenging symptoms. It is essential that all employers and health professionals are fully informed and ready to provide women with the best options for treatment and support. The right thing for individuals is also the right thing for our economy.

We have had a fascinating and fantastic debate this afternoon. It is important that we continue to speak openly and confidently about the menopause, so that embarrassment does not prevent women from accessing treatment and support where necessary. I thank all hon. Members for their brilliant contributions and for this opportunity to mark World Menopause Day.

3.8 pm

Martin Whitfield: This has been a fascinating debate. As one of the two men here, I extend the hand of friendship to the Minister. We have survived the discussion, so any man can survive it. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank him for sharing his personal experience in a very moving part of his speech.

I would just like to pick up on two elements of the debate very quickly. One is humour. It can be used to hurt and as a punchline. However, as we heard in a lovely extract from *Holyrood* magazine, it can also be used to open up a discussion that is so very important.

I again thank the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and I would particularly like to speak to her colleague who said that we did not talk to our mothers about this. To quote from earlier on, Madam Deputy Speaker, this is a place where breakthroughs can be made. I think we have made a breakthrough today. It is a breakthrough that we should all, men and women, continue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered world menopause day 2018.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, in respect of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.—(*Andrea Leadsom.*)

Redhill, Reigate and District Rail Services

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

3.10 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): What a delight it is to have a satisfactory amount of time to debate the rail service into Reigate and Redhill. It is hard to overstate the importance of the rail service to the two main towns that I am privileged to represent. I am talking about the Brighton main line and not that for Banstead which, as the Banstead village residents' association will point out, is formally a village, not a town. Of course, the rail services there on the Tattenham line are within zone six. The central issue I want to raise is the service on the Brighton main line and issues that are specific to Redhill and Reigate.

The rail service is a central factor in the economy of Reigate and in the quality of life of the many of my constituents who use it to commute to work, usually in London, and it sustains our economy in a very important way. This also reflects our history: Redhill has its roots as the halfway point on the early Victorian London-Brighton railway. It was, and remains in many ways, a railway town. The rail service has helped to create a vibrant housing market and local retail and service economy. Equally, the rail service has enabled Reigate and Redhill to host a wide range of businesses, including small start-ups, finance and retail organisations, and large multinational companies, whose employees were able to travel reliably into Reigate and Redhill by train. A continuing reliable service is critical to the economic success of these two towns.

It is reasonable to assume that year by year, bit by bit, public services will progressively improve. It is therefore doubly concerning that over recent years, the service has diminished to such an extent that the local economy is now at risk. People are making decisions about where they live and new companies are making decisions about where to invest because of what has happened to the rail service in the past four years. This is now a real risk factor, and there have been articles in *The Sunday Times* and other publications about communities that are at risk due to the failing rail service. After all the pain of the last four years, the prospect is of a materially worse service after the timetable for 2018 is finally introduced, which breaches the undertakings given to local rail users in 2012.

I recognise that the London Bridge upgrade works have been the principal cause of Redhill to London services experiencing a disproportionate reduction, leading to infrequent, delayed, cancelled and frequently crowded trains since Christmas 2014. The industrial action then made that bad situation even worse. However, even before that, to facilitate the work at London Bridge, there were major changes to the Redhill route services between 2012 and 2014, including the removal of all London Bridge trains after 7.30 am for up to two hours, making commuting into London harder and more inconvenient for many local commuters from 2014. A previous service of nine trains became just four.

Let me say to the Minister, who may well refer to the timetable in his response, that I suspect that the start date is really 2012 rather than 2014, when the service "fell over". That made things worse, but it was in 2012

[Crispin Blunt]

that the service could reasonably be regarded by my constituents as unsatisfactory, in terms of the number of trains that were serving those commuting to London.

The second blow to local rail users was the long period of industrial action that followed the introduction of driver-only operation on the Southern network. While, of course, all services across the franchise were affected, the Redhill line once again took the brunt of the cancellations on the emergency timetables that were used on strike days. Moreover, Redhill and Merstham stations, which were not served by the fast line—the so-called Quarry line—were, and are, frequently bypassed to enable delayed trains to travel more quickly from Horley to East Croydon and vice versa, so that they could catch up when delays had been inflicted on them. That means that my constituents are the ones who are not being served by the trains by which they would otherwise expect to be served.

Both the planned May 2018 Govia Thameslink Railway timetable and its introduction have added insult to injury. Indeed, they have caused both insult and injury to an already injured travelling public, whose quality of life has now been assaulted for a period longer than the United States spent as a belligerent in the second world war. In November 2014, David Scorey, who was then GTR's passenger service director, spoke at a public meeting organised by Reigate, Redhill and District Rail Users Association—I was there, and I have the honour to be its president—and publicly stated that the service from Redhill would be significantly better than it was in 2012. However, the new timetable has resulted in a further diminution of the services available to Redhill line users, in terms of both service frequency and journey times. There are now no direct trains from Redhill to the south coast, including Brighton, and no direct services from Reigate to London Bridge, a key commuter route.

In 2012, during the key two-hour morning peak, there were 15 trains to London. By 2018, that figure had been reduced to 12, which constituted a reduction in peak service—a drop from 112 coaches to 104. There was also a significant reduction in the number of seats. The new trains have about 90 fewer seats: the old 12-coach class 377s had 754 seats, and the new Class 700s have 666.

Anyone who is lucky enough to get a seat at Redhill on a train that has travelled all the way up from the south coast will be largely unable to work, because most of the tables have been taken away. I know constituents who are not by any means grossly obese—they look like any other ordinary citizens—but who can no longer fit into those seats, and will therefore choose to stand anyway. It seems that all these issues arise, and then along comes a bright new train, and the bright new train itself produces a worse service—it has fewer, harder seats, and is less compatible with the work that people want to do on the way to their workplaces.

If we cause people to spend more time commuting and then make it more difficult for them to use that extra time to work on the train, we have had a serious impact on their quality of life. I realise that the decisions about rolling stock were made some time before the Minister took up his post, but I cite it as yet another reason why rail users in my constituency are hurting.

Although the new timetable restored and extended Redhill to London Bridge services through Thameslink, following the London Bridge upgrade cuts, it did not restore the fast trains that formerly took 25 to 27 minutes from Redhill, the fastest of which now take 31 minutes in peak hours. The service from Redhill to Victoria was significantly reduced from seven trains between 7 am and 9 am to just four. Furthermore, those trains now take 39 minutes, whereas in 2012 the 0703 took 30 minutes. From neighbouring Earlswood, the 0718 service that took 43 minutes in 2012 has been replaced by trains taking 51 minutes. Off-peak and evening scheduling to and from Victoria has also seen journey times increased from 28 minutes in 2012 to 38 minutes in the new timetable. This is, by any standard, a very significant reduction in service quality.

Under the Thameslink contract specification for train services, most stations were given a minimum journey time to London. For example, Brighton has 62 minutes guaranteed in the peak and 56 in the off-peak, but Redhill route stations are among the very few absent from getting any such guarantees of minimum journey times, and thus we now have increased journey times to both Victoria and London Bridge in the new May 2018 timetable. I can only speculate as to the reasons why those stations were omitted, and I suspect that it has something to do with their position on the line, as their being the halfway point down to the Brighton line might give the managers of the rail service greater flexibility to be able to deliver on other service delivery points. Again, I would be grateful to understand the reason for this. Why did my constituents not get minimum guaranteed journey times in the way that most other rail users did?

In November 2017, the Reigate, Redhill and District Rail Users Association gave its members an opportunity to add their voice to these concerns, and a petition was raised, signed by over 2,000 local rail users, to ask the Department for Transport and GTR to readdress this weakening of services, which directly contradicted the promises made by David Scorey on behalf of GTR in 2014 and caused what I believe are unacceptable cuts to Redhill services while the majority of the Brighton main line maintained a reasonable service. Reigate, Redhill and District has subsequently suffered inordinately from the chaos following the introduction of the new timetable, enduring more cuts and cancellations during this time than other local stations. To add insult to injury, following the new timetable disruption, passengers from Reigate station, who are forced to travel via Redhill to connect to Thameslink services to London Bridge as there are now no direct Reigate to London Bridge services, have since been excluded from the GTR enhanced passenger compensation scheme, despite suffering all the inconvenience caused during the timetable introduction.

The Minister was kind enough to receive me last week and explain why the Department had taken the position that it was not going to move on the compensation issue. All I can say is that that decision has been received with enormous disappointment, and of course it is in the context of a rail service that has been endured by local people, rather than one that has served their lives in the way we would all have hoped.

I now want to turn to the central issue. There is an opportunity to address all these issues. One would hope that the substantial investment from the ministerial

team and the £300 million that the Secretary of State has secured, in addition to the London Bridge works, to sort out the lines north of and around Croydon, will deal with an important bottleneck that has been the driver of much of the service difficulties over many years. When that is associated with the major investment into London Bridge, it becomes an almost catastrophic pinch point. I can see that the Government investment will give the opportunity, some years hence when the investment is completed, to produce better service provision, and, one would hope, to address the timetable issues.

I want to register how unhappy my constituents are about the timetable issues. When the opportunity comes to make serious improvements, after the Minister and his colleagues have addressed the capacity constraints, will he ensure that my long-suffering constituents are first in the queue for those major improvements, given the 20% reduction in the journey times on the service and the corresponding reduction in the number of trains?

The central unfairness is the underlying and long-standing issue of fares for rail users from Reigate and Redhill. This historical anomaly, which is colloquially referred to as the Redhill hump, means that tickets purchased in Reigate and Redhill are more expensive than those available at stations further down the line. It costs 47% more to get an annual all-zone ticket from Redhill than it does from Coulsdon South, which is just two stops closer to London and in zone 6. Much of the work that I did during 2015 and 2016 was to try to convince the Minister's predecessors that pulling zone 6 down to Gatwick would be the right way to address this issue. Bringing Gatwick into zone 6—in the same way that Heathrow is within London zoning—would produce an overall increase in income from fares, to make up for what would be a nominally reduced fare income based on current usage rates, because that zoning would bring an increase in usage, as was experienced when London Underground introduced zoning in the first place. I did not succeed in my argument, however, and part of that failure was down to the wretched complexity of the management of the railway, particularly when London issues are brought in alongside the issues of Network Rail, the service provider and the Department for Transport.

When it is £204 cheaper to buy an all-zone season ticket from Three Bridges, which is five stations further away from London than Redhill, we can understand why people are beginning to notice that they are paying top dollar and over the odds for a service that has been way short of anything close to satisfactory for the past four years. It is astonishing, given that the taxpayer has invested billions in the London Bridge upgrade and that the current Secretary of State was able to secure £300 million of extra investment in this line, that the service for my constituents is getting worse and there is no prospect of improvement that I can present to them. In short, rail users in my constituency are now at the end of their tether. They are forced to pay unreasonably high fare prices for a poor and diminishing service.

The main local capital improvement—a potential new 12-car platform at Reigate station that would enable Thameslink trains to terminate there and then return to London, providing additional regular fast direct trains to London Bridge via Redhill—is on the first stage of the drawing board only due to sustained pressure from me and to the commitment of the local director of

National Rail. The reason that we even got that far was the prospect of a development gain bonanza from a wholly inappropriate development of larger houses at Redhill aerodrome. That development would have given the developer a massive gain of well north of £1 billion, and I was planning to make a serious effort to retrieve a very good share of that utterly unmerited profit for use in major local infrastructure projects. I am grateful that, for the time being, that shocker of a green belt violation has been seen off, but the duty to address our hard and soft infrastructure deficit, following decades of strong local housing growth, remains.

