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6 November 2018**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 6 November 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

School Funding

1. **Sir Vince Cable** (Twickenham) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the adequacy of schools funding. [907466]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): More money is going into schools than ever before. Schools will receive over £42 billion of core funding this year and £43.5 billion next year. Our investment in schools is paying off, with 86% of schools now rated good or outstanding compared with 68% in 2010. Schools funding for 2020-21 onwards will be considered along with all areas of non-NHS departmental spending at next year's spending review.

Sir Vince Cable: The Chancellor will already be aware that the £400 million for "little extras" has gone down like a lead balloon with schools that cannot afford the basics, but will he explain why there was not even a penny of additional money for post-16 colleges, most of which are in a desperate financial position and cannot carry out their training functions? Is the further education sector just another "little extra"?

Mr Hammond: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, we have launched a significant initiative for the FE sector with the Government's new T-level programme, which is being rolled out over the next few years. The programme involves a funding commitment of an additional £500 million a year to increase contact time between learners and teachers or work environments by 50%.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Education at all levels clearly matters for our economy and our country. Financing education properly is important, and I will be taking a keen interest during the spending review. However, does the Chancellor agree that money is not everything and that good teaching and well-managed schools are of equal importance?

Mr Hammond: Of course. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. They say, don't they, that no one ever forgets a good teacher? This is about excellence in teaching and in the leadership of our schools, and a well-resourced system led by excellent leaders and staffed by brilliant teachers is the best guarantee of Britain's bright future.

17. [907486] **Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Lab): It is not just schools in Dudley that have been inadequately funded. The area overall will have lost over £100 million by next year. Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council's spending power has been cut by 20%, while Surrey, which the Chancellor represents, has actually had an increase. Why is he treating Dudley so unfairly?

Mr Speaker: This is about the adequacy of school funding.

Ian Austin: Which I am interested in.

Mr Speaker: Very well done.

Mr Hammond: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the national funding formula is providing every local authority with more money for every pupil in every school.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the extra £400 million that the Chancellor found in his Budget for school funding. North East Lincolnshire has two nursery schools that have been particularly badly affected by the current funding regime. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and I have met the Education Minister responsible, but it would be helpful if the Chancellor could arrange for us to meet one of his ministerial team to pursue the matter.

Mr Hammond: As my hon. Friend will know, we are putting a record £6 billion into childcare and guaranteeing working parents 30 hours a week of childcare for three and four-year-olds, but I am happy to ask one of my colleagues to meet him. We are always happy to discuss such issues. This aspect of funding, along with all others, can also be considered in the round at the spending review.

20. [907489] **Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): Austerity under this Government and the previous one has cost the Scottish Government £2 billion, meaning less money for education and other public services. Will the Chancellor bring an end to this failed austerity and also repay the £175 million from VAT on police and fire services?

Mr Hammond: What the hon. Gentleman does know, but chooses not to say, is that as a result of the measures announced in the Budget last week, including the huge increase in NHS England funding, Scotland will receive over £2 billion more through the Barnett formula by 2023-24.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Chancellor confirm that public spending on schools has never been higher in the history of our country? Will he also repeat for the benefit of the House the proportion of pupils in good and outstanding schools now, compared with when Labour left office?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on both counts. He might also be interested in the OECD data, which shows that England is the top spender in the G7 on schools and colleges delivering primary and secondary education, as a percentage of GDP. We spend more on primary and secondary education than Germany, France, Japan and Australia, both as a percentage of GDP and on a per pupil basis.

Leaving the EU: Tax Revenues

2. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on tax revenues of the UK leaving the EU. [907468]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government will be coming forward with a full and appropriate analysis of the impact of the deal we negotiate with the European Union well in time for the meaningful vote.

Christian Matheson: The Government's own figures demonstrate between a 2% and 8% hit on the broader economy after Brexit. Is it not the case that there is no form of Brexit that will not have a massive impact on the public finances and, therefore, on public services?

Mel Stride: We are in the middle of a negotiation. At the appropriate moment, when we know exactly what the deal is—the deal that is available and that we have negotiated—we will of course come forward with a full and comprehensive analysis of both the fiscal and the economic impacts of that deal.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Is it not important that the public and Parliament are able to scrutinise not just the Treasury assumptions on tax as we leave the European Union but the Treasury assumptions on all aspects of the economy under the Treasury's CGE—computable general equilibrium—model? Will the Treasury publish that model as soon as possible?

Mel Stride: As I say, we will come forward with a full and appropriate analysis. Of course, prior to the meaningful vote, the Government will ensure that there is appropriate time to fully debate all these matters.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Our country already suffers from brutal inequality, so will the Minister say whether that analysis will be broken down by region and sub-region so we can see exactly what the impact of Brexit will be on the communities we represent?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Lady will know, under this Government income inequality is far lower than it was under Labour. I am not going to start getting involved in a running commentary on the negotiations and the various impacts thereof, as that would not be helpful, other than to restate that a full and appropriate analysis will be provided to the House prior to the meaningful vote.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Will Ministers consider moving the trigger point for the application of the zero rate of VAT for new build dwellings as defined in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, which would end the unintended discrimination, both before and after we leave the EU, against self-build and custom house building projects, while not harming Government revenue?

Mel Stride: That is possibly the most ingenious question I have ever heard in this House, and it is indicative of my hon. Friend's passion for and commitment to this matter. I recognise the issue he raises on the zero-rating

of new builds, on which he wishes to extend the scope somewhat. I believe that my office has now arranged a meeting with him, and I look forward to it taking place within the coming days and weeks.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Minister ensure that both he and the Chancellor take steps in advance of the next Budget to ensure that thousands of jobs can be created, particularly in Northern Ireland, by looking at air passenger duty and at VAT in the hospitality sector?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have consulted on APD and VAT on tourism in Northern Ireland, and we have now reported back on that consultation. We are setting up a technical working group to look specifically at the issue of short-haul APD to see whether there is some way in which that could be addressed.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Even before that great day, what reassurance can the Minister give to those of us who hold on to the quaint belief that Budgets should balance?

Mel Stride: We take a very balanced approach to the economy, which of course includes ensuring that we stick rigorously to our fiscal rules. We have met the two intermediate rules a full three years early. We continue to bear down on the deficit, and debt as a percentage of GDP will continue to fall throughout every year of this Parliament.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Each additional EU citizen working in Scotland contributes £10,400 to Government revenue. What assessment has the Minister made of the reduction in tax revenue as a result of the ending of free movement?

Mel Stride: I am sorry to keep reverting to the same answer, but it is effectively the same question that I keep being asked: "What will the analysis look like when the deal is concluded?" Of course that prompts the question of what exactly the deal will be. In the fullness of time, when the deal is agreed, we will come back to the House with a full analysis.

Kirsty Blackman: Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs can collect customs duties only if it has a working customs system, so how is the roll-out of the customs declaration service going? How is HMRC going to achieve the Government's commitment in the Red Book to halve the time it takes to apply for customs trusted trader status?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises the issue of the CDS system. The current expectation is that that will be fully functioning by the end of March next year, which means we therefore have a robust back-up in the extension of the CHIEF—Customs Handling of Import and Export Freight—system. This is to make sure that that gears up for the huge increase in the number of customs declarations that will need to be made in a no-deal situation. We will of course continue to work hard on that matter.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Further to the answer the Financial Secretary gave to my hon. Friend the Member for

Dover (Charlie Elphicke), will he publish, when he is publishing the CGE analysis, the assumptions underlying all potential EU exit scenarios, including those on World Trade Organisation terms and with a free trade agreement?

Mel Stride: The commitment we have made is that the deal agreed between us and the EU—we are confident we will achieve exactly that—will be fully analysed in an appropriate way and delivered to this House so that during the days in the run-up to the meaningful vote all Members of the House will have an opportunity to properly study that analysis.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Last week's Budget certainly did not end austerity, but we all heard that things could be even worse in the event that the Government fail to get a good Brexit deal. In the Chancellor's own words, that would necessitate a new Budget entirely, so may I ask the Financial Secretary an entirely straight question: how will the Government react to the loss of even 10% of our tax revenues from financial services in the now likely event that our market access is diminished?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of financial services, and of course he will be aware that recent progress has been made on that issue with our European partners in the negotiation. As for the impact of an actual deal, as I say, we do not know exactly what that deal will look like at this stage. When we do, we will come forward to the House with an appropriate announcement.

Jonathan Reynolds: The reason the Minister keeps having to give the same answer is that the Government's answer is woefully inadequate. Business needs certainty and the Government have run out of time, so will he at least acknowledge that securing no more than equivalence to what is already available to third countries would be insufficient? Is it not the case that if people want a Brexit deal that really protects jobs and tax revenues, and they want to end austerity, the only way they can have both is with a Labour Government?

Mel Stride: It was all going so well—not that well, actually, but it got a sight worse towards the end. Government Members know that we are taking the responsible decisions to move forward a very difficult and detailed negotiation. At the appropriate time, when we have a deal—we are confident we will do that—we will present it to the House, and the House will then be able to express its view on it.

Universal Credit: Household Income

3. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the potential effect on household income of the roll-out of universal credit.

[907469]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Thanks to our universal credit and welfare reforms, we have a record number of families earning wages and a record number of children in houses with work, bringing more income.

Gerald Jones: Labour Members and my constituents would gladly welcome the end of austerity, but the measures laid out in the Chancellor's Budget certainly will not bring an end to it. Will the Chief Secretary clarify what proportion of the cuts to UC made by George Osborne in the 2015 Budget have now been reversed?

Elizabeth Truss: In the Budget, we announced an additional £630 for every family on UC. The Resolution Foundation has confirmed that this is more generous than the previous benefits system, but it is also better at keeping people in work. The reality is that if the Labour party was in power there would be no money to spend on those families, there would be no money for tax cuts and taxes would be going up for ordinary people.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The Minister knows this, but can she explain to Opposition Members that helping people into work and into higher rates of work, and keeping the credits and benefits they are entitled to matters, and that if Labour's policy of freezing the roll-out of UC came in many people would not get the support they need to help them have the lives they want?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Under the previous Labour Government, we saw 20% of young people unemployed and we saw families trapped on benefits. What we have done is create a system where it pays to work. There are now a record number of children in houses where parents are out at work. That is good for them and good for the next generation.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Chancellor announced in the Budget a two-week run-on of legacy benefits for those being migrated to universal credit, but it takes five weeks for a universal credit payment to come through, so what does the Chief Secretary expect families to do in the three-week gap between those two?

Elizabeth Truss: We already have an advances system that enables those families to be covered for that period. Universal credit is designed to mirror the world of work to make it easier for people to get into work and that is exactly what it is doing, as opposed to the previous benefits system, which trapped people in poverty and kept people where they are, which is what the Labour party wants to do.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Universal credit comes to my constituency next month. Will the Chief Secretary confirm that the changes made in last week's Budget mean that there is more support for working families with children, more support for people with disabilities and more support for the self-employed and that, crucially, people will not need to wait five weeks for a payment?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right on all those points. What we were also able to do in the Budget was make sure that there is £690 boost for those on the national living wage and a £130 basic rate tax cut. We were able to do that because of the improvement in the public finances, thanks to getting more people into work. The reality is that the reason we had £100 billion extra in our Budget is that this Government have taken responsible decisions.

Leaving the EU: No Deal

4. Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on the OBR's Budget 2018 forecasts of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [907470]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Office for Budget Responsibility has set out its forecasting assumptions regarding EU exit and will update them when the details of a deal justify a forecast change. Parliament will be presented with the appropriate analysis to make an informed decision ahead of the vote on the final deal. It is in the interests of the EU and the UK to strike a deal, and we remain confident that we are on track to achieve a mutually advantageous deal in the near future.

Mr Bailey: The Chancellor's Budget measures were based on OBR assumptions of an orderly withdrawal from the EU and a 21-month continuation in the customs union. In the event of a no deal, will the Minister share with the House the assessment he has made of the potential decline in tax revenues and consequential changes to his tax and spending plans in the Budget?

John Glen: The Government are fully committed to achieving a good deal with the EU. We will make lots of assessments during that process, but our mind is focused on achieving that deal and the Government will achieve it.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Mr Speaker, through you, may I assure all Members of this House that the Treasury Committee will take very seriously the job of scrutinising the analysis produced by the Treasury on the final deal on behalf of all Members, and will let Members know the conclusions that we draw from that before the meaningful vote?

My hon. Friend the Minister may well be aware of the OBR discussion paper published last month on Brexit and the OBR's forecasts. Paragraph 1.27, which talks about the risk of a disorderly Brexit, says that

"while not a direct parallel, it is worth noting that the 'Three-Day Week' introduced in early 1974...was associated with a fall in output of...under 3 per cent that quarter."

The shadow Chancellor might think that the 1970s was a good way to manage the economy, but can my hon. Friend assure us that he does not think that that is the way forward for this country?

John Glen: That is certainly not the way forward. I can assure my right hon. Friend that we are doing everything we can to plan for all eventualities. That is why I am taking through a large number of statutory instruments to take account of all possibilities next year, but we are working on, and focused on, achieving a good deal.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): There is no estimate in the Red Book for the benefits to tax revenues of the measures that we took in the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. Is that because Ministers are holding that money in their back pocket in case of a no deal?

John Glen: What is clear is that we will have greater freedom in terms of how we implement a sanctions and anti-money laundering regime, and that will give us the opportunity to fix measures that are appropriate for this country, and the revenues will flow from that.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Surely the greatest threat to this country is not no deal, but a Labour Government and the tax bombshell that would come with them.

John Glen: I agree wholeheartedly with that characterisation of the risks associated with the Opposition ever getting into power. The enormous increases in taxes for businesses would hit consumers and be appalling for the state of the economy.

Productivity

5. Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase productivity in the economy. [907471]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Budget set out the next steps in our plan to raise productivity and to grow the economy. That included increasing the national productivity investment fund to more than £37 billion to fund the largest sustained investment in our national infrastructure since the 1970s.

Lee Rowley: With that very increase in infrastructure funding to £37 billion, what opportunities are there in places such as North East Derbyshire to invest in regeneration and communities?

Robert Jenrick: The plans set out in the Budget were designed exactly for parts of the country such as my hon. Friend's constituency. The £28.8 billion national roads fund will provide the largest ever investment in our strategic roads, and more money for potholes and pinch points. The future high streets fund will enable small towns across the country, including in the midlands, to be transformed and become thriving communities once more.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): How does the announcement in the Budget that non-NHS capital funding will actually fall in the coming years help the country's productivity?

Robert Jenrick: The Budget announced the largest increase in capital spend in our economic infrastructure since the 1970s. Under this Government, investment in our economic infrastructure will be £460 million a week higher than under the last Labour Government.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): The Chancellor has announced that he will be improving productivity by stopping inefficient public sector contracting—basically, abolishing the use of the private finance initiative and private finance 2. Can more be done to reduce the £240 billion bill to our country left by the Labour party?

Robert Jenrick: Yes. We are ending the scandal of PFI that was created by the last Labour Government. Eighty-six per cent. of PFI contracts were signed by the last Labour Government—91% by value. In addition to retiring PFI we are creating a crack team, beginning in

the Department of Health and Social Care, to look back at some of those old contracts and to clean out the stable left by the last Labour Government.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): This Government and their coalition predecessors have overseen the longest slump in wages in living memory. What effect has that had on productivity?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman may not be aware of this, but real wages are rising. The Government believe that the best way to support working people across the country is to get them into work. Employment is now at its highest level in my lifetime, with 3 million more jobs created and 1 million fewer people on the dole.

Multinational Digital Businesses: Tax

6. **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough) (Con): What plans he has to raise additional tax revenues from multinational digital businesses. [907472]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government have announced that we will be introducing a digital services tax on the UK revenues of large social media platforms, search engines and online marketplaces. The tax is expected to raise around £1.5 billion over four years, ensuring that digital businesses make a fair contribution to the public finances.

Neil O'Brien: Members of Market Harborough chamber of commerce and my local Federation of Small Businesses have for some time been calling for the Chancellor to bring in a new tax on the digital giants and to use the proceeds to help small businesses on the high street. First, may I congratulate the Chancellor on taking such sensible economic advice? Secondly, can he tell us how much small businesses will benefit by?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and his constituents for the advice; and, while we are at it, I wish him a happy birthday. The digital services tax aims to improve sustainability and fairness in the tax system. Separately, the Government have announced measures to support small retailers by cutting their business rates by one third for two years. Just to put that in a local context for my hon. Friend, there are 660 retail properties in Harborough local authority area with a rateable value of below £51,000, which means that there are 660 properties that could benefit.

14. [907483] **Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Before we get too excited about this, we should bear it in mind that it is still a small amount of the profits of these large companies that will come into the Exchequer. Will the Chancellor explain the timetable for the consultation and when he expects to get any tax revenue into the Exchequer from this measure?

Mr Hammond: As I said last week, the proposal is to introduce the tax in 2020, but in the meantime we will continue to lead international negotiations on the potential for an internationally agreed tax. Such a tax would in fact be preferable to nationally implemented schemes, but at the moment it is proving very difficult to agree. I

hope that, by the time we get to our implementation date in April 2020, we may yet have made progress on an internationally agreed measure.