One of the smaller and most urgent improvements involves enabling Reigate station to cope with its growing passenger demand. On one level, that growth represents a huge success. The number of passengers using Reigate station is growing, and we have been sustaining the growth of Reigate and the quality of life that explains why people want to live and bring up their families there. Not only does the change need making in its own right, we need to get this line working at a capacity that offers the service that it should be providing if one is to address the welcome improvements north of Croydon. I hope that the Minister will be able to consider the proposal on both those grounds. I cannot find a large development to target to get investment into the local community, so I hope that he will consider the allocation of budgets within his Department's spend, obviously on a wholly proper basis, to try to ensure that the capital infrastructure can at least be properly planned through the next stage, leaving the final decision to be made when the funds are available to construct it. If we are doing Croydon at the same time, it would make complete sense to advance that process.

Naturally, my constituents have expected me to remonstrate on their behalf and to press for service improvements to reverse the service catastrophes that the Redhill line has endured over the past four years. I have therefore had meetings with successive Secretaries of State and Rail Ministers to bring these serious matters to their direct attention and to request compensatory action of one sort or another. Through the Reigate, Redhill and District Rail Users Association, of which I have been honorary president since my election in 1997, local rail users have helped me put expert and costed proposals to Ministers and their officials.

With one small exception, I am sorry to say that all my efforts seem to have been largely in vain. My protests have been heard by successive Ministers, but none has been able to consider implementing any significant improvements, despite undertakings that they were going to try. At least one Rail Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), resigned her position in 2015 due to frustration over the delivery of the GTR service and the London bridge investment programme.

The only significant result that I have achieved was a partial fare freeze for some ticketholders last year as a result of an intervention by the then Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). Inevitably, the reality was not quite as widespread across all ticket types, but it was a start. In my meeting with the new Rail Minister in May, I was promised that the proposal to address the Redhill hump would be ready by the summer and that someone had been employed to work up a proposal.

[Crispin Blunt]

Finally, the issue seemed to be getting serious attention. However, when I met my hon. Friend the Minister last week, he advised me that the proposal was still on the drawing board and would not be ready for preliminary discussion with experts from the RRDRUA until the second half of November. Indeed, unhappily, the Minister's only concrete news for me at that point was confirmation that compensation for the failure of the 2018 timetable introduction would definitely not be available for those using the service from Reigate.

I want to be clear that I am not asking for special treatment for local rail users. I am asking for a reasonable service, fare pricing, and equitable compensation. These four years of being told that my rail users are a priority, without any significant change, have made it very difficult for me to continue to defend to my constituents the Government's position. Redhill and Reigate are heavily used stations that provide transport to members of the public who contribute hugely to the British economy. The cost of the disproportionate level of disruption that they have endured in recent years is incalculable, and surely greater than the cost of rectifying the anomalies that have made their commuting lives so miserable and have been so damaging to their productivity. I simply ask for reasonable treatment for them.

I am aware that many rail users throughout the UK have been hugely concerned about the Department for Transport's role in the 2018 fiasco, but, coming after years of disruption relating to the London Bridge investment, the long-suffering Southern commuters are in a class of their own. I can fairly argue that they are a special case within the special case of Southern commuters. This has been a running sore for the people I represent within a wider overall shambles.

Where the responsibility lies is complex, arising from how the service was privatised back in the 1990s. I ask the Minister to help improve the experience of local rail users, who have been very unfairly treated. I made fair fares a central issue in my 2015 general election campaign, and I have since continued to campaign on that issue. If there is one issue, above all others, that can and should be addressed it is that, because of historical ticketing anomalies, the rail-traveling public I represent are not getting a fair economic deal from the service they are buying relative to everyone else.

I look forward to the Minister's reply.

3.35 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) on securing this debate and on continuing his tireless campaign on behalf of his constituents in Reigate. He and I have discussed these issues on many occasions over the months I have been in this role. I understand his frustration at his relatively poor progress over the years on behalf of his residents, and I am pleased to say that I will have good news for him later in my remarks. His core concern is the Redhill hump, but, before I come to the meat of that, I will touch on some of the other issues he mentioned.

Thameslink performance through Redhill has improved, as I hope my hon. Friend will acknowledge, since the introduction of an amended timetable on 15 July. Services on the Brighton main line were some of the worst hit

following the introduction of the timetable on 20 May, and I am glad that things are now improving. In fact, we have seen a public performance measure above 80% on Thameslink services through his constituency. Of course there is always room for improvement, and the Department is carefully monitoring the performance.

I am aware that services from Reigate have been affected by external issues, including trespass incidents in recent weeks. None the less, the long-term signs are moving in the right direction, which is why it is important that we are seeing the progressive reintroduction of services that were withdrawn from the proposed May 2018 timetable.

In a couple of months' time, in December, GTR will bring in a further 200 additional services every weekday across its network, including, as my hon. Friend will be pleased to hear, 18 services calling at Redhill and 14 calling at Merstham. I have made it clear to GTR that its improved performance has to be maintained as those services are introduced and that we must not see any slippage or return to the disruption associated with the past introduction of new services. I am confident that continued good performance, and those additional services from December, will allow passengers from Reigate to start feeling the benefits of the new timetable.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the constraints imposed by the current infrastructure, which we are in the process of addressing through the £300 million upgrade to the Brighton main line. One of those limitations is the short platforms at Reigate. The Reigate works will form an important part of the potential range of interventions in the Brighton main line upgrade programme, and they would allow the station to accommodate direct Thameslink services and provide greater operational flexibility for Thameslink. A study to investigate the feasibility and cost of this eventually necessary infrastructure has recently been completed by Network Rail.

Stoats Nest junction, to the south of Coulsdon, is also recognised as a constraint, and it is a potential part of the Brighton main line upgrade programme. We will look to future opportunities to progress the programme, subject to the development of positive business cases and the availability of funding.

My hon. Friend raised the question of compensation and special compensation. I certainly appreciate his points about the special compensation scheme following the May disruption for people travelling from Reigate, and I understand that passengers interchanging on to Thameslink services also suffered disruption—a point he made very forcefully to me in our meeting last week. However, to ensure that passengers were treated fairly and so that those who were most affected by the disruption received appropriate compensation, it was inevitably necessary to put in place clear criteria to define the scope of the scheme.

Passengers travelling from Reigate who would normally change on to Thameslink services were still able to travel on the less disrupted Southern services to Victoria and use the tube network to reach London Bridge. Ticket acceptance on the tube and between Thameslink, Southern and Gatwick Express services was in place at the height of disruption. As a result, as I said to my hon. Friend last week, there are no plans to amend the compensation scheme for passengers who change trains at a level 1 station or who buy tickets from a station not served by Thameslink or Great Northern services.

My hon. Friend has also been campaigning relentlessly for Reigate to be included in an extended Oyster zone. The Department set out in its strategic vision for rail, published in November last year, that its goal was to ensure that across regional and urban commuter areas smart ticketing can deliver the kind of pay-as-you-go structure that is used in London, with a system to automatically charge fares at the appropriate level.

We are actively exploring options for how that might be achieved, and I hope that my hon. Friend's constituency will, in time, and hopefully not within too much time, be one of those that benefits from the broader approach we will be taking.

We want to deliver pay-as-you-go travel across regional and urban commuter areas rather than singling out particular stations, such as his own, at this point. Pay-as-you-go travel and the associated simplified fare structure will bring substantial passenger benefits and the Department will be working very hard to achieve that.

Finally, let me return to what my hon. Friend rightly described as his core issue, the Redhill fares hump. Historically, this has arisen because separate operators on the Brighton main line have put in place specific fares that were intended to make their service more competitive. Now, all services on the Brighton main line are run by the same operator. This has led to a situation where the fares in his constituency are unnecessarily complex and unhelpfully perverse, with fares from Gatwick airport into London at a lower price than those in all surrounding stations. This is a truly exceptional situation. I made a commitment to him that we would work on this issue and provide a solution, and I am pleased to say that we have done exactly that.

Today, I can make a commitment that we will see this issue resolved by the end of the current franchise in 2021, with a reduction in fares coming into effect from this coming January. I hope that my hon. Friend will welcome that news, which results directly from his tireless and effective campaign on behalf of all his constituents.

Crispin Blunt: I have managed to scrape in before the Minister's last word. Obviously, his concluding remarks are immensely welcome, and it would be ungracious of me not to be delighted on behalf of my constituents that he has had the opportunity to reflect and put a plan in place to get this issue addressed. I am immensely grateful. I am afraid that we will continue to have meetings on the merits of the other issues, but I am delighted that we will get Oyster as it is rolled out across the piece. He will probably continue to be lobbied by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), I am afraid, as his constituents who travel to the further education colleges in my constituency are caught by this problem, but, overall, I am very grateful to the Minister.

Joseph Johnson: I am delighted that we have a happy customer in Reigate and Redhill. I am always ready to receive further lobbying from my hon. Friend on the points that he raised.

Question put and agreed to.

3.44 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 18 October 2018

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Breast Cancer

1.30 pm

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): This debate can last for up to three hours, but hon. Members are not obliged to fill the entire time.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of breast cancer.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe, and to have been selected to introduce this important debate. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and, of course, the Minister. Their presence underlines the importance of this issue. I also welcome everybody in the Public Gallery, many of whom have had personal experience of breast cancer, and all other hon. Members here today. It is important that we demonstrate our commitment to raising the profile of this issue across the party political divide. I am sure we have all been touched by this terrible disease in some way in our own lives.

I pay tribute to the remarkable people up and down the country who raise awareness of breast cancer and fight against it in their everyday lives. I want to take this opportunity to mention Rachael Bland, the BBC Radio 5 Live newsreader and presenter, who sadly passed away on 5 September. She did a remarkable thing by blogging about her experience in “Big C. Little Me.” and bringing down the barriers when it comes to living with breast cancer. Her strength and courage touched many of us, and her family and friends should be incredibly proud of her.

Between 2014 and 2016, an average of 457 women a year developed breast cancer in the South Cheshire clinical commissioning group area, which covers my constituency of Crewe and Nantwich. Sadly, in the same period, an average of 101 women lost their lives to the disease.

Today is World Menopause Day. It may seem odd that I have chosen to start my speech by talking about what might, at first glance, appear to be an unrelated issue, but the reverse is true. Breast cancer is most commonly diagnosed in women between the age of 50 and 65—the age at which women undergo the menopause. Some breast cancer treatments can bring about menopause symptoms, because they reduce oestrogen levels in the body. To make matters worse, women diagnosed with breast cancer usually cannot use hormone replacement therapy, the primary treatment for menopause symptoms, because there is strong evidence that it can increase the risk of breast cancer coming back. Some might ask whether it is really a big enough issue to warrant special attention, but we cannot afford not to pay special attention to it.

It is absolutely vital that we continue the fight to ensure that those diagnosed with breast cancer live, but we must also fight to improve their quality of life. About 70% of women with breast cancer experience severe night sweats and hot flushes, which cause major physical discomfort and anxiety, and affect their confidence. In some cases, they can even lead to serious sleep deprivation. Such problems can persist for many years. The severe and persistent symptoms of menopause are one of the main factors contributing to women discontinuing their treatment. Given that doing so can increase the chance that their breast cancer will come back, we have simply got to take this issue seriously.

What can be done? Professor Fenlon of Swansea University believes that cognitive behavioural therapy can help to ease physical symptoms, and is leading a clinical trial to assess how feasible it would be to train breast cancer nurses to deliver it. If clinical trials deem it to be effective, it has the potential to improve the quality of life of half a million women living with or beyond breast cancer in the UK, so I urge the Government to provide the NHS with resources to make the programme available in all our hospitals.