Support for the High Street

7. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support the high street. [907473]

9. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support the high street. [907477]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): As my hon. Friends will know, in the Budget, we allocated £1.5 billion to supporting our high streets, including £675 million for our future high streets fund, and reduced business rates for smaller retailers by one third for the next two years.

Alex Burghart: Businesses in my constituency are giddy with excitement at this huge reduction in business rates. Will my right hon. Friend confirm what proportion of businesses on the high street are going to benefit from this?

Mel Stride: I am also giddy with excitement about this, and giddy with excitement to be able to inform my hon. Friend that up to 90% of smaller retailers, many of them in our high streets, will benefit from this package. That is in complete contrast to Labour's policy of putting up taxes on small businesses. That is no way to support our high streets; it is Labour's way to destroy business and jobs.

Mark Pawsey: On 1 December, I will be visiting retailers in Rugby town centre to support the Federation of Small Businesses' Small Business Saturday. These businesses are in a tough and fast-changing environment. Does the Minister agree that the business rate incentive that he mentioned will go some way towards levelling the playing field between those retailers and those who operate online?

Mel Stride: I certainly agree. These changes will boost our high streets, and the FSB is to be congratulated on Small Business Saturday. I shall be in Ramsgate with my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) speaking to some of his retailers about this. I extend a non-partisan invitation to Labour Members to join us: we will go up our high streets talking to retailers about reducing their rates, and they can talk about the tax increases that they have in store for them.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The very short-term measure to give some businesses relief was announced at the Budget, but why did not the Chancellor announce the real cause of escalating business rates—the investors on our high streets from overseas who are really exploiting the market?

Mel Stride: I am slightly disappointed by the approach taken by the hon. Lady, for whom I have great respect, in pouring cold water on a major fiscal move such as this to reduce high street rates by one third, which will benefit approximately 90% of smaller retailers in her constituency. That is a shot in the arm for our high street and a shot in the arm for British business.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): In truth, this is very small beans for high street stores. It is correct that some people will benefit, but also correct that many of our town centres and shopping centres have vacancies that this will not even touch, so what more can Government do to address the fundamental unfairness in the system?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman is right inasmuch as he points to the fact that high streets need to reinvent themselves—to transition—in order to adjust to the growth in online marketplaces. That is exactly what our future high streets fund is all about, with £675 million going out via local authorities, following competitive bids, to make sure that we reshape those high streets in exactly the way that he would like them to be reshaped, get rid of the shops that are shut down and reinvigorate and rejuvenate the very centres of our communities.

Support for Businesses and Entrepreneurs

8. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What steps he is taking to support businesses and entrepreneurs. [907474]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): This Government are determined to make the UK a great place to do business, so we are keeping taxes low and helping businesses and entrepreneurs to access the support they need. We have cut corporation tax to the lowest rate in the G20, we have made changes to business rates worth over £13 billion by 2023, we have introduced a £1 million annual investment allowance, and we are helping exporters by increasing UK Export Finance's direct lending capacity by up to £2 billion.

Sir David Amess: Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the BEST enterprise growth centre at Hythe in Southend, which provides free advice for businesses to grow and prosper, and has so far helped over 3,000 businesses in Essex, through start-up centres, to increase their profitability?

Mr Hammond: I am pleased to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the BEST growth hub on its support for Essex businesses. That is a clear example of how England's 38 growth hubs are helping businesses to start up and grow. Businesses in Essex, like those across England, will benefit from the further measures that I have announced on management training, mentoring and local peer networks, which will help businesses to grow by learning from our leading business schools and companies, as well as from one another.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Shops in Grimsby tell me that the biggest issue they face at the moment is shoplifting and antisocial behaviour, and local residents tell me that they are too scared to go into the town centre. We need to make sure that we have a strong police presence. What assurance can the Chancellor give me that the additional pension costs that Humberside police is facing will be covered by central grant funding, to prevent the loss of 200 additional police officers?

Mr Hammond: As I have told the House before, the 2016 pension changes were notified to Departments in 2016 in their settlement letters and have been factored into departmental calculations since then. The 2018

increases in public sector pension contributions will be covered in full by the Treasury in 2019-20 and then looked at in the round in the spending review.

16. [907485] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am grateful for the Chancellor's recognition in his Budget speech of the work that the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking has done on dispute resolution between banks and businesses. The Financial Conduct Authority's report into that matter recommends "a role for both an extended ombudsman service and a tribunal, as they meet different needs."

Will my right hon. Friend give further consideration to the introduction of a tribunal?

Mr Hammond: The Financial Ombudsman Service can make judgments faster and at a lower cost than a tribunal, and the Government therefore think that that is a better way to go than the creation of a tribunal, but I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter in more detail.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The £150 million investment in the Tay cities deal is welcome, but it short-changes my city and the surrounding area by £50 million—the Scottish Government have committed £200 million. Given the serious news of the proposed closure of Michelin in Dundee, with 850 jobs at risk, will the UK Government urgently commit further funding to the Tay cities deal and work constructively with the Scottish Government to protect those jobs?

Mr Hammond: My understanding is that, after negotiations, including negotiations involving the Scottish Government, the Tay cities deal is almost agreed, and we hope to see it signed very shortly. Of course, where there are large-scale redundancies in any area, there are other mechanisms by which we can provide support.

21. [907490] **Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on maintaining entrepreneur's relief. Does he agree that that not only helps to support people starting their own business but sends a strong signal that this Government are on the side of the entrepreneur, the risk taker and social mobility?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said in my Budget speech, after considering representations to scrap entrepreneur's relief, I reached the conclusion that, unless we support entrepreneurs, we will not have a dynamic and vibrant economy that can support our first-class public services. Those two things go hand in hand.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Chancellor aware that the businesses and entrepreneurs I speak to look back fondly to the time of the global economic collapse—not a Labour recession, but a world economic collapse—when a man called Alistair Darling, who was a real Chancellor, led us through that crisis? [Interruption.] At a time when everyone is totally depressed about Brexit, our businesses and entrepreneurs want a real statesman and a real Chancellor to lead this country.

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman's synthetic anger, which I have been enjoying for the best part of 20 years, is always a spectacle worth observing. I thank him for

another episode. If he really thinks that businesses look back fondly to the financial crisis, he needs to get out a bit more.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): In his Budget speech, the Chancellor failed to make one single mention of climate change, yet by scrapping enhanced capital allowances for small and medium-sized enterprises, the Government have again cut vital support for energy efficiency and decarbonisation. Given the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change climate change report and given this Government's support for fracking and their abysmal failure on tidal, onshore wind and solar, do the Conservatives realise that not only will they fail to meet their climate change targets, but they have breached their quota for hot air on this issue?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman might have been too busy preparing his question for today and in the process have missed the industrial energy efficiency fund that we have committed to introduce.

Skills and Training Funding

10. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to provide funding for skills and training. [907478]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): By 2019-20, we will be spending £2.5 billion on apprenticeships in England every year through the apprenticeship levy. In this Budget, we have given employers more flexibility to deploy it as they see best.

Alan Mak: Greater investment in STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—skills is key to boosting employment in our growing digital economy. What support can the Chief Secretary give to ensure more training is available to our next generation of scientists, engineers and tech entrepreneurs?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. We know that people with STEM skills have higher earnings. That is why we put more money into the maths premium last year to encourage more students to study that subject from 16 to 18. This year, we have launched a new programme to enable the better retention of maths and physics teachers in our schools.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): If, as the Chief Secretary says, there is now more money for skills funding, why did not the Chancellor announce in his Budget speech an uplifting of the cap on sixth-form and college funding from £4,000, which is causing real problems?

Elizabeth Truss: What the Chancellor announced in his Budget speech is the fact that we are giving employers more flexibility over apprenticeships, which they have asked for, and we are seeing more and more people going into high-level apprenticeships under this Government.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): West Oxfordshire businesses are thriving, but they are clear that their major challenge is access to people with the right skills. Will the Minister please give an update on the national retraining scheme and how that will help?

Elizabeth Truss: We put £20 million into the national retraining scheme, and I am very much looking forward to visiting my hon. Friend in Oxfordshire to see some of those fantastic businesses in situ.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that two thirds of UK firms have expressed concerns about a skills gap, will the Minister further outline what steps her Department has taken to provide schemes and support to businesses that are willing to take on apprenticeships but have not so far done so?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we want to encourage more small and medium-sized enterprises to take on apprenticeships. That is why we have reduced the level from 10% to 5% for co-investment, which will encourage more small firms to get involved, as well as extending the amount that can be used down the supply chain.

Public Finances

11. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the deficit and improve the public finances. [907480]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The 9.9% of GDP post-war record deficit that we inherited in 2010 is forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility to fall to 1.2% this year and to 0.8% of GDP in 2023-24, the lowest level since the start of the century. The OBR's Budget forecast shows that borrowing will be lower in every year than was the case at the spring statement, and that we are now meeting our two fiscal rules three years early. We continue to be committed to our balanced approach—getting debt down, keeping taxes low, investing in Britain's future and funding our public services, with the spending review to take place next year.

Theresa Villiers: The nature of the economic cycle means that, inevitably, over the next few years there will be a global economic downturn. Can the Chancellor reassure the House that he will always retain sufficient headroom and resilience in the public finances to enable us to respond strongly to such a shock?

Mr Hammond: Yes, and I remind my right hon. Friend that the fiscal targets are set in cyclically adjusted terms, so that in the event of an economic downturn, fiscal space is automatically created. In addition, I have kept a buffer, over and above any cyclical dividend, of £15.4 billion in 2020-21 to allow us firepower should any unexpected events cause headwinds for the economy.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): After the Budget, then, more than 3 million families will still be losing an average of £2,100 a year by transferring to universal credit. With 40% of claimants in debt and 38% in rent arrears, are not the Government simply transferring the nation's debt into the pockets of the poorest families, and what assessment has the Chancellor made of their ability to move into work?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady should not have spoiled it. She was doing very well before she added a further bit that was not required.

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady will have heard the Chief Secretary remind the House earlier that the Resolution Foundation has now identified that, with the additional money we have put into universal credit, the system is now more generous than the legacy system that it replaces. It has a clear incentivisation to work, and those of us on the Government Benches believe that the best way we can support and help and families is to help them into work. That is the sustainable route out of poverty.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Parliament passed legislation in 2016 to save hundreds of millions of pounds each year by limiting public sector exit payments to £95,000. As my right hon. Friend is so keen to improve public finances, why has he not yet implemented that legislation, which would have outlawed the obscene £474,000 exit payment recently announced for the chief executive of Dorset County Council, with many similar payouts to follow?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend raises a perfectly legitimate question. This is a complicated area. We are making progress on it and we hope and expect to be able to make an announcement shortly.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Just as the Chancellor's claims to end austerity already lie in tatters, so do his claims of fiscal prudence, given the Institute for Fiscal Studies' assessment that the Chancellor took a bit of a gamble with this Budget. Does he agree with the Father of the House that the Budget was based on an

“unexpected surprise”,

and that,

“news about...tax revenues recently may not last”—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2018; Vol. 648, c. 1099.]?

If so, how worried is he about Standard & Poor's warnings about the potential for recession if we leave the EU without a deal?

Mr Hammond: The Opposition try to have it all ways. Look, the truth is that our remarkable record in creating jobs—3.3 million new jobs in this country since 2010—forecast by the OBR to continue over the next four years, has led to a boom in fiscal revenues, which we have been able to deploy. The Budget that I delivered to the House last Monday shows debt falling in every year, the deficit falling in every year, and both of those metrics lower today than they were forecast to be at the spring. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) says, “Inequality up,” but unfortunately for him, he is wrong. Inequality in this country is lower now than it was under the last Labour Government.

Infrastructure: South-West

12. **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What steps he is taking to provide funding for infrastructure in the South West. [907481]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): Plymouth and the West of England Combined Authority will benefit from the £2.5 billion transforming cities fund extended in the Budget. Cornwall will receive £79 million towards the A30 St Austell link road, which my hon. Friend campaigned for.

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for that answer, but Cornwall relies on its only mainline rail link through south Devon, and it is well documented that it is very vulnerable to adverse weather. The Budget Red Book contained a reference to improving that rail link, but some in the south-west have doubted the Government's commitment to it. Can the Minister confirm that the Government are committed to improving that railway, and that we now need Network Rail to get on with it?

Robert Jenrick: Protecting the line at Dawlish is a national priority. South-west Conservative MPs, including my hon. Friend, pressed that upon the Chancellor and me, and we restated our commitment in the Budget to finding a permanent solution that delivers super-resilience at Dawlish.

One Yorkshire Devolution Deal

13. **John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on the proposed One Yorkshire devolution deal. [907482]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I have regular conversations with my counterparts in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, including on the One Yorkshire proposals. We have said that we will respond to any proposals that we receive in good faith, assuming that they are able to provide for economic growth in a clearly defined economic geography.

John Grogan: Does the Minister agree that the detailed economic case for One Yorkshire devolution, presented to the Treasury and to other Ministries by no fewer than 18 Yorkshire councils, many of them Conservative, is worthy of detailed discussion between the Government and local authorities, as specified in the legislation?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed this matter. I have met stakeholders from the region on a number of occasions, including Councillor Judith Blake from Leeds. We have said that to progress this matter we want to see the Sheffield city region become fully functioning and the Mayor, who is now elected, able to conduct his duties. We think that is a reasonable way forward, so that local people in that area are not let down.

Renewable Energy

15. **Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of public funding for renewable energy since 2010. [907484]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Due to the Government's support, we have already seen the cost of renewables fall significantly. Offshore wind has halved in price since 2015 and the costs of other technologies are also falling.

Seema Malhotra: It is very surprising that the Chancellor's Budget did not make any new commitments on renewable energy. Even worse is the fact that that comes with slashed grants for electric vehicles and plans to remove

support for small-scale renewables. This was described by RenewableUK as a major blow to the sector. It also comes with the pursuit of fracking at any cost. On one of the greatest challenges we face today—clean, low carbon sustainable energy sources—why are the Government rolling back the clock?

Elizabeth Truss: Since 2010, we have reduced carbon dioxide emissions across the economy by 26% and across electricity generation by 47%. We are making sure that those technologies are competitive, so that they work well in the market, and so that we deliver lower prices to customers and lower levels of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere.

Tax Avoidance and Evasion

18. **Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (Saffron Walden) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle tax avoidance and evasion. [907487]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government have brought in over 100 measures to clamp down on avoidance, evasion and non-compliance since 2010, protecting and yielding over £200 billion in revenue.

Mrs Badenoch: Some 19% of all businesses declared deliberate tax defaulters by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs this year were from the restaurant and takeaway business. Does the Minister agree that companies in this industry that do pay their taxes, such as the Chesterford Group in my constituency, do not have a level playing field?

Mel Stride: I cannot comment on a specific taxpayer, but I can say that HMRC does publish quarterly the names of those who deliberately default on taxation, as a method of bringing them forward to settle with HMRC. We have brought in a further 21 measures in the Budget to raise a further £2 billion by 2023-24 by clamping down on avoidance and evasion.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): How does a £200 million cut, announced in the Red Book, help with HMRC's collection of taxes?

Mel Stride: HMRC has had an additional investment since 2010 of £2 billion. It has 28,000 full-time equivalent staff engaged in the mission of tax inspection and clamping down on avoidance and evasion. We have one of the lowest tax gaps in the entire world, at 5.7%. That is far lower than was the case under the previous Labour Government. In fact, if we were stuck with the poor levels of tax collection under the Labour party, we would lose revenues equivalent to employing every policeman and policewoman in England and Wales.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) is a very lucky boy today.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Topical question number one, Sir.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is getting ahead of himself. The reason why he is a lucky boy is that he is going to get two bites of the cherry. What he should now say is—mouth it after me—"Question 19".

Sir Edward Leigh: So what are the Government doing to reduce—

Mr Speaker: No, no. I realise the hon. Gentleman has only been here for, I think, 35 years, but what he has to say is, "Question 19".

SMEs: Tax

19. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to reduce the amount of tax payable by small and medium-sized enterprises. [907488]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): My hon. and gallant Friend always gets there in the end and in my experience he is very good when he does. I can tell him that we do a great deal to support small businesses. We announced our one third reduction in the small business rate. Our tax rate for small business is declining. It is now 19% and it will fall to 17% in the next couple of years.

Sir Edward Leigh: Can the Minister assure me that by the end of this Parliament small businesses in Gainsborough will be paying less tax than they are now?

Mel Stride: I can assure my hon. and gallant Friend that the smaller retailers in his constituency will be paying about a third less in rates. He will see a further diminution of the general corporation tax rate. It was 28% in 2010 and it is now coming down to 17%. Of course, they will also benefit from other measures, such as the freezing of fuel duty, which will help many small businesses.

Topical Questions

T1. [907491] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure economic stability and the continued prosperity of the British people, and I will do so by building on the plans set out in last week's Budget. This is a Budget that supports our vital public services, such as the NHS, invests in Britain's future, keeps taxes low and continues to reduce the nation's debt. It is a Budget that shows that the hard work of the British people is paying off and that austerity is finally coming to an end. We have turned an important corner in this country and a bright, prosperous future is within our grasp.