That brings me to the next issue I want to focus on: the geographical inequality in treatments and related services. It is important that the advances that I hope we are about to make in this area benefit everyone. The main CCG covering my constituents is NHS South Cheshire. I am proud to say that it was recently rated outstanding based on four pan-cancer measures, including waiting times, one-year survival rates and patient experience.

However, the report by the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer states that there is a postcode lottery for breast cancer outcomes. All hon. Members will agree that it is simply unacceptable that women in some areas are more than twice as likely to die prematurely as women who are treated elsewhere. My CCG is set to merge with three others in the near future, and I want to ensure that my constituents continue to see waiting times fall, survival rates rise and the patient experience improve. I was shocked to read that women in some areas are one third less likely to have attended breast cancer screenings in the past three years than women living in other parts of the country.

Patients have had issues accessing off-patent drugs such as bisphosphonates, which were originally licensed for the treatment of osteoporosis but were discovered to be effective in preventing breast cancer recurrence in some post-menopausal women. When CCGs were asked last year whether they routinely fund bisphosphonates for that purpose, only 42—20%—said that they did. At the time, South Cheshire CCG said it was not doing so. I hope that the situation has improved, given that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has recently published updated clinical guidelines that recommend bisphosphonates. I am currently waiting to hear back from South Cheshire CCG. Is there an opportunity for the Government to make some specific interventions in the NHS long-term plan to prevent more cases of secondary breast cancer?

There is currently little incentive for manufacturers to license off-patent drugs for new uses in breast cancer. Breast Cancer Now is calling on the Government to introduce a catalyst fund in the NHS long-term plan to provide that incentive. That would make it quicker and easier for patients routinely to access cheap off-patent

[*Laura Smith*]

drugs. Breast Cancer Now commissioned York Health Economics Consortium to model how many lives we could save if the best outcomes were reached everywhere. It found that more than 1,100 lives could have been saved in 2016 if all CCGs in England had been able to reduce their mortality rates to match the lowest. Geographical inequality is not just an issue of principle; we have the potential to save lives, and if we save only one life, does that not make it worth addressing?

I would be grateful to hear from the Minister about the steps he is taking to facilitate the sharing of best practice between cancer alliances to reduce those variations. What conversations has he had with the Chancellor and his Treasury colleagues to ensure the long-term funding of cancer alliances?

If cancer alliances are properly to invest in the future of services and plan strategically, we must provide them with multi-year budgets. The APPG's report on geographical inequality highlights that there are still worrying gaps in data collection, including in relation to the number of people living with secondary breast cancer. It is absolutely essential that we improve the cancer dashboard with more detailed performance data. After all, identifying and understanding these inequalities is the first step towards addressing them.

1.39 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for leading the debate with such care, passion and expertise. It is a great pleasure to note that the three Front-Bench spokespeople—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford)—have all served as chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer. It is a rarity for all three Front-Bench spokespeople to have so much knowledge and, indeed, to care so much about the issue that they have spent their time campaigning on it in Parliament. I salute all three of them for their work on this matter and I very much look forward their contributions.

The statistics are well known and well rehearsed, but I want to put them on record. In the UK, 55,000 women and 350 men are diagnosed with breast cancer every year. Sadly, one in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer, 35,000 women are living with secondary breast cancer, and nearly 1,000 women die from breast cancer every month. Nearly 700,000 people in the UK are living either with or beyond breast cancer treatment. The positive that we can look at now is that 80% of women survive for five years or more. The title of the debate on the Order Paper, "Future of breast cancer", is crucial, because it is all about the future. The progress made so far has been absolutely extraordinary, but we must not rest on that progress; we must look further forward and do even more, as science and medical developments allow us to.

I would probably have trotted out those statistics a couple of years ago when speaking on this matter, because it impacts on my constituents. However, personal experience of a loved one being struck down with breast

cancer makes me more determined to be here to represent their cause and that of the thousands of women across the country who have to go through the same experience. I salute the courage and bravery of all who have been diagnosed with breast cancer and who have gone through the treatment. To watch those people undertake that brave journey is a humbling experience, because when I saw it with my own eyes, I thought, "Could I actually do this? Would I have the bravery and the strength to go through this myself?" It was the most extraordinary experience for me to see that.

I pay tribute to all the carers and those who provide support. They feel helpless, at times, and they wish that they could go through the wretched experience instead. They would do anything to change places, but they cannot. Those people do the most amazing job. On behalf of those who have been through the treatment, I salute all the brave families, friends and loved ones who went through it with them. The inner strength that their support must give to sufferers is absolutely tremendous.

Breast screening uptake is at its lowest level for 10 years, which is very concerning. Uptake is at 71%; the aim is to make that figure at least 80%, which would save 1,200 lives per year. If the Minister has time, I would like him to reassure us that the Government will take action in their attempt to reach that target. Screening is, of course, still age-based, and it was sad for me to note that the entry-level screening age would have been too high for the family member I referred to, who was only 42 when they were diagnosed.

It is incredibly exciting to meet groups such as Breast Cancer Now, which is carrying out a generation study, following 113,000 women from the UK over 40 years. I was absolutely blessed and fascinated to meet the people involved in that study at a recent all-party parliamentary group meeting. Of course, age is one profile, but we need to look at high-risk scenarios and investigate the genetic, lifestyle and environmental factors that can change the likelihood of a woman developing breast cancer. That study, which I think is exciting, identifies 160 common genetic changes associated with the development of breast cancer, as well as showing how various life events—such as the menopause—and lifestyle factors can have a great impact. The future is bright, because rather than just looking at age ranges, we are now really going into the detail with those studies to show how certain factors can lead to risk and then, where there is risk, providing screening. That is hugely important.

I paid tribute to those who go through breast cancer treatment and to their carers, who go through it with them, but I also want to touch on the phenomenal work that NHS staff do for everyone who goes through that journey. I thank them; they are the most extraordinary people, in terms of their sheer intelligence. It is incredibly reassuring to meet such bright, dedicated people. The other great thing about them is that they deal with everything in black and white—there is no messing around—and tell people exactly what is going on. It can sometimes be stark, but it reassures people that they are being led to the right conclusion.

Of course, there are workload impacts. We know that the NHS faces challenges, and cancer departments absolutely share those challenges. A Macmillan Cancer Support survey from last year highlighted the increased workloads, complex patient needs and vacancies in key

roles that are putting pressure on the cancer care workforce. Certainly, in my experience with the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust, the staff were absolutely phenomenal. When things did not work, it was often because they did not have what is called back-office support. As a result, consultants have to run around doing admin work instead of focusing on their medical and clinical expertise, making them very expensive and overqualified admin resources. We often talk quite clinically about back-office savings, but perhaps we need to look very carefully before making such savings if they will have an impact on frontline services.

Some of the NHS communications systems can be incredibly clunky. Finding out via Royal Mail that one has an appointment after the appointment is due to take place—not just once, but twice—is maddening. These days, we embrace technology. We are told about dentist appointments via text messages to which we can respond to confirm, and the NHS should be doing the same thing. Before my journey with breast cancer, I was critical of people who missed appointments, but I had not reflected that people might miss appointments because they have not been told that they are taking place. It is maddening for consultants, because once people have received their notification, they are not even required to reply to confirm that they will attend their appointment. Of course, no one in the hospital thinks, “Someone has not got back to me; perhaps they have not received the letter.” We sat waiting in the hospital for hours, because the system did not know we were there despite the fact that we had booked in. That is maddening for patients, and maddening for consultants and staff.

Such issues may seem quite trivial, but they caused me to go back to the hospital to meet the heads of service to ensure that I could convey the concerns of frontline staff to senior management. I thought that that was the least I could do after the care and attention that the staff had given us.

I therefore ask my hon. Friend the Minister to think about the support staff, the systems that are in place and how we can better support the staff who help us to get better. I express my immense gratitude for those people and the support, expertise and help that they provide, not just during the treatment but on the journey beyond. That is the other thing that I have noticed: once a patient is given the all-clear, which is the best news, all of a sudden they face another journey, on which they will not necessarily be with clinicians. They will still have support staff from organisations such as Macmillan, who take great care of people.

I find myself speaking from experience, having been on an incredible journey that taught me a great deal about those who go through cancer and those who care for us through cancer. It has made me vow that I will always do everything I can in Parliament to try to make the situation better. I look forward to those on the Front Benches reassuring us that they will do the same.

1.49 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), my good friend, for introducing this debate. It is vital for us to have the opportunity to discuss the future of breast cancer care and treatment. I

also place on the record my thanks to Breast Cancer Now, a fantastic organisation without which this debate would not be possible. I am an ambassador for Breast Cancer Now.

As people probably know by now, in 2010 my daughter, aged 35, was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer. She was dead within 13 months. When I first came to Parliament, one of my aims was to do anything I could to ensure that that did not happen to other people and whatever I could to make things better.

This month is Wear it Pink Month. The timing of the debate could not be better—in Breast Cancer Awareness Month, with a new cancer strategy announced by the Prime Minister at her recent party conference and while the long-term economic plan for the NHS is being decided. This is an unprecedented opportunity to ensure that the way in which we prevent, diagnose and treat breast cancer, and care for those who have it, truly benefits all patients in every part of the country.

Every year about 55,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with breast cancer, making it the most common cancer in the country. One in eight women in the UK will develop breast cancer in their lifetime, and nearly 11,500 women and 80 men in the UK still lose their lives to breast cancer each year. Progress has been made, but survival outcomes vary significantly between regions across the country, and Britain continues to trail other European countries on breast cancer survival. As Members can imagine, that sort of statistic hits home with me.

Debates such as this one, along with the necessary commitments from the Government, are crucial if we are to work towards a future in which everyone with breast cancer can live, and live well. After three decades of progress in the UK, however, within four years the number of women dying from breast cancer each year is projected to rise, according to recent analysis. We have to address that—an increase simply cannot be allowed to happen.

What we need is action; we do not need platitudes or promises, because neither of those leads to improvements in care. We need some real action. I appreciate that the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) means well, and it is all very well to praise NHS staff, but at the end of the day we cannot spend a pat on the back. Someone needs to go back to the Prime Minister to tell her that we actually need to pay NHS staff properly.

Incidence rates are projected to increase in the next decade, but waiting times still vary widely, screening attendance is at a record low, secondary patient needs are still too often unmet, and the quality of care still depends far too much on where someone happens to live. My daughter did not have a cancer clinical nurse specialist, a CNS, and when her cancer metastasised—she was diagnosed at the end of April, and it metastasised by the following February—she tried to get her GP to visit her. The GP lived quite a distance away and would not come out; even after I made a number of phone calls, she still would not come out.

My daughter lay in that bedroom with a cancer metastasising to her brain, but only had paracetamol and ibuprofen to take because she could not get a doctor out to her. Had she had a CNS, that would not have happened. For women to get nursing from a cancer specialist is crucial. Again, I know that the hon. Member

[Karen Lee]

for Bexhill and Battle means well, but seeing that and having to care for someone in that position did not give me inner strength—it broke my heart, and I hope that it never happens to anyone ever again.

It is not too late to prevent the projected decline in breast cancer survival rates. For example, were 10% of breast cancers diagnosed a stage earlier, an estimated 290 lives could be saved in just one year. My daughter could have been one of those. It is therefore vital that we raise awareness. A couple of weeks ago, I went out to our local shopping centre, the Waterside. My office manager and I had loads of leaflets from Breast Cancer Now—the little ones, which tell people how to check their breasts—and a stack of chocolate brownies that my younger daughter had made. I have to say that the leaflets went faster than the chocolate brownies, but we gave it all out in the end.

We could also prevent more than 1,200 breast cancer deaths by increasing breast screening uptake from the current low of 71% to the 80% standard set for breast screening units. Those figures show that if the Government act now, and act decisively, progress can continue to be made, more lives can be saved and quality of life can be improved.

The progress made on breast cancer over the years masks stark regional inequalities in diagnosis, treatment and care across the country. Having worked in our NHS, I am so proud of the values of universality, equality and fairness that are hardwired into the delivery of life-saving care. Under our national health service, your postcode should have no bearing on the care you receive.

Last Friday, I visited Lincoln's breast unit and saw the brilliant staff doing an amazing job. To do such a fantastic job, they often leave late at night. They have an answerphone, so people can ring up and leave a message if they are worried about anything. Those girls do not go home at night until they have emptied all the messages on that machine—it does not matter what time it is, or if they were meant to have gone home an hour ago: they stay. I do not think they get paid for staying.

In Lincoln, the average incidence rate for breast cancer is slightly above the English average. Most worrying, however, is that Lincoln's premature mortality rate was higher than the English average, and significantly higher than that of the neighbouring area of North Lincolnshire.

Having worked at first hand on hospital wards—I am an ex-nurse—I know how essential it is for patients, staff and quality of care that teams are appropriately staffed, and that regular, trained nurses are working—not agency staff. Staff should be in an area all the time, so they know what they are looking for, and to do that we need the reinstatement of nursing bursaries. That does not only go for nurses; we need them for radiographers as well, because the people who do the mammograms need three years of training in radiography and then an extra year on top of that. I was told that only last week, and there is a real shortage of them. The Government talk about their apprenticeships, but it takes four years to train an apprentice nurse, and people are just not taking up the training.

Only 21% of trusts in England have a dedicated clinical nurse specialist for secondary breast cancer patients. As I said just now, having a CNS is vital, so

that is a shockingly bad statistic. Our dedicated NHS staff work around the clock to provide expert care. The minimum that they deserve is not to have to worry about filling the gaps in understaffed departments. I do not know whether people realise, but when nurses go to work in a hospital that is understaffed—that is, most of them—and another ward is short, they can be moved from one ward to another. They are still nurses, but they might not know quite as much about exactly what they are doing. That is really bad. Bursaries need to be reinstated so that we have enough nurses.

The Government must invest £39 million in recruitment to the breast imaging and diagnostic workforce, and they must provide funding for the 120 hospital trusts without a dedicated CNS post. To the first person who asks, "How do we do that in a time of austerity?", I will say how—fair taxation is how. Every year, 23% of breast cancer cases could be avoided by simple lifestyle changes but, owing to austerity, public health budgets in 2017-18 were 5% less in real terms than they were in 2013-14. Over the same period, this Government have reduced corporation tax and taxes for the very rich.

The cut in public health budgets drastically reduces the capacity of local public health services to deliver life-saving preventive action. Not only is underfunding local public health services putting people's lives at risk, but cost-cutting measures fail on their own terms. Investing in public health locally would not only save lives but result in long-term savings for our NHS. It is therefore essential that the NHS long-term plan secures the future of cancer alliances through a continued commitment of at least £200 million per year, in line with inflation. I hope that the Minister will make a real commitment to that. I do not want to hear how we all have to live within our means: we can do that and we ought to do it.

To conclude, it is fantastic to see this crucial debate receive the participation and thoughtful consideration that it deserves. I hope that the Government take on board the excellent range of proposals from Members in all parts of the House. Breast cancer is, after all, an issue that affects all of us. It would be a travesty if we allowed decades of progress to be undone, especially when the pathway to continued improvement is already laid out.

I urge the Government to support fully the delivery of breast cancer diagnosis, treatment and care. Ever since I was elected, I have wanted to work towards a future in which everyone with breast cancer can live, and live well. Breast Cancer Now has a pledge: that by 2050 no one should be dying of breast cancer. I hope that everyone across the House can join in that aim and that, in future years, we will look back on debates such as this as a crucial step in the eradication of breast cancer as a fatal disease.

1.58 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in any health debates—as my party's health spokesperson, I am interested in them—but it is particularly pleasing to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for presenting the case so well and, through having secured the debate, giving us other MPs the opportunity to make a contribution. It is also always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee). All of

us in the Chamber today, or who were in the main Chamber when she spoke on this topic some time ago, will remember her contributions. I thank her for them.

I am pleased that we again have an opportunity to highlight breast cancer issues while we have the Minister's attention. We all know he is deeply interested in this subject, and we look forward to his response. I also look forward to the contribution by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), because I know she has an interest in the subject, too. There may be few of us here, but I know everyone's contribution will be significant.

Some 55,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with breast cancer every year. Breast Cancer Now's new 55000Reasons campaign calls for investment in breast cancer to feature in the NHS's long-term plan. That beseechment is worthy of the Minister's attention. Some 11,500 women and 80 men in the UK still lose their lives to breast cancer every year. I know men are a smaller proportion of sufferers, but we sometimes forget that they can be susceptible to breast cancer; I was given a salient reminder of that while researching for the debate. We sometimes do not think about that, but we should be aware of it.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that although far fewer men suffer from breast cancer, because services—particularly support services—are designed for women, men often delay coming forward with concerns and find it difficult to access support? Because they still see breast cancer as a women's issue, they are almost afraid to be open about it.

Jim Shannon: As always, the hon. Lady makes an intelligent contribution; I do not mean to say that nobody else does, but she always brings her knowledge of her subject to our debates. I told her beforehand that I looked forward to her contribution, because, as always, it will be full of information we can learn from.

The hon. Lady is right: as the men present will know, we hide our health problems. We do not go to the doctor as often as we should. We just grin and bear it—except in the case of man flu, when we are probably dying almost before it starts. I should not be facetious—that is not right. I am just saying we do not react in the way we should. As the hon. Lady said, when we do go to the health service, the services are not there. We need to address that.

Between 2012 and 2016, an average of 66 women a year were diagnosed with breast cancer in the Strangford constituency. On average, 20 of those women—almost 30%—lost their battle with breast cancer in each of those years. As the MP for Strangford, that puts the issue into perspective for me, but it also tells me that the survival rate is not as good as we would like. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) referred to early diagnosis, which I will come to. That statistic represents 20 homes deprived of a mother, a daughter, a sister, an aunt or a friend.

Outcomes vary tremendously among clinical commissioning groups. We continue to lag behind other European countries, such as Sweden, Portugal, Malta, Germany and France, on breast cancer survival. Projections indicate that if current trends continue and we do not address the increase in the number of people diagnosed

with the disease, the number of breast cancer deaths will begin to increase within four years. I know the Minister has a cancer strategy in place and is addressing these issues, but perhaps he will indicate what is happening.

Those projections are shocking when we consider how far cancer diagnostics and treatment have progressed. My colleague the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) told me this week that a good friend of hers—a 42-year-old—has just died from cancer. Again, the reality is pertinent for us all.

I said to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich that these debates always seem to come at the time when we can relate to them best. A very good friend of our family was diagnosed with breast cancer and is going through all the radiotherapy treatment. She has lost all her hair, as so often happens, and wears a scarf. The treatment is quite harsh. She is a friend of my son and the wife, and she works just down the road from us. Her employers have been good with her—they have ensured that she can at least do some part-time work. It is important for people to have something to focus their mind on when things are difficult.

Breast cancer is no respecter of the person. The large number of people affected by it means that even seemingly incremental changes have a huge potential to save more lives. Before I highlight some of the Breast Cancer Now recommendations, let me thank the Library for its work on the excellent briefing for the debate, which outlines the things we need, including public awareness and screening. It states:

“On 2 May 2018 the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care reported to Parliament a serious failure in the national breast screening programme in England and announced an independent review to investigate.”

Again, perhaps the Minister will indicate where we are with that review.

I underline the need for access to breast cancer drugs for people who are going through the most difficult times. We all know it is not just the patient who suffers—their family suffer, too. The hon. Member for Lincoln referred to that in a very personal way, which we all understand. The cancer care strategy refers to earlier diagnosis. One of its priorities is:

“A shift towards faster testing and responding more quickly to patients who present with symptoms. A target that by 2020, 95% of patients referred by a GP will be definitively diagnosed and receive test results within four weeks.”

If we reach that wonderful target, we will certainly be going the right way.

I often say to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, (Dr Whitford) who speaks for the Scottish National party, that she genuinely—she knows I mean this—brings a wealth of knowledge to our debates. I also tell her that, in many cases, Scotland leads the way with some of its health strategies and plans. We should look at its cancer strategy, which was published in 2016 and deals with prevention, detection, diagnosis and treatment—and aftercare, too, which is so important.

People who suffer from breast cancer often worry about financial issues, because they have a mortgage to pay and a family to look after, and sometimes the lady is the breadwinner. We must have all those things in place, so I encourage the Minister to look at Scotland's cancer strategy, which I know the hon. Lady will refer to, probably in some detail. We look forward to that.

[Jim Shannon]

The excellent Breast Cancer Now recommendations include: specific lifestyle interventions; optimising the screening programme through increased uptake; strengthening the workforce; introducing new technologies; developing a screening programme tailored to an individual's risk so cancers may be detected earlier; and reducing variation by reinforcing the position and ambition of cancer alliances. We will do this better if we do it together—I often say we are better together in everything. We can certainly learn from one another.

We should provide long-term funding and look at funding specific CNS posts to support secondary breast cancer patients in trusts where there is not a dedicated secondary CNS. We should ensure access to clinically effective drugs at a price that is affordable for the NHS. Let us have a price system. The Minister knows about the issues with the price structure for some drugs, and I know he is pursuing that matter so we get good drugs at a fair price.

I will take the time to list Breast Cancer Now's recommendations. Its first priority is to fund "specific interventions to prevent the 23% of breast cancer cases that are attributable to lifestyle factors in England every year."

We should address the avoidable cancers.

The second priority is:

"Prevent over 1,200 breast cancer deaths by increasing breast screening uptake from the current decade low of 71.1% to the 80% standard set for breast screening units."

It is so important to have that in place.

The third priority is:

"Urgently invest £39 million in recruitment to the breast imaging and diagnostic workforce to enable breast services to cope with increasing demand over the next ten years."

I welcome, as we all should, the Government's commitment to spend an extra £20 billion on health; it is a step in the right direction and it is quite a commitment.

The fourth priority is:

"Adopt new technologies, such as tomosynthesis and Artificial Intelligence, into the breast screening and symptomatic services as soon as proven effective."

The fifth priority is:

"Transform breast screening to risk stratified screening to spearhead the prevention and earlier diagnosis of breast cancer over the next ten years based on evidence as it emerges."

As evidence indicates the trends and how to respond to them, we should make the changes to make that happen.

The sixth priority is:

"Ensure that innovative, clinically effective cancer treatments are quickly available to NHS patients at a price that is fair and affordable, including by reviewing the NICE appraisal methodology."

The seventh priority is:

"Introduce a Catalyst Fund worth £3 million to incentivise generic manufacturers to make it quicker and easier for patients to routinely access cheap, off-patent drugs found to be effective in new uses."

The eighth priority is:

"Fund new Clinical Nurse Specialist posts to support secondary breast cancer patients in over 120 Hospital Trusts without a dedicated post."

Those things can make a difference.

Dr Whitford: The hon. Gentleman talks about having a separate secondary breast cancer nurse as opposed to the breast cancer nurses who are involved in the initial treatment, but that is a discussion about local set-up.