Mr Speaker: Hopelessly long.

Sir Edward Leigh: As our economy is cyclical and sooner or later there will be another recession, will the Chancellor take this opportunity to deny the claim that by spending an extra £30 billion by 2023, we are going to be taking out of the economy exactly the same proportion as Gordon Brown did at the end of his chancellorship? Will the Chancellor assure me that we remain as committed as ever to fixing the roof while the sun shines and that he has a firm plan to reduce the debt?

Mr Hammond: Yes, I have a very firm plan to reduce the debt. My hon. Friend will see from the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast published last week that the debt will fall from over 85% of GDP to below

75% by the end of the forecast period. But my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I have decided to take a balanced approach, where reducing the debt has to take place in tandem with keeping taxes low, supporting our public services and, probably most important of all, investing capital in Britain's future.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): There are reports that the Cabinet has been briefed on a possible deal with the EU that includes a customs union that can be ended through a review mechanism at any stage in the future. So after two years of uncertainty, of business holding back investment and of jobs relocated abroad, we are now presented with a fudge that gives no guarantees on a long-term basis of our future trading relationship. Investment in our economy today is the lowest in the G7 and falling. If a customs union with our largest trading partner can be ripped up at any stage, how does the Chancellor expect businesses to have the confidence to bring forward the long-term investment needed to support our economy?

Mr Hammond: That was a perfectly reasonable—if a little long—question, but unfortunately, it was built on a false premise. The Cabinet has received no such briefing.

John McDonnell: Well, it is interesting, because the Chancellor knows then that a free trade agreement without a permanent customs union will not protect our economy from the damage that a hard Brexit would cause, so to guarantee frictionless supply chains, we need a secure, permanent customs union with the EU. Businesses and workers are looking to the Chancellor to fight their corner, so will he join me and MPs across the House in calling on the Prime Minister to do the sensible thing and agree a permanent customs union that protects our economy, and yes, the livelihoods of millions of our people?

Mr Hammond: The right hon. Gentleman and I do not share very much in common, but we do share the desire to maintain frictionless trade between the UK and the European Union to protect British businesses and British jobs. His preferred way of achieving that is through a customs union; the Prime Minister has set out an alternative plan that will ensure that we can continue to have frictionless trade with the European Union. I prefer the Prime Minister's plan.

T2. [907492] **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): Four thousand current and former employees of Roadchef, many of whom are elderly, including some 150 who worked at Sandbach services, will be pleased that there has been success in their campaign for money that they are entitled to from HMRC, but can Ministers provide an assurance from HMRC that there will be no tax payable on these moneys going in or out of the Roadchef employee benefit trust?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I obviously cannot comment on the specific case of the Sandbach services employees, but I assure my hon. Friend that I have looked extensively at this matter and consulted various Members across both sides of the

House. I am satisfied that HMRC in general has conducted itself appropriately over this whole issue, but I am happy to meet her to discuss the specific point that she raised.

T3. [907493] **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): There were over 9,000 words in the Chancellor's Budget speech, but not one mention of Nottingham or the east midlands. In the east midlands, we have multiple investable schemes that will drive growth in our region. When will the Treasury back the east midlands?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The hon. Gentleman obviously missed the Chancellor's speech at the Conservative party conference, in which he announced the creation of a special area of economic activity at Toton, just south of Nottingham, which we expect to become one of the UK's leading areas of economic growth. We also announced in the Budget an increase in the transforming cities fund, which will directly benefit Nottingham.

T5. [907495] **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): I welcome the announcement in last week's Budget of investment in our high streets, which will be particularly welcome in Bedworth in my constituency. I had meetings with local businesses recently on this very issue, and particularly on their frustrations at the lack of ambition of the local borough council. Can the Minister advise how local councils such as Nuneaton and Bedworth can best take advantage of this excellent opportunity?

Mel Stride: I recognise the huge amount of work my hon. Friend has put into the issue of revitalising our high streets, and his representations to me and other colleagues. The £675 million future high streets fund will be bid for on a competitive basis through local authorities, so it is very important that all Members encourage their local authorities to come forward with their bids.

T4. [907494] **Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The co-operative movement in the UK has a turnover of £36 billion. Given that it employs thousands, and that thousands will benefit as a result of the economic and social benefits that co-operatives bring, why was there no mention of the co-op movement in the Budget?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): As the hon. Gentleman knows, the co-operative movement is very important to our economy; we have met to discuss various aspects of its future. I am happy to meet him again to discuss the matters that he wishes to bring forward.

T7. [907497] **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Does the Budget not demonstrate that we have turned around the economic catastrophe left to us by the Labour party to deliver billions of pounds for public services, and tax cuts for millions of people up and down this country?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. The Government have delivered eight straight years of economic growth, over 3.3 million more people in work, and higher employment in every region and nation of

the United Kingdom. Wages are growing at their fastest pace in almost a decade, and the deficit is down by well over four fifths. In the Budget, we have gone further, cutting taxes and funding our vital public services.

T6. [907496] **James Frith** (Bury North) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Schools are still reeling from the Chancellor's "little extras" quip, while colleges and sixth forms were given no thought at all in the Budget. Further to the letter of 15 October from the Education Committee to the Chancellor, will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury accept our invitation to give oral evidence to our inquiry on school and college funding?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): As the Chancellor pointed out, we have already put an additional £1.3 billion into schools' budgets, which means that they are rising in real terms, and it is entirely proper for Education Ministers to appear in front of the Select Committee to discuss those issues.

T10. [907500] **Mr Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk) (Con): Some people are worried about the end of Help to Buy in five years' time. Given that it is a subsidy on demand, why not soften the blow with a subsidy on supply through a help to build programme, which would help more ordinary people bring forward their own schemes at prices they can afford?

Mr Philip Hammond: I have heard my hon. Friend's representations on behalf of self-builders; twice in one sitting is probably a record. I will treat them as representations for the next fiscal event and will look at them accordingly.

T8. [907498] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Some 37 million packs of medicines are imported each month into the country from the EU, and people are rightly concerned about security of supply next year. The Government have advised the industry to stockpile. Will the Chancellor tell the House how much the Government are paying for that?

Mr Hammond: That is a matter for the Department of Health and Social Care, and I know that the Health Secretary is in discussion with the pharmaceutical industry. We are supporting the Department with allocations from the £3.5 billion I have allocated for Brexit preparations. We will ensure that adequate supplies of medicines are stockpiled if there is any risk of disruption at the channel ports.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): One way both to reduce the deficit and to deliver a reduction in tax rates would be to do something about stamp duty land tax. Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts show over the scorecard period a £4 billion reduction in stamp duty land tax receipts—down a staggering £800 million since the last forecast in March. Can the Chancellor give me an assurance that the Treasury is actively looking at this issue and designing a solution?

Mr Hammond: What I can do is assure my right hon. Friend that we look actively at all taxes at every fiscal event. He will know that stamp duty land tax has been a

subject of some interest and, indeed, controversy. We do look very carefully at the receipts data, but we also have to look at the distributional impact of different taxes. As my right hon. Friend will understand, doing anything about high rates of stamp duty land tax would have a very uneven distributional impact.

T9. [907499] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Renewable energy developers working on wave and tidal power have presented a proposal for what they call innovation power purchase agreements, a mechanism whereby they might finally get their devices over the line into commercial deployment. Will the Chancellor, or perhaps the Chief Secretary, work with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on a proposal that could allow them and the developers to see the fruition of what could be a very important part of the Government's industrial strategy?

Elizabeth Truss: As part of the spending review, we will look at the most efficient way in which we can meet our carbon targets. I am working closely with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in that regard.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's announcement of £150 million of new money for the Tay cities deal, but may I ask him to direct some of his officials to speak to colleagues in BEIS to establish what support could be given to the devolved Administration and to Michelin, which is to close its tyre factory in Dundee? The closure could mean the loss of 850 jobs, which could not only have an impact on Dundee but cause ripples throughout the region.

Mr Philip Hammond: I am sure that both BEIS and the Department for Work and Pensions are already aware of that very large job loss, and I will ensure that my colleagues are looking at it.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What role, if any, have the readiness for Brexit and resource levels of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs played in influencing the Prime Minister to consider extending the customs transition period?

Mel Stride: HMRC has a central role in ensuring that we are ready for Brexit, specifically in the unlikely event of a no-deal day one scenario. That has included the recruitment of 2,300 additional staff, and we will have an additional 5,000 staff by the end of the year. We are ready, and we will be ready, for wherever this deal lands.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Motorists want to see the earliest possible end to the traffic misery on the A417 caused by the air balloon pinch point. Does my hon. Friend recognise that the Budget, through its extra firepower for roads, provides the best possible platform for such a vital scheme?