The hardest thing is to tell a patient, "It's back." To have a nurse to support her, who she knows from five or three years ago, is a big contribution. At our hospital, there was a conscious decision not to have a separate nurse—if a patient got sent to her, that would be a bad sign—but to have the nurse they already knew.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is right and I accept that we should look at what is being done in Scotland. If there is a better way of doing something, let us do it that way.

The ninth priority is:

"Improve the Cancer Dashboard by including more detailed data on performance across Cancer Alliance geographies to identify inequalities within and between Alliances."

The tenth priority is:

"Provide multi-year funding for Cancer Alliances, to increase confidence and encourage long-term thinking to drive investment in innovation, including a dedicated fund to address pathway variation."

It would be remiss of us all not to thank the charities, which work so hard. We all know them and I will mention just a few I am aware of: Cancer Focus Northern Ireland; CancerCare; and Marie Curie—I met a Marie Curie lady at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee yesterday. I know Marie Curie's work because some of my constituents have been referred there in the last month. Its end-of-life care is incredible, as is that of Macmillan Cancer Support.

We need a plan of action and we must have the funding for that plan of action to be put into place. I support so fervently the English reforms that the Minister will put forward, in the hope that the ethos and the funding for my constituents will follow. We are in a different place in Northern Ireland; health is a devolved matter and the responsibility falls under the Northern Ireland Assembly, but it is not functioning correctly at this moment. Men and women need to know that there is a way forward, to ensure that no one dies of breast cancer anywhere in the UK in the not-so-distant future.

2.14 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for securing this debate. I am sorry that it is not more highly subscribed, but it is competing with other debates elsewhere. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) and particularly to the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), whose daughter did not survive. I am sure that that was very difficult for her to speak about; I know she has done so before, and it is very brave of her. I am sure her daughter would be proud.

I declare an interest, which most people know about—I was a breast cancer surgeon for 33 years before coming to this place. Naturally, I am one of the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer and I am a Breast Cancer Now ambassador. In my previous life, I was part of its clinical advisory group. In Scotland, I led on developing the quality improvement standards, which we set up in 2000 and which helped to drive up the quality of breast cancer care across Scotland. It was one of the most rewarding periods in my career, because not only did I have the incredible satisfaction that anyone who has worked in the NHS gets from looking after a patient one-to-one—it is an honour to get to do that—but I knew I was contributing every year to

cranking up the standards across the country. We have annually gathered peer-reviewed data right back to 2003. It has been great to see that driven up.

The subject of the debate is the future of breast cancer, but being such an old, crusty breast cancer surgeon, I could not resist talking a little about where we have come from. When I started as a medical student, the five-year survival rate was 53%; now, it is more than 80%. That is the journey we have made—a huge journey for the patients, too. It just so happened that my first job on qualifying, and the first three units that I worked in over my first three years, were breast cancer units. I learned so much from the patients on the ward.

Those were the old days, when my light week was 75 hours and my heavy week was 132 hours. My bedroom was on the ward, so I had my tea with the breast ladies. I learned so much about what they hated: people undressing them and not covering them up while starting to talk about them; people talking over their heads. I watched women come back from theatre on a trolley, groping themselves—if they had a lot of bandages and a drip, that meant it was cancer, because the diagnosis was done at surgery. They took out the lump; it went to the lab; they looked at it; they phoned the theatre; and the woman had a mastectomy. No breast care nurse, no pre-operative diagnosis, no discussion and no plan.

There were no women surgeons in Scotland at that time; I remember one of my professors saying, “You should do breast surgery.” I thought it was a bit clichéd for a woman surgeon to do breast surgery, but I looked at my three years’ experience and I thought that the experience of those women was so awful that I could not do anything other than make it better. We have transformed that. By the mid-’80s, we were able to diagnose it at a clinic. Lots of breast surgeons were still not interested in having breast care nurses, but I was involved in the research in Glasgow into the critical need for social and psychological support for women who were going through that journey, looking at the impact of mastectomy on women.

Eventually, we learned that we are kind of not stupid. We are not stressed just because we lose a breast, but because we have cancer; we have kids and we want to see them grow up. We understood that there are two sides that create pressure on women: the change to their body image and the simple stress of the disease, and how to support that. We offered reconstruction; eventually, we moved from mastectomy to preserving the breast when we could. We also know that to support a woman psychologically is to be utterly and completely honest—not to be cruel or rude, but utterly honest. If a patient is lied to, whether by a doctor or family member, that creates a barrier. I have always tried to be utterly and totally honest about what we are facing. We should be part of the patient’s team.

In the late ’70s, tamoxifen came in. Scotland did a lot of the research on that and it looked like it did not make a big difference, until they started doing what we now call meta-analysis—putting a lot of studies together and realising that all the little gains were adding up to an awful lot of lives saved. That has been borne out. There is no magic wand that will get rid of breast cancer; it is about early diagnosis, detailed diagnosis, good surgery, good radiotherapy, good chemotherapy, good hormone treatment and good immunotherapy.

We are talking about the future of breast cancer, and genomics and personalised therapies are in all of the briefs. Tamoxifen was one of the first personalised therapies for a solid tumour to come into existence because it worked only for patients with hormone-sensitive cancers: by testing that tumour, we could tell whether tamoxifen would work. As part of the trial way back in the 1980s, the University of Glasgow did a huge amount looking at how we could test to see whether a cancer was hormone-sensitive. We now do it in a much more efficient way, which is much less time-intensive. Of course, Herceptin, which we discussed so much in the 2000s, works only on patients who carry the human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 marker that makes them sensitive to that drug. We already have that personalised medicine, and a test for it.

My MD thesis was in breast cancer immunology. I utterly believe that immunotherapy will dominate the future of cancer treatment because it is so much better tolerated than chemo and often has a much bigger impact. However, the antibody that became Herceptin was discovered in the second half of the ’80s, when I was in the lab—not that lab, but it was the talk of the steamie because it was an utter breakthrough for everyone studying cancer immunology. That drug went into general trial in 2001. In Scotland, we got access to it routinely on the NHS in 2006, and down here, south of the border, it was the following year—20 years from the bench to routine access. That is one of the challenges we will face in the future.

New treatments have come in, including many in the ’90s, with newer chemotherapy in the form of taxanes, new endocrine treatments, better surgery and better staging. All of that has added up to get us over the 80%. However, as was mentioned, our rates are below the European average.

I remember seeing an interesting paper that compared the UK with Denmark: in all the lower stages and less aggressive diseases, the UK held its own comfortably, particularly because way back in 1988 to 1990 we were one of the early adopters of breast screening whereas other European countries came on only in the second half of the 2000s. However, for the people with really aggressive or advanced disease, we were not matching up. That simply comes back to drug access.

We may get the drug discovered. Scotland plays a significant role—we punch above our weight—within life sciences research in taking things forward and finding new drugs. However, I can say, as one who was routinely involved in trials for years, that it is really demoralising to take on all that extra unpaid time to do the paperwork, sit and explain trials to patients only to find that, as soon as that drug is passed and licensed, we do not get access to it any more.

That is one of the challenges. We are talking about all the amazing new treatments that may come over the hill, but we need to look for an utterly different way of trying to bring them onstream and make them affordable for the NHS. We need a different discussion with the pharmaceutical industry. In exchange, we can offer not personalised data but real-world information thanks to having a joined-up national health service in each of our four nations while many other systems in Europe simply do not. Similarly, our cancer registries are highly accurate.

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

We face challenges in the future; it is not just that magical treatments will come. Access to drugs is important—and not just new ones. As the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich said, there are off-patent drugs such as bisphosphonates, which are cheap in the scale of things, yet only one in five commissioning groups in England are funding that. In Scotland, it is funded in all health boards—my unit took part in that trial.

The idea that something that protects against bone metastasis or strengthens the bones of those driven into the menopause could prevent the spread of breast cancer in all patients was fantastic. In comparison to all the treatments we use, and the one we would use if that patient were to develop metastasis, frankly the cost-benefit is very positive. That should be driven up in England and made routinely accessible. As the hon. Lady mentioned, the report that looked at variation across England showed shocking postcode prescribing.

One of the biggest challenges we face in general in the NHS right across all four systems is workforce. I mention it all the time. It is a challenge in every single NHS specialty, but we have a particular issue in breast cancer and a particular problem in radiology—the mammographic or MRI scanning diagnosis. Many of the consultants who went into breast cancer when screening was developed all became consultants around the late '80s and early '90s, and they are all retiring. We are losing a huge cohort, and apparently for every three that retire only two are lined up to replace them. Less than one in five breast screening units report having a full cohort of staff.

Patients cannot be treated in any way if they have not been diagnosed. The issue that led to patients not getting called at the end of breast screening, referred to by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), was partly because of slippage. If those patients had been screened on the correct date, they probably would have been called correctly, but because they slipped past the ages of 70 or 71 without being called, they missed their appointments.

We need to look at that problem, and that includes promoting this specialty. I spent 33 years in it. Yes, sometimes other surgeons are patronising about breast surgery—maybe it is not quite exciting enough for them; there is not enough blood on the floor or enough glamour—but it is one of the most holistic surgical specialties. We look at how to support the patient to recover, getting them back to normal life through exercise, integrating them into their community, providing support groups and having cancer nurse specialists. It is important that those of us in the specialty or who have been in it reach out and attract our younger colleagues to think of it as a life's job. Cut me through the middle and it'll still say breast cancer doctor, not MP, and that will never change.

Finally, we do not give remotely enough attention to prevention. The same things that prevent breast cancer will prevent bowel cancer, lung cancer and so many others. The public sometimes get so many conflicting messages, so they go, "Do I drink coffee or not? Do I use a roll-on deodorant or not?" I always say, "There are only five things you need to think about. Don't do drugs and don't smoke. If you don't do either of them, you've only got three. They are: keep your booze under

control, because we know that contributes directly to breast cancer; watch your diet, because we know that fats and saturated fats in particular contribute to a rise in breast cancer; and be active and healthy."

If we were to focus much more of our attention on that handful of things that people should do, we could look at reducing the incidence of all of those cancers, whereas they are currently rising. Instead of thinking about hundreds of thousands of pounds at the end of someone's treatment journey to try to buy another half a year or a year, why do we not try prevention in the first place?

2.28 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for leading this timely debate during Breast Cancer Awareness Month and for her excellent speech. It is timely because it is on the same day as Baroness Jowell's moving memorial service, which I attended prior to this debate. I will say more about why that is relevant later.

I also thank other hon. Members for their excellent contributions—the hon. Members for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), and my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee). I also thank the amazing campaigners, ambassadors and charities, especially Breast Cancer Now and Breast Cancer Care, for their unswerving support to us as politicians campaigning on the issue, but more importantly to the women, men and families who are living with breast cancer, before, during and after treatment.

As we have heard so movingly today, so many of us, especially those here today, have had our lives touched by breast cancer. I lost my mother-in-law to breast cancer 21 years ago—I have spoken about this before—and that is what inspired me to join the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer when I became an MP. As the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle so astutely spotted, I served as co-chair of the group, with the Minister and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, and I still serve as the vice-chair. That shows how close breast cancer is to the heart of the health spokespersons of each party and how important it is to work in a cross-party, collaborative way on such an important issue.

More women are surviving breast cancer than ever before. Around 95% of women will survive for one year and more than 80% survive for five years or more. However, the UK still lags behind countries such as Sweden, Portugal, Malta, Germany and France. It is clear that more must be done. Many different issues have been mentioned, but I will specifically talk about breast screening, the workforce and prevention, which others have touched on.