Robert Jenrick: I have met my hon. Friend and his Gloucestershire colleagues to discuss this matter. It was with strategic roads and roundabouts, such as the air

balloon roundabout, in mind that we made the largest ever investment in our strategic road network. Decisions on specific roads will be made next year.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I welcome HMRC's rather belated decision to return tax wrongly paid by the Roadchef employee benefit trust. It is clearly now necessary to honour previously made commitments in respect of tax implications for beneficiaries. Did HMRC use its discretion to make that payout, and, if so, on what basis?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman and I have had a number of discussions about this issue, both formal and informal, and have engaged in an Adjournment debate on it. I have always been very attentive to his specific questions, but if he would like me to meet him again to discuss the issue further, I should be more than happy to do so.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Previous independent assessments of the impact of air passenger duty have shown that it costs the economy more than it brings into the Exchequer. May I have an assurance that the Treasury will do its own modelling to ensure that this island trading nation can compete better in the future?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes. The Treasury regularly receives independent assessments that tell us that taxes cost us more than they deliver to us, and I can assure my hon. Friend that the Treasury always does its own modelling to reach its decisions.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The Chancellor is aware of the sad news about the Michelin plant in my constituency; its potential closure in 2020 would mean the loss of 850 jobs. It is early days, but may I ask the Chancellor for a straightforward commitment to work constructively with the Scottish Government and others—who are meeting representatives of the business today—to do whatever he can to preserve quality manufacturing on the site, and to protect and preserve as many jobs as possible?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Of course we will work constructively with the Scottish Government to ensure that we can mitigate in every way possible the impact on the community of these very large numbers of job losses.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I do not think we have heard from Mr Knight.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

This morning, the European Automobile Manufacturers Association released research demonstrating that all 270 new-generation diesel vehicles tested to date are below the emissions threshold on the road. In the light of this, will the Treasury team meet me and other colleagues to discuss how we can construct a road tax system that promotes clean diesel over old diesel and protects 9,000 jobs in my constituency?

Robert Jenrick: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend, who I know is a champion for Jaguar Land Rover. I hope it will reassure him to know that I will discuss these issues with the chief executive of that company later today.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If we took every single person who has suffered a major traumatic brain injury—for instance, from a car crash—from needing four people in order to be able to wash, clothe and look after themselves to needing just one, and thereby leading a more independent life, we could save the taxpayers £5 billion a year. May I meet with the Chancellor to explain all this?

John Glen *rose*—

Chris Bryant: With the Chancellor.

John Glen: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have a previous interest in this subject. I commend the excellent work he has done with the all-party group on acquired brain injury, and am happy to meet him to discuss the matters he has raised.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the first of the two urgent questions, I remind the House that the sitting will be suspended at 1.45 pm and will resume at 3.15 pm. That is to accommodate the fact that significant numbers of colleagues are going to the commemorative Remembrance service in St Margaret's church. It might be useful for colleagues to know that both urgent questions will therefore finish by 1.45 pm.

Police Pension Liabilities

12.41 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if he will make a statement on police pension liabilities and the National Police Chiefs Council's threatened legal action against the Government.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I am sure the whole House agrees about the need for our public sector pensions to be properly funded and affordable for the long term. That is why the Government announced changes to the discount rate that applies to those pensions at both Budget 2016 and Budget 2018. These changes, I should stress, are based on the latest independent Office for Budget Responsibility projections for future GDP growth.

This change will lead to increased employer pension contribution costs for all unfunded public sector pensions, including those of police forces. Budget 2018 confirmed that there will be funding from the reserve to pay for part of the increase in costs for public services, including the police in 2019-20. My officials are in discussions with representatives from the NPCC and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners to discuss how this additional funding will be distributed. Funding arrangements for 2020-21 onwards will be discussed as part of the spending review.

As the Chancellor made clear at the Budget, the Government recognise the pressures on the police, including from the changing nature of crime, and we will—Home Office and Treasury Ministers working together—review police spending power ahead of announcing the police funding settlement for 2019-20 in early December.

Louise Haigh: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

In a written ministerial statement in September, the Government thought it reasonable to try to sneak out the proposed changes to public sector pensions. The NPCC has said that this liability, dropped on police chiefs at the last minute, will cost £165 million in the next financial year, rising to £420 million in 2020-21. This could amount to the loss of a further 10,000 police officers. Despite what the Prime Minister has repeatedly, and shamefully, told this House—that the police have known about these changes “for years”—police chiefs issued a public statement rebuking the Prime Minister and saying the first notification they had came in September 2018. So quite apart from the fact that the Prime Minister should apologise to the House, the Government should apologise to the police for such rank incompetence. Is it any wonder that police chiefs are now taking the unprecedented step of taking the Government to court?

Without the Minister giving a firm commitment today that his Government will meet the full cost of these pension changes, it is inevitable that further officers will be lost next year. West Midlands police is preparing an emergency budget that could cost 500 police officers; the figure is £43 million for the Metropolitan police alone. Will the Minister commit today—not in the comprehensive spending review in a year's time, and not in the police grant next month—to meeting the £165 million cost that the Government have left the police to pick up

next year? Police forces need this security urgently. If he will not, does he accept that this will mean officer numbers being cut to the lowest levels on record?

Does the Minister further realise that the pension changes will cancel out the council tax rise that hard-pressed ratepayers have coughed up this year? Is that what he meant when he said that the precept rise would enable forces to spend on their local priorities? Will he confirm whether the Home Office has conducted any analysis of whether the police can afford to meet these changes, given that he has been telling them repeatedly to spend their reserves? How many police forces will go bankrupt as a result of these changes?

The police and our communities are facing twin crises. The surge in violent crime is devastating lives, and the crisis in police finances is leaving the police unable to respond. The Government's serious violence taskforce has met just four times since its creation. That is a shameful response to the horrifying rise in violence, but the Government are not just complacent; they are actively making it harder for the police to keep us safe. It is time for Ministers to step back from the brink, apologise for the risks they have taken with our safety and give the police the resources they need to fight crime.

Mr Hurd: It would have been nice to hear from the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson some commitments or some recognition of the need to keep our public sector pensions properly funded and long-term affordable. I am sure that other Labour MPs will want to take the opportunity to make that clear to their constituents. That was one of the most disgraceful pieces of shroud-waving that I have heard, even from Labour Members. The hon. Lady knows the reality, because I am sure that she has studied Budget 2016 in detail. In it, the Treasury made it quite clear that there were likely to be changes to the discount rate that applies to public pensions.

What has changed is the independent Office for Budget Responsibility's projection for GDP growth, which changes the discount rate that applies. That is a change, and I fully accept—the hon. Lady has heard me say this publicly—that it has resulted in an unbudgeted cost for the police of around £165 million next year. That is a serious issue—she has heard me say that publicly as well. I set that alongside other serious issues facing the police, such as the significant shift in demand and pressure on them, which we have recognised. We are working extremely hard with the police and the Treasury to find a solution.

What I would say to the hon. Lady is that, as a result of the action that this Government have taken on the economy, we are now in much better shape to resume our investment in policing. That is why, in this year, we have taken steps that have resulted in £460 million-worth of additional public money going into our policing system—the police settlement that Labour MPs voted against. We are on track to invest more as a country in our policing than promised under Labour, so she needs to be very careful about what she says about projections in this context.

Finally, as a London MP, I take offence at the hon. Lady's statement about complacency on serious violence. She knows, because I know how seriously she takes this job, that we are dealing with one of the most serious challenges that this society faces. We have beaten it before, 10 years ago, but we know that it is not simple.

[Mr Hurd]

We know that it involves complex, long-term work, which is why, under this Home Secretary, our ambition has been increased so that there will be more money for policing and more powers for the police coming through in the Offensive Weapons Bill. There is almost a quarter of a billion pounds of public money being committed to critical work on prevention and early intervention to ensure that we get the right balance between robust policing and really good prevention and intervention work over time. She knows, or should know, that we cannot police our way out of this system. We are addressing a very serious challenge with the right level of ambition and partnership with the police and the police and crime commissioners.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Some Members across the House are hoping that December's police funding settlement may bring good news about dealing with unfair damping, which affects 19 police forces. However, if there is good news about damping, there would be concern that that may be counteracted by pension costs. Is my right hon. Friend able to say anything about that?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend has been tireless in making the case for more funding for Bedfordshire police, and I am working hard with my colleagues at the Treasury and with officials to look again at the 2019-20 funding settlement as an opportunity to find a solution to the pensions issue. However, the path that we set this time last year has meant that almost every police force in the country is now recruiting additional officers, which is what we and the public we serve want.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Affairs Committee's recent report pointed out that recorded crime has gone up by around a third, but the number of charges and arrests is down by a quarter, which reflects the real challenges that the police face. The Budget provided no additional money for mainstream policing across the country, and police chiefs are warning about a potential reduction in the number of police officers of 10,000 if additional money for pensions is not provided. What does the Minister have to say, not to MPs, but to those chief constables about their warnings? Will he provide extra pension money in the settlement before Christmas?