We all know how important early diagnosis is to improving the chances of survival. Breast cancer screening has a huge part to play in this, yet uptake is the lowest it has been in ten years, with stark variations across the country. According to Breast Cancer Now, increasing breast screening uptake from the current decade low of 71.1% to the 80% standard set for breast screening units could prevent over 1,200 breast cancer deaths per annual cohort of eligible women. Will the Government

be taking steps to increase breast cancer screening, so that over 1,200 breast cancers deaths can be prevented each year?

The Prime Minister's commitment as part of the NHS long-term plan to see three out of four cancers detected at an early stage by 2028 included a plan to make screening programmes more accessible and easier to use. Can the Minister elaborate on those plans? Will they include outreach services to groups who are less likely to attend screenings, such as those from certain demographic groups or those with learning disabilities?

Earlier this year it was announced that there had been a serious breast screening invitation error, which meant that over 10 years more than 174,000 women did not receive an invitation to their final breast screening appointment. A review into this error is expected to be published next month. Can the Minister provide an update on that review and is it expected to report on time?

Every year over 55,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with breast cancer, but the failure to address those increasing numbers means that, according to Breast Cancer Now, the number of breast cancer deaths is set to rise within four years. That is why pressure on the workforce needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Demand on the breast imaging and diagnostic workforce is set to increase over the next 10 years. We already have a workforce crisis with growing demand, but the problem is only going to get worse if it is left unaddressed. For every three breast radiologists who retire over the next five years, only two are expected to replace them. What plans do the Government have to deal with the growing pressure on an overstretched workforce?

Leaving the EU could also have an impact on our NHS workforce: 5.6% of the NHS workforce in England are from the EU. Changes to immigration rules may exacerbate existing workforce problems for breast cancer patients, particularly among the nursing workforce. Can the Minister provide any clear guarantees to EU citizens working in our NHS? What steps is his Department taking to ensure that the UK continues to attract nurses from the EU?

The current cancer strategy for England includes a recommendation that all patients diagnosed with cancer are supported by a clinical nurse specialist, but this support is not widely available. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln how devastating that is and what it means in reality, when she talked about her experience with her daughter. That support is not available to the majority of the 35,000 people in the UK living with secondary breast cancer. Nearly 72% of hospital organisations in England, Scotland and Wales do not have a dedicated secondary breast cancer clinical nurse specialist. I share Breast Cancer Care's belief that incurable should not mean unsupported. Does the Minister share that belief and what steps will he take to close the stark disparities and support between primary and secondary breast cancer patients?

Dr Whitford: The hon. Lady has recognised the comment I made earlier, that our patients all have the support of a cancer nurse specialist, but they do not have a title of secondary nurse specialist. That is something that requires looking into in more detail, so that we can identify places where there really is no support versus places

where support is linear, and the decision has been made to follow patients through their whole journey rather than make a decision on a title.

Mrs Hodgson: That is an important point and the model that is used in Scotland should perhaps be looked at. I took on board the hon. Lady's point, when she said that patients who are assigned a secondary breast cancer nurse know what that might mean, whereas if it were someone who had been with the patient on their whole journey, that would be a different experience.

Dr Whitford: It varies in Scotland. We are a huge and rural country, so we will have some areas where there is a cancer nurse specialist and, for example, islands where there is someone who has the training to act in that role. In Glasgow and Edinburgh there may well be nurses who are different. It was a decision that we took as a team, as we felt it would be hard on the patients to suddenly move to someone new. It is also hard to sustain the nurse, if they are only ever involved in that part of the journey and do not have other days when they see patients get discharged, be well or be diagnosed.

Mrs Hodgson: The challenge to the Minister is whether improvements to the breast cancer workforce will include recruiting and training additional secondary breast cancer nurses, clinical nurse specialists—whatever we may decide to call them—so that patients have the vital support they need and no one has to witness their loved ones suffering in agony, with only over-the-counter painkillers to ease the pain, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln so bravely testified to earlier.

Karen Lee: Does my hon. Friend agree that the withdrawal of nursing bursaries cannot fail to have impacted on the numbers of nurses training? There are figures out today—I have been on the radio this morning. I think there has been more than a 30% drop in the number of people training to be nurses since the nursing bursary was withdrawn. That cannot fail to have had an impact. It impacts on radiographers as well, because they train for three years, then for another year after that to do mammograms. Does she agree that those bursaries absolutely must be reinstated?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes, I agree. Obviously, that is why it is in our manifesto that we would reinstate those nursing bursaries. I would urge the Government to look at this closely, especially in light of Brexit, and what might happen post Brexit, with regard to the EU workforce, as I already mentioned.

Finally, I will move on to prevention. It is a challenge to us all to live healthier lives. I do not stand here saying I am doing a very good job, but we know that regularly drinking alcohol, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire mentioned earlier, and being overweight or obese, can increase the risk of developing breast cancer—and most cancers—as can smoking and lack of exercise. Regular physical exercise and reducing all the above can reduce the risk. Researchers estimated that 23% of breast cancers are preventable through lifestyle changes. That means there were approximately 10,600 preventable cases in 2016. Turning that into money, approximately £102 million in treatment costs could have been saved in 2016 if all those cases had been prevented. I know that may not be completely achievable, but since 2015, public

[Mrs Hodgson]

health budgets have been cut by 3.9% a year until 2020-21. Has the Minister made any assessment of the effect that cuts to public health budgets have had on the incidence of breast cancer, and will he commit, as much as he can, to an increase in public health funding to help to prevent more cases of breast cancer? I know that might be above his pay grade; he is not the Chancellor—yet.

In closing, I will touch on secondary breast cancer. More than half of women are given no information about the signs and symptoms of breast cancer returning. Will the Minister look into ensuring that all patients are advised at the end of their primary breast cancer treatment about lifestyle and symptoms, so that where possible all cases of incurable secondary breast cancer can be prevented? I know that, like me, the Minister is incredibly passionate about breast cancer and that he will take much if not all of what he has heard today back to his Department to work on, so that he can achieve the best future for breast cancer.

On the day of Dame Tessa Jowell's memorial, I will end by quoting from her magnificent last speech in the House of Lords in January this year, when she said:

"In the end, what gives a life meaning is not only how it is lived, but how it draws to a close."

She said that she hoped the debate would give hope to other cancer patients,

"so that we can live well together with cancer—not just dying of it".—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 25 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1170.*]

Perhaps her most precious legacy will be not only Sure Start and the Olympics, as wonderful as they are, but a better future for everyone with any form of cancer.

2.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Thank you for chairing our session today, Mr McCabe. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) on securing the debate and the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) on leading us off today. Breast cancer sadly affects so many of us so personally. It is always a privilege to respond to any debate in this House, especially on cancer and more especially on breast cancer, and this has been a constructive, small and perfectly formed debate.

It is always a pleasure to follow my shadow Minister and friend, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson); I think this is the first time that a debate has been led by all three chairs of the same all-party parliamentary group, speaking for their respective parties. It was important to us when we chaired the group that we had the three main parties in the chair. The third chair was then held by the Liberal Democrats—remember them?—[*Laughter.*] Stop it. When the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) joined the House, it was a real pleasure that she came on board and took that seat.

I will start by saying, "Happy BCAM!" There is much to celebrate, as hon. Members have said, and it is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, or BCAM for short. I pay tribute to all the people who are here, the survivors—survivorship is very important—and to all the people who have gone. Macmillan Cancer Support ran a heartfelt

campaign earlier this year on the idea that "A mum with cancer is still a mum", which was one of the best pieces of advertising I have seen in the health space for a long time. The reason I say, "Happy BCAM!" is that the people who have gone were still mums, daughters and sisters, even while they were going through their challenges. That is very important. Even children who lose their battle with cancer after being on this earth for a matter of days leave an indelible mark, because they were here for a few days. It is important to me that we always remember that, and I always do.

The title of today's debate on the Order Paper is "Future of breast cancer". The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West said to me once in one of our group meetings, "You will be cancer Minister one day." If she could predict something else great for me, that would be excellent.

Mrs Hodgson: Chancellor.

Steve Brine: Oh yes; the hon. Lady has already said Chancellor today. I am not sure about that one.

As the cancer Minister, I want a future where there is no breast cancer. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned that, and I think all hon. Members who have contributed this afternoon would like to see a future where there was no breast cancer. One day, perhaps—but the statistics show that we are making good progress. That is why I said that there are things to celebrate. We are ensuring that more people than ever survive breast cancer. As has been said, 10-year survival rates have almost doubled, from around 40% to nearly 80%, in the last 40 years.

I hope I do not need to say it, but cancer is a huge priority—the priority—for me. The Prime Minister chose to make it a central point of her party conference speech this month, and there was a reason for that; it is a huge priority for her and for her Government. Survival rates have never been higher, and they have been increasing year on year. Of course the Prime Minister celebrates that, but it is also why she announced a very ambitious package of measures for cancer care and treatment, showing that cancer will be absolutely central to the long-term plan for the NHS, which she has challenged NHS England to write before the end of this year and of which I will say more later. We are committed to investing an extra £20 billion a year in our NHS. The investment will build on the success we have already achieved through the implementation of the cancer strategy for England. I pay tribute to Harpal Kumar and those at Cancer Research UK who put that strategy together. We will build on that legacy and take it forward into the long-term plan.

In opening the debate, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich raised a number of good points. She talked about secondary breast cancer data collection—a number of people did so, but she raised it first. She is right that the robust and timely collection and sharing of data is vital for improvements in breast cancer services. If we do not measure it, we do not know, and if we do not know, we cannot act. The National Cancer Registration and Analysis Service, or NCRAS, collects data on all cancers diagnosed in England, with the data collection specified by the cancer outcomes and services dataset. That data collection of secondary breast cancers was mandated as part of the COSD for diagnoses from April 2013 onwards.

I remember, with my shadow Minister, taking a delegation to see Prime Minister David Cameron in No. 10 to talk about that exact issue just before Christmas; I remember our photo by the tree. It is good that that happened, but it is evident, comparing the collected data with sources in academic literature, that a large proportion of cases are still not being reported in the COSD. That is of great frustration to me. NCRAS continues to work with NHS trusts to improve the completion of the data, and we have redesigned aspects of the COSD to allow more relevant information on occurrence to be captured, but I do not for one minute shirk the fact that there is more to do in this area, and I assure the House and colleagues that I will constantly redouble my efforts in that regard.

Dr Whitford: I touched on the quality improvement project that we started in 2000 in Scotland, looking at many measures right along the pathway that the patient went through. In essence, it was assessing the whole team: how the team functioned, what the surgery was like, what the diagnosis was like and what the chemotherapy was like. The problem is that that sort of audit has not happened, other than for screening patients, in England for quite some time. While I welcome the collection of data on secondary cancer, we need units to have the ability to look at their performance on patients the first time around, to try to prevent that secondary cancer.

Steve Brine: The hon. Lady is right. That is why COSD stands for the cancer outcomes and services dataset. It is not specific to breast cancer, nor should it be, because there are sadly lots of different cancers, but she is right that it should be measuring, judging and analysing both the outcomes and the services that lead to that outcome. As ever, she is dead right.

The point was made about off-patent drugs being found to be effective in new uses. The Prime Minister set out, both in her party conference speech and when we launched the new NHS long-term plan, how a key ambition of that plan will be to speed up access to groundbreaking treatments, with a quicker translation of new breakthroughs into practice through investment in world-leading cancer research centres.

Although bisphosphonates—I always struggle to say that—are not licensed for the treatment or prevention of secondary breast cancer, clinicians can prescribe them off-licence or off-label, subject to local funding policies, if they consider them to be clinically appropriate for an individual. The hon. Lady was right to raise that point.