Mr Hurd: I hope that the right hon. Lady welcomed the news in the Budget about additional money for counter-terrorism policing and, crucially, for mental health. Through the work of the Home Affairs Committee and the many conversations that we have had with the police, she will know about the mental health demand on our police system, and that additional money must work to reduce demand on our police.

Given the right hon. Lady's experience as a former Secretary of State, she will also know that the Budget is not where local police money is allocated. It is settled in the police funding settlement, and as the Chancellor and I have made clear, that deal is not settled. Work is ongoing between the Home Office and the Treasury to look again at what I indicated last year, and I will come to the House in early December with the results of that work.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I give my right hon. Friend every support in his negotiations with the Treasury. In addition to using reserves, funds must be found for pension liability above and beyond an increase to the police grant in December so that frontline officer numbers can rise.

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for that constructive intervention. We share a desire to continue down the path we set, and as a result of the action that we have taken, almost every single police force in the country is now recruiting additional officers. We do not want to go backwards. We must solve the pension issue, and we are working closely with our Treasury colleagues to do just that.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the pension issue comes at a time that is not without problems that already exist. My constituency has seen an alarming rise in gun and knife crime, and a bus service was withdrawn last week after hooligans threw bricks at buses. The Minister needs to resolve the situation quickly; otherwise we run the risk of losing control of the streets.

Mr Hurd: I will resist any such scaremongering on this issue, but I do not need any lectures about the demand and pressures on the police following my conversations with all ranks of police leadership and with Members from both sides of the House. We are all in the same place, and even the Chancellor recognised here at the Dispatch Box the pressures on the police. We are trying to structure the right response to those pressures, and we are doing so from a position of growing economic confidence, which is in stark contrast to what the situation would be if Labour was in power.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us see whether we can get everyone in by 1.15 pm, which is when we need to move on.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I fully support the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg). Will the Minister assure us that he will look carefully to ensure that the promised increases in police officers in Staffordshire and elsewhere are taken forward, because council taxpayers were promised that back in April?

Mr Hurd: I fully understand my hon. Friend's point. If elected representatives have made commitments to their public, I quite understand the need to stand by them—we all do. As I said, the steps that I took last year, both in the 2018-19 funding settlement and what I indicated for 2019-20, have resulted in exactly what I wanted, which is that police and crime commissioners up and down the country are starting to recruit again. I want that to continue.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Humberside's police and crime commissioner has delved into reserves to mitigate the loss of 440 police officers over the past eight years. He has just recruited an extra 250 police officers. To how many of those should he hand a P45?

Mr Hurd: To be honest, I am delighted that reserves are being put to good use because, in March 2018, Humberside was sitting on £28.9 million of public money, almost 17% of its annual budget. One of the things the Government have done is to force PCCs to be more transparent about their use of reserves, and I do not resile from that at all. I stress again that we recognise the problem, and there is determination and extremely hard work between the Treasury and the Home Office to find a solution in the police funding settlement in early December.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Police finances are incredibly stretched. Dumping £165 million of pension liabilities will be the straw that breaks the camel's back. I offer the Minister my 100% support in getting the Treasury to think again.

Mr Hurd: I am grateful, as always, for my hon. Friend's support. He knows from our previous exchanges that the Government recognise there is a problem in how stretched the police system is, and we took steps last year that led to more money going into the system, which is welcome, even though it was opposed by Labour. He knows my determination to find a solution not just for the pensions issue but for the stretch on the police. There is a need to increase police capacity.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): In my constituency, a 15-year-old child, Jay Hughes, was murdered on Thursday, another tragic victim of knife crime. Then, on Sunday, another young man was stabbed to death in Anerley, just metres from where teenager Michael Jonas was killed last year. This is a crisis. When so many lives are being lost on the streets of London, surely we should be funding the Met properly, not cutting its budget. When will the Government put in place a proper plan to protect our communities? I listened to the Minister's answer to the urgent question with dismay. What does he have to say to the families affected by these senseless killings?

Mr Hurd: What I have to say to the families, and I speak as a London MP, is that the whole country and the whole Government are absolutely appalled and shocked by what is happening on the streets of London. It is not just a London issue, as the hon. Lady well knows; it is a national challenge. We are absolutely serious about getting on top of this, and she will know that we have been here before, 10 years ago, at a time when the public finances were in a completely different place and when people were not asking, "Where are the police?" This is long-term, complex work, and we have to bear down on it.

The hon. Lady asked about funding for the Met police, and there is an additional £100 million going into the Met this year as a result of actions that we and the Mayor are taking. London has over one and a half times the national average for funding per head of population and for police officers per head of population.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: As he is a distinguished former broadcaster, I am sure the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) can demonstrate his mastery of the one-short-sentence question.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is reasonable to make extra provision, but can something also be done about the Labour West Midlands police and crime commissioner sitting on £100 million in reserves?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes a serious point. Across the police system, reserves have grown by hundreds of millions of pounds since 2011, at a time when all the public were hearing from the police system was, "We need more money." One of the things we have done is to say, "Yes, you need reserves, but you need to account for how big those reserves are and what you intend to do with them." That goes for the West Midlands police and crime commissioner, who has, I think, increased reserves by £20 million.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Police chiefs say that filling this pension deficit could cost up to 10,000 police officers. Does the Minister agree?

Mr Hurd: No, I do not. I think the number is exaggerated, which is not unusual for the police. I recognise that there is an unbudgeted cost, and I have given an undertaking to work very closely with the Treasury and with the Home Secretary to find a solution to both this and the additional resources and capacity needed to meet the very real demand pressures on the police.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): With Sussex police having welcomed 150 extra staff at the end of October, funded by council tax increases, will my right hon. Friend work with me and Katy Bourne to ensure that the police force has all the resources at its disposal to carry on increasing police numbers?

Mr Hurd: The public's safety is the priority of this Government. We have made clear the priority we attach to police funding, and the Home Secretary has made his priority clear personally. We are absolutely determined to make sure the police have the resources they need. As we heard the Chancellor say in answer to questions before this, we are in an increasingly strong position because of the recovery of the economy, and austerity is ending, which means that the Conservatives, uniquely as a party, can take these steps—that is in stark contrast to the fiscally incredible Labour party.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Government Red Book says there will be £10.8 billion for the Home Office this year and £10.7 billion for it next year—that is £100 million less. Is the Minister going to revise that figure, or is he going to take that money from somewhere else?

Mr Hurd: As I have made clear, the next step in Parliament debating and discussing police funding is the 2019-20 funding settlement. As I did last year, I intend to come the House in early December to set out this Government's proposals, which are being worked through with our Treasury colleagues as we speak.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will be aware that not all the demand on the police is based on crime. What work will he be doing with police and crime commissioners, including Devon and Cornwall's, to look at how that can be used to help release more resources for fighting crime?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. Anyone who speaks to the police finds a consistent message from across the system: a growing frustration about the amount of time our police are spending supporting people on mental health issues—the estimate across the system is at least 25%. Some of that I would class as core policing but some of it is not, so we are working with PCCs to get the evidence base and establish what is good practice in terms of triaging some of this demand. Part of what I welcome in the Budget is the additional investment that this Government can now make in local mental health, and I am determined to ensure that one dividend from that investment is reduced demand on policing.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): In the past five weeks, three youths were stabbed, two fatally, and one 20-year-old man was shot dead in Bedford. Will the Minister support the bid from Bedfordshire's police chief constable and the PCC for emergency extra funding from the police special grant before another young person is killed on our streets?

Mr Hurd: I was delighted to see the hon. Gentleman take part in the cross-sector summit we had on serious violence in Bedfordshire. What I said then was clear: we have received an application for exceptional funding and we expect to take a decision on that by the middle of the month. Our ability to meet that comes from the fact that we increased the contingency pot available in the Home Office for those situations, in a funding settlement that he and other Labour MPs voted against.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Just last Friday, I was out and about with the police in Long Eaton in my constituency, along with the Minister. Will he reassure me that resources will be provided to continue the vital work we saw at first hand being carried out in my constituency?

Mr Hurd: I know my hon. Friend thoroughly enjoyed her visit, and I repeat what I have said to other colleagues: we are taking steps in the right direction. The right direction is providing the resources for our police forces to increase their capacity and continue the process of recruiting the additional officers that we and the public want to see. We can do that because we are in a stronger economic position. My intention is to come to the House with the funding settlement in early December to update the House on our plans for next year.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The House will have noticed that the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) has perambulated. He was over there!