Dr Whitford: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: Not at the moment. The hon. Lady and others also talked about the long-term funding of cancer alliances. NHS England and I are absolutely committed to the cancer alliances. We have backed them with significant funding and we will continue to support their development fully, ensuring that they have the funding that they need—in this cycle, at the very least—to transform cancer services in the long run.

I take a close and continued interest in the cancer alliances, as Members would expect. Just this week, I sat down with Cally Palmer, the NHS England's national cancer director, to do what I call a deep dive, going

through each cancer alliance in England. I want to know who runs them, where there are leadership challenges, where they struggle to meet the 62-day target and why, and I want to know their turnaround plans for that, including replacing people who are not performing. We do not expect or accept poor performance in a trust, and we do not expect or tolerate it in schools. Cancer alliances spend a lot of public money and they should not be treated any differently.

I want much greater transparency from the cancer alliances. I suspect that if I asked every Member here whether they knew the name of their local health trust chief executive, they would say that they did—and they probably have them on speed dial, as I do. If I asked those Members whether they knew the name and number of the person who leads their cancer alliance, I doubt that they would. I assure Members that that will change.

Dr Whitford: Bisphosphonates and other off-patent drugs are usually old drugs, which ought to be cheaper and therefore very cost-effective. The Minister and another Member mentioned that these drugs are not relicensed. A private Member's Bill to set up a method for relicensing drugs for a new purpose was unfortunately talked out by the then Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), in November 2016. We have agreement that these drugs will go into the "British National Formulary", which will hopefully increase their use. However, I notice that the shocking increase in prices of off-patent drugs that led to the introduction of the Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Act 2017 has not changed. The regulations are not being used. NHS England is being charged ridiculous prices for old drugs and for specials that are made up for individuals. Why are we not using that legislation to drive down those prices, so that all women in England could access drugs that are not—or should not be—actually that expensive?

Steve Brine: There is so much more that I want to get on to, so I will not go into that in any great deal, but I will give the hon. Lady a note on that. Lord O'Shaughnessy, who is part of the Department's drugs team and who speaks on health in the other place, is working on the implementation of that legislation. The hon. Lady has asked me about this before, and it frustrates me incredibly that that Act is not being implemented more quickly, but that should not be taken as any indication of a lack of desire on our part to do so. However, I take the hon. Lady's point.

It is still right for those prescribing decisions to be made by clinicians. However, I want breakthrough drugs to make it on to the market more quickly, instead of staying in the cancer drugs fund. There are good examples of that related to breast cancer, and we want to see it happen much more quickly.

My dear hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) spoke personally and passionately—as always—about these matters, and I thank him for that. He raised lots of issues, including the screening programme. Everyone says that the breast cancer screening programme is a critical tool in ensuring that we catch breast cancers as early as possible, when there is a higher chance of successful treatment. However, we know that there is much more to do to improve uptake. In her party conference speech, the Prime Minister set out that

[*Steve Brine*]

we would transform our screening programmes, making them more accessible and easier to use and utilising the best research and technology. Further detail on that will be set out in the long-term plan later this year.

My hon. Friend also asked about technology in screening. I will come on to the screening scandal in a moment, but it is very much our aim that in the future patients will be able to make much greater use of technology to be informed of things, such as GP or screening appointments, rather than relying on Royal Mail. Our NHS app is being piloted and will be rolled out from December this year. That is just the start of the technology revolution that we want to see and that the Secretary of State has made one of his priorities. We expect the independent breast screening inquiry to make recommendations in that area.

Several Members asked about the inquiry into the breast screening problems that we had. We expect that to report shortly. I do not have an expected date, but several Members, including the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire and the shadow Minister, asked whether it is on schedule. I believe that it is, and I look forward to that report very much. With somebody as serious as the Macmillan chief executive leading that review, alongside others, I know that it will challenge us, as it is meant to; the former Secretary of State set it up to do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle mentioned the importance of early diagnosis. I am proud of Public Health England's Be Clear on Cancer campaign, which I am responsible for. PHE ran its 14th Be Clear on Cancer campaign through February and March of this year, focusing on breast cancer in women aged over 70—a subject that is very close to the hearts of members of the APPG. Research shows that older women are more likely to delay presenting to their GP with breast cancer symptoms.

The campaign previously ran in 2014 and 2015, and an evaluation showed an increased awareness of the key messages that it promoted and, even more importantly, that more cancers were diagnosed during the campaign period. We are running the “Blood in Pee” campaign at the moment—I have all the glamorous things in my portfolio—and Be Clear on Cancer will go forward and from strength to strength.

Huw Merriman: I am incredibly impressed by what the Minister has said so far. Will he keep an open mind on the age limits for screening—particularly the entry age? I know that it has been reduced, but will he keep an open mind on reducing it further?

Steve Brine: I always keep an open mind. The truth is—the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire knows exactly what I will say—that although the screening review will no doubt make recommendations on that, there is a very heated and divided debate within the breast cancer community around screening, and not just about the age at which to begin it. We had the AgeX age extension trial, which broadened the range of ages at which we screen, but there is absolutely no consensus within the breast cancer community on the benefit of screening. That debate continues and rages strongly, and it is for policy makers to listen to all the different views, as the screening review will do.

Several Members, including the shadow Minister, rightly mentioned clinical nurse specialists and the cancer workforce. Last December, Health Education England published its first ever cancer workforce plan, which committed to the expansion of capacity and skills in fighting the big C.

Karen Lee: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: Let me make this point. That plan includes an ambition to attract qualified people back to the NHS through domestic and international recruitment. HEE also plans to expand the number of clinical nurse specialists and to develop clear CNS competencies and routes into training. This will see every breast cancer patient having access to a CNS or other support worker by 2021.

We are committed to ensuring that all that happens. I saw a lot of news coverage last weekend on access to CNSs, and I completely accept that we have more to do. However, I have been very interested in listening. These debates are not only about me sitting here and waiting to read out my speech; they inform me, as much as anything. I was very interested in the discussion between the Labour and Scottish National party Front Benchers about what CNSs are called and the multidisciplinary team that they could be part of to offer support to women as they are going on this journey. I will definitely take that away.

Karen Lee: May I ask the Minister to respond directly to my comment that according to the figures out this morning—I know, because I was given them and asked to comment on them—the numbers of people training to be a nurse have dropped by just over 30% since the bursaries were withdrawn? The Government talk and talk about associate nurses and apprentice nurses, but there is not the take-up for those posts, and an apprentice nurse takes four years to train, so will he respond directly to my comments? Of course, the issue affects not just nurses but radiographers, as I said.

Steve Brine: The general point I would make is this. The hon. Lady said that people cannot live on good will; they have to have pay rises, and that is why I am very pleased that we have lifted the public sector cap pay. The significant pay rise that will be coming is welcome. Also, as well as expanding the number of nurse training places by 5,170, we are expanding the skills of specialist cancer nurses. There are 52,000 nurses training in the NHS, with more to come, thanks to our 25% increase in training places. The debate on bursaries is very live. That is discussed every single time we have Health questions—I dare say it will be again on Tuesday—but the Government have been very clear about our vision for the health education workforce and where we see nurse training places and the nurse apprenticeship scheme sitting in that. That is probably all I can add at the moment on that issue.

I want to touch on so many other different things. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, the shadow Minister and everyone else who spoke in the debate talked about prevention, and of course the title of the debate on the Order Paper is “Future of breast cancer”, so yes, we need to do a lot more to prevent people from developing cancer—not just breast cancer, but cancer—in

the first place. As the Minister responsible for public health and dealing with cancer, I know that encouraging people to live healthier lifestyles can be one of the most effective ways to prevent cancer. Yes, there have been challenging budgets since we took office in 2010, but I refuse to bring politics into the cancer debate. All I will say is that Governments do have to live within their means. Governments do not have any money of their own; they have only our constituents' money. We are spending £16 billion on the public health budget in England during this spending review period, but difficult decisions have been made. Clearly, I cannot pre-empt the spending review next year. I know what the NHS is getting, because we have pre-empted that ourselves, but we will make our announcements around the future of the public health grant, which obviously comes through a different Department, in due course.

I want to talk about the prevention point. Better prevention is not a silver bullet. I wish it were, but the truth is that cancer is indiscriminately cruel. We have had statistics today on the number of cancers that are preventable. Some two thirds of cancers are just down to bad luck. That is a horrid fact of life, and a horrid fact of life that every Member in this Chamber lives with every day. Cancer can have devastating effects on children, and on people who have lived the healthiest of lives, but we can have a huge impact and ensure that more people live their lives free of cancer if we focus on the prevention message.

Obesity is relevant. We talk a lot about childhood obesity. That is obviously because big children become big adults. Cancer Research UK has been very good in this space in making the connection between obesity and cancer. When we made the connection between smoking and lung cancer, it was a game changer. CRUK makes the connection between obesity and cancer. I am not fat shaming in saying that; it is just a matter of fact that obesity is a contributing factor to cancers. I am told that 8% of breast cancer cases in 2015 were the result of being too heavy. We need to do better on obesity, and we could talk for hours about the childhood obesity strategy alone. There are of course the issues of diet and physical activity. Earlier this month I was at the G20, talking about strengthening health systems, obesity and physical activity, and everyone around the world concurs on that.

I shall close on prevention by talking about alcohol, which the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire mentioned. It is a big breast cancer risk. That is the truth. Women who drink more alcohol have higher rates of breast cancer; women who do not drink have a lower risk of breast cancer compared with those who do. Risk rises with alcohol consumption, and no particular level of intake is risk free. That is the truth.

I want to return to the screening failure, because screening was referred to by the hon. Member for Strangford. He is in his place as always—God bless him. However well we are doing, we cannot be complacent. I constantly look at and worry about the screening figures. With regard to the failing in the national breast screening programme in England, many things come across our desk as Ministers that we wish did not come across our desk, and there are many things that we lie awake at night and worry about. Some things kick you where you do not want to be kicked as a man, and the breast screening programme failure in England kicked

me very hard there when it happened. It resulted in thousands of women between the ages of 68 and 71 not being invited to their final screening. That is a stark reminder that however well we think we are doing, we have to do better. The former Secretary of State apologised unreservedly for it. He said that all we can do is put it right, and we are putting it right in terms of inviting people back for screening. We are determined; the independent review was set up to investigate and report on the circumstances of breast screening failure. That is expected to report shortly. It will challenge us and make very challenging recommendations. I look forward to discussing that with hon. Members.

The five-year survival rate for breast cancer is already 86%, as has been said. Some in the breast cancer community worry that the long-term plan and the Prime Minister's new 75% early-stage detection ambition for cancer mean that we have no ambition left for breast cancer. Earlier this week the national cancer director and I discussed the long-term plan. I was absolutely clear with her, and she agrees, that our long-term ambitions cover all cancers, including breast cancer. The 75% five-year survival aim is ambitious—we would love many cancers to be even remotely there—but it is not the limit of our ambition.

As I said, I want a future in which there is no breast cancer. The NHS does well at diagnosing breast cancer, but it must do a lot better at preventing it. We must continue until the five-year survival figure is 100%, and I do not say that as a naive ambition. I want to make that point clear, because I know that some in the breast cancer community are concerned about that.

I pay tribute to the selfless work done by the people who will deliver the vision in the cancer strategy and the wider long-term plan. Obviously, doctors and nurses are at the sharp end, and I visit them when I go out and about. They, not Ministers, are the people behind the highest ever survival rates. I also want to add my thanks to the charities, which I have enjoyed working with. Breakthrough Breast Cancer joined with the Breast Cancer Campaign to become Breast Cancer Now. I enjoy working with Delyth, Baroness Morgan, of Breast Cancer Now and with Breast Cancer Care and Breast Cancer Haven. I have a lot of time for Breast Cancer Haven, which creates havens to help women to feel human and normal again after treatment. It does a lot of good work.

NHS England and I, with the support of what I always call Team Cancer, are utterly committed to making the ambitions that we set out in our long-term plan and our new cancer strategy a reality. That will ensure that we take a huge leap forward, over the next 10 years, to a future in which cancer has no future.

3.8 pm

Laura Smith: I thank everyone who has attended the debate—especially because I am not sure whether the heating bill has been paid in here. It is absolutely freezing, so well done to all those in the Public Gallery.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK. Every 45 minutes, another life is lost to the disease; it claims almost 1,000 lives every month in the UK. I pay special tribute to the charities that help to raise awareness, support those affected in all our communities and, of course, fund research into this devastating disease. Thanks

[*Laura Smith*]

to that research, more people are surviving breast cancer than ever before. I hope that I live to see the day when everyone who develops breast cancer lives.

I want to thank the Minister, the shadow Minister and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who represents the Scottish National party. Her expertise in this area is very welcome, and I have learned a lot. I thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for their contributions. Special thanks go to my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), who spoke so passionately about her own experience. Her daughter would be very proud of her work and all that she does, and her friends and family are proud of her too.

As a 33-year-old mother of two young children, I would welcome earlier screening with open arms, but as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire pointed out, it is also about education in how to check for lumps—what they look like and feel like. I check my breasts, but I am

not convinced that I am doing it right, so it would be good to be shown how to do that. I will call on her from now on—she will not be able to get rid of me.

Praise must go to the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer for its report on the geographical inequalities. I encourage all hon. Members who are yet to read the report to do so. I hope to see everyone join in for Wear it Pink tomorrow. My trophy for winning the title of best-dressed MP for Wear it Pink is in pride of place between my son's football trophies, but my two-year-old daughter has claimed it as her own prize—it is her “booby trophy”. Thank you for chairing the debate, Mr McCabe and thanks again to everyone who has attended.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of breast cancer.

3.11 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 18 October 2018

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Inquiry

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington):

On 24 September, I attended the commemoration that preceded the preliminary hearings of the infected blood inquiry, and watched the moving and powerful testimony from those infected and affected by the infected blood scandal. The commemoration brought home the terrible human cost of this tragedy, and emphasised to me the importance of this inquiry, to get to the truth of what happened, and provide the answers that the people infected and affected so desperately need.

When the public inquiry was launched in July this year, I deferred making a decision on whether to appoint a panel to sit with Sir Brian until he was able to take the view of core participants. Sir Brian Langstaff wrote to me this week following the preliminary hearings, and has advised me that he has now done so, and there has been no demand for a panel. In the place of single experts, sitting as panellists, Sir Brian is establishing expert groups to provide openness and transparency across a range of truly expert opinion. He recommended that I should not appoint co-determining panel members. I accept his recommendation.

In his letter Sir Brian also called for action in relation to financial and psychological support for the affected and infected. The Government will consider those comments and Sir Brian's recommendations carefully and will respond as soon as possible.

The Cabinet Office takes seriously its role as sponsor to the infected blood inquiry and is determined to do all it can to support the inquiry with its work. Regrettably, an administrative error earlier this year has come to light, which had delayed the circulation of an instruction to Government Departments about the retention of records. I can reassure the public that this has resulted in no actual harm, but it is an error for which I apologise to the inquiry, and most importantly, to the people infected and affected.

The facts are these: Cabinet Office officials circulated a Government-wide notice on 3 April this year, instructing Departments to preserve all information relevant to the infected blood inquiry. A further, more comprehensive message was issued to Departments by the Cabinet Office on 11 June.

However, following a query from the inquiry about the notice, Cabinet Office officials discovered that the 3 April email containing the retention notice did not reach its recipients, due to the failure of the collective IT address used. My officials have provided a detailed explanation to the inquiry which will be published on the inquiry's website.

Since the error was discovered, all relevant Departments and relevant areas within Departments have worked urgently to confirm that they have not destroyed any documents relevant to the inquiry during the period

between 3 April and 11 June. Because of their size and the complexity of some of the records they hold, HM Courts and Tribunals Service and the Legal Aid Agency are continuing to work to provide this assurance and have committed to doing so as urgently as possible.

The Department of Health and Social Care put in place a moratorium on the destruction of historical records as soon as the inquiry was announced in July 2017. No material damage has resulted from this administrative error, but I am very sorry it occurred, and I would like to reassure the public that the Cabinet Office will learn the lessons from this to avoid such an error occurring in future.

[HCWS1021]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Modern Slavery: 2018 Annual Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Today, I am publishing the 2018 UK annual report on modern slavery. The report covers the whole of the UK and has been drafted in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Executive, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government. This report sets out an assessment of the scale of modern slavery in the UK, and outlines the actions that have been taken to combat it over the last year.

A copy of the report will be placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS1020]

JUSTICE

Justice and Home Affairs Post-Council Statement

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I attended the Justice and Home Affairs Council for Justice day on Thursday 11 October in Luxembourg.

The Council reached a general approach on the insolvency restructuring and second chance directive.

During the discussion on e-evidence legislation, Ministers agreed not to include real-time interception within the scope of the regulation and asked for further work on the extent of the obligation to notify other states when data is sought direct from a service provider. I offered to share UK experience from our bilateral discussions with the US on a data access agreement, which was welcomed by the Commission.

With regard to the draft conclusions on the application of the charter of fundamental rights in 2017, 20 member states, including the UK, supported the Netherlands proposal for the adoption of "presidency conclusions" given the lack of consensus for Council conclusions.

The director of the Fundamental Rights Agency presented his annual review of the fundamental rights situation in the European Union (EU), noting rising levels of hate crime, including anti-Semitism, and

discrimination faced by immigrants and minority groups. He also referred to Roma communities living without basic amenities such as electricity and water. Member states noted these concerns.

The Commission updated Ministers on implementation of the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO). The European Council will discuss the proposal to extend the EPPO to cross-border terrorism offences.

The discussion on enhancing mutual trust focused on the importance of mutual recognition, while noting the importance of an independent judiciary and the rule of law. The UK intervened to recognise the mutual benefits of continued co-operation, and the UK's commitment to the principle of mutual trust. The presidency will prepare conclusions on mutual trust for the December JHA Council.

The Commission presented its communication on securing free and fair European elections, including protection from personal data misuse and cyber incidents.

The Home Secretary attended Interior day.

The Commission set out ambitious plans for a stronger, more effective European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) including a standing corps of 10,000 officers, which would provide substantial support to member states in protecting the external border. Member states underlined their support for a stronger Frontex, but expressed concerns about the size of the standing corps, its impact on national authorities and the consequences for member state competence on border protection.

The Commission briefly presented the new return directive recast and member states discussed accelerated borders procedures, linking the asylum and returns processes, with asylum claims processed as close to the border as possible and, if refused, the failed asylum seeker returned fast and smoothly. Some member states focused on the need to maximise third-country co-operation on returns and readmission of own nationals. Member states were divided on the mandatory nature of the border procedures. Some member states supported manifestly unfounded claims at the border leading to an entry refusal rather than a returns decision.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the EU's comprehensive "whole of route" approach to tackling illegal migration. The Home Secretary focused on strengthening the EU's response to human traffickers and smugglers advertising online, and boosting our work with African partners on economic development, strategic communications and behavioural insights to prevent migrants from starting dangerous journeys to Europe.

Ministers also discussed the balance between solidarity and responsibility. The presidency, supported by some member states, proposed broadening the idea of "solidarity" to avoid compulsory reallocation of refugees to member states who reject this, but who are content to make substantial contributions to other aspects of migration management, including external partnerships with third countries.

The Council discussed the JHA funding programmes within the next multi-annual financial framework. The UK will not participate in these programmes as a member state. The presidency called on member states to establish a strong steering structure to ensure the optimal use of funds. Member states supported provisions to step up co-operation with third countries on migration, but raised questions around flexibility and allocations to member states.

The presidency updated on progress on the files within the common European asylum system (CEAS) package. The Dublin IV proposal, as it links to the issue of solidarity and burden sharing, will be discussed among leaders at the October European Council.

[HCWS1022]

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Draft Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):

Today, the Government publish the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill in draft, which seeks to establish the statutory bodies that will be responsible for the restoration and renewal works within the parliamentary estate, giving effect to the resolutions passed by Parliament earlier this year. In addition to Parliament having expressed its view in those resolutions, it will also be given an opportunity to vote on the proposed design, cost and timing of the substantive building works relating to the Palace of Westminster. In developing the draft Bill, the Government have worked closely with the House authorities.

The Bill will establish the governance structure within which those bodies will operate. The bodies will have the capacity and capability to make strategic decisions on the restoration and renewal programme, so that the Palace of Westminster can be secured as the UK Parliament for future generations.

The Bill establishes a parliamentary works sponsor body which will have overall responsibility for the programme and act as a single client on behalf of both Houses. It will also form a delivery authority as a company limited by guarantee. The delivery authority will formulate proposals in relation to the restoration works, and ensure their operational delivery. The bodies will be independent and able to operate effectively in the commercial sphere, bringing the expertise and capability needed for a project of this scale. This two-tier approach was used to successfully deliver the London Olympics.

The Bill also establishes a Parliamentary Works Estimates Commission which will lay the sponsor body's estimates before Parliament, and play a role in reviewing the sponsor body's expenditure.

The Government agree with Parliament that there can be no blank cheque for this work and it must represent good value for taxpayers' money. The Bill provides that the sponsor body and the delivery authority must have regard to value for money when exercising their functions throughout the programme. The Treasury will be able to review and comment on the annual estimates for the funding of the programme, and the National Audit Office will be able to undertake audits and value for money reviews. Furthermore, the Estimates Commission will have the power to review, comment on, and in certain circumstances reject those annual estimates.

It is important that the views of parliamentarians on the programme are taken into account. The sponsor body will have a majority of parliamentarians on its

board, alongside external expertise. Parliamentarians will be fully consulted on the strategic direction of the programme. The sponsor body will be required to return to Parliament for approval to make any significant changes to the approved proposals in respect of the Palace. Parliament will also be given an opportunity to vote on the annual expenditure of the sponsor body and the delivery authority through the estimates process.

We welcome the forthcoming scrutiny of the draft Bill, to ensure that it achieves its aims of a restoration and renewal programme that is sufficiently independent, and that is transparent and accountable to Parliament.

[HCWS1019]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 18 October 2018

WORK AND PENSIONS

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from topical questions to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 15 October 2018.

T7. [907067] **Michael Tomlinson:** I welcome the announcement that the Department is providing work experience, and working with Barnardo's to provide work experience, for care leavers. What further support is my hon. Friend offering to care leavers to ensure they fulfil their potential?

Justin Tomlinson: This is a real priority for our Secretary of State and it will involve building on our work to enable care leavers to make advanced UC claims, access

to the youth application support programme, early access to the work and health programme and extensions to second chance learning, and we will work with employers to create more opportunities to build on this partnership with Barnardo's.

[Official Report, 15 October 2018, Vol. 647, c. 405.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) during topical questions.

The correct response should have been:

Justin Tomlinson: This is a real priority for our Secretary of State and it will involve building on our work to enable care leavers to make advanced UC claims, access to the youth application support programme, early access to the work and health programme and **exemptions for** second chance learning, and we will work with employers to create more opportunities to build on this partnership with Barnardo's.

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