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I am trying to get your attention, Mr Speaker. What does the Minister suggest Gwent police do: cut 100 police officer jobs or make local precept payers make up the difference?

Mr Hurd: Gwent was the first police force I visited, and I am well aware of some of the pressures on the force and some of the excellent work it is doing, not least in pursuing exploiters of children. I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that Gwent is absolutely the outlier

in the reserves it holds; it sits on £56 million-worth of public money as reserves, which is a stunning 46.3% of its funding. I think the people of Gwent deserve a clear explanation of how that public money is going to be used to support their local police service.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister will be aware that Humberside police has recruited more than 200 officers over the past couple of years. A threat to further recruitment or to our police community support officers due to increased pension contributions is now a real possibility. Will he assure me that he will work with me and other colleagues in the force area to ensure that that recruitment is not threatened?

Mr Hurd: I do not want to do anything that jeopardises the recruitment of police officers and the progress that we are making in that context—I have made that very clear. I have also made it clear that it is my intention to work very closely with colleagues from all parts of the House to make sure that we have a proper understanding of what is going on force by force. My main point is that we are able to make progress because of the progress that we are making on the economy, and that is progress that would be jeopardised by the Labour party.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): The number of police officers in Durham has been cut by 400 since 2010. That is not an exaggeration; that is a fact. These changes to the pension mean that another 30 officers will have to go and that there will have to be an increase in the precept by £12 for homes in band D. Will that not be perceived as a local tax for the Treasury and as incompetence by the Treasury?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman's intervention gives me the opportunity again to place on the record the admiration of the Government for the performance of Durham police, which is an outstanding force. Against the context of reduced resources, it shows what it is possible to achieve. I understand the point he is making and I return to what I was saying, which is that we are working through the issue and I will come back to the House in early December with what I hope will be a solution.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Essex, 150 additional officers are making a real difference in the fight against crime. Will the Minister work with the Treasury and reassure our excellent police, crime and fire commissioner, Roger Hirst, that this actuarial change to pension liabilities will not hit our frontline policing?

Mr Hurd: I am sure that my hon. Friend will share the determination of the Government to do the right thing by public pensions and to make sure that they are properly funded. What the Treasury is doing is as a result of independent advice, and its approach is the right one, but there is a recognition of the difficulty that this causes the police at a time when things are already difficult and demanding. I made some comments earlier about possible exaggeration on their part of the problem. I should be more cautious, because there is a very real issue of stretch on police; I just do not happen to believe that there is the loss of officer numbers that they have indicated, not least because I am working very closely to find a solution to that. My hon. Friend can be

assured that we at the Home Office, working closely with the Treasury, are determined to find a solution to this and to come to the House in early December with a police funding settlement that allows us to continue on the track of making sure that our police have the resources that they need in Essex and elsewhere.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I am quite frankly amazed by the language that the Minister is using and by the fact that he told my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) to be careful about what she says. No one in my constituency is telling me to be careful about what I say about knife, gun and gang crime being on the rise. Will he accept that with Liverpool and Merseyside police there are special cases with problems of organised and gang crime, and agree that they will not lose any more money through this Government's incompetence?

Mr Hurd: I absolutely recognise the spike in serious violence that we are dealing with; it is an unbelievably serious problem that applies not just to London but nationally, and the Government are responding to it. I have one note of caution. It is not my business to give lectures to the Opposition, but the reality is that I have sat here with Labour MPs who, session after session, pop up and down demanding more and more money for policing, but actually, in the Labour manifesto, the shadow Front-Bench team committed £300 million additional funding to the police, which has been increased by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley to £780 million over this Parliament, whereas this Government have taken steps to put £460 million into the system in this year alone.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): From my discussions with frontline police, I know that the one thing they value above all else is the protection of their pensions. Will my right hon. Friend make sure that, in discussions about funding, the pension for frontline police officers is fully protected?

Mr Hurd: Yes, and that is absolutely the underlying motivation of what the Treasury has announced.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The police pension deficit is in no small part due to this Government's policies of forcing experienced officers into early retirement and reducing the number of current serving officers by 21,000. Should the Government not shoulder the responsibility for the impact on the contributions that are required?

Mr Hurd: No, the proposed adjustments to the discount rates are independent advice based on adjustments to projected growth rates of the economy—growth rates that I would hope will be significantly higher than they would under a Labour Government.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): This is an issue that I have discussed with both my police and crime commissioner and my chief constable. Understandably, there is some concern. Will the Minister reassure them that he will work closely with police forces to fully understand the impact that this change will have and take any action necessary to protect vital frontline services?

Mr Hurd: I fully give that undertaking. We are working very closely with the chiefs and the police and crime commissioners to understand the implications, force by force, so that we get a real sense of the impact, rather than the one dominating the headlines. I can also give the assurance, as I have repeatedly today, that we are working closely with colleagues in the Treasury to find a solution. I look forward to coming to the House in early December with the result of that work.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Owing to Government cuts, in West Yorkshire we have nearly 1,000 fewer uniformed police officers on our streets. As a former police employee for a decade, I know at first hand the impact that this is having on our communities. Will the Minister reassure me that there will be no further cuts to police numbers in Dewsbury and West Yorkshire?

Mr Hurd: I have been very clear that what I set out last year enabled police forces up and down the country to start recruiting officers again, and I want that to continue. I ask the hon. Lady to support us in holding the PCC to account for holding £72.7 million of public money—almost 18% of funding—in reserves. I am sure that her constituents will want to know how that money is going to be spent to benefit the local force.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): West Midlands police estimates that, if these changes go ahead in their current form, they will cost the force more than £22 million over the next two years, and the loss of hundreds of officers on top of the 2,000 who have already gone since 2010. The reserves that have been mentioned are already being used to fund current spending and will disappear by 2020. Does the Minister agree that it would be intolerable for the public to have to put up with the loss of hundreds more officers?

Mr Hurd: I have engaged closely with the West Midlands police and crime commissioner and the chief constable about some of the challenges facing the force, and these are real. They know that it is my intention to work through the issue and come to the House in early December with a funding settlement that works. We are working very closely with the police to build the evidence base for the Treasury's comprehensive spending review, which the right hon. Gentleman knows is a major event in shaping police budgets for the next few years.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Following on from my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), I want to share a local teacher's perspective on the losses:

"Last night I got that call that no one prepares you for...I'd just got home...it was just after seven and my own children were in the bath, 'Sorry to bother you at home but can you talk?' my headteacher on the other end of the line, her voice breaking in that way a person's voice breaks slightly when they are trying their very best to remain strong even though all they want to do is cry. All I heard was 'multiple...stabbing...murder scene...and the name Jai.' This was a boy who I had known from the age of 8 and was now 15 and fighting for his life. An hour and a half later I heard the words 'I'm really sorry but he's gone.' I broke down and cried. All I thought was how could this have happened?"

When can we talk about addressing knife crime and the Government's public health approach?

Mr Hurd: These are terrible losses; each represents a young life cut terribly short. The hon. Lady knows as well as anyone in this House the devastating impact of these losses on friends, families and the broader community. This issue is one of the biggest challenges that we face as a Government and as a society, and everyone has a role to play in addressing it, not least teachers.

I salute the hon. Lady's work and leadership on this matter. She will know from that work that there is no straightforward solution. This is long-term, complex work that requires robust policing and proactive, persistent investment in prevention and early intervention work to steer young people away from that life, those choices and the devastating consequences. I hope that she knows that whatever happens, the Government are absolutely committed to working with partners from both sides of the House and all parts of society to bear down on this problem. We have to end this terrible cycle of violence, but it will be long-term work.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Right across Merseyside, we have similar stories to those of my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). Some 1,600 police staff have gone through Government cuts since 2010. If not funded, this proposal will cost another 300 police officers. Our PCC, Jane Kennedy, talks of these cuts swinging a "wrecking ball" through her budget. She is right to say so, isn't she?

Mr Hurd: I spoke to Jane about this yesterday, when she and other PCCs were in the Home Office talking about the serious violence strategy. She was very clear, as she always is, about the pressures on Merseyside police. It is a consistent refrain across the system. I am very, very aware of it. That is why I took the steps I took last year. They were small steps but they were steps in the right direction. I intend to come to the House again in early December with the next stage in this journey, which is the 2019-20 funding settlement.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that, alongside the cuts that will fall on police, our fire services are also liable for costs in the region of hundreds of millions of pounds? What is he going to do about that?

Mr Hurd: As I said in my statement, this issue affects all public services. We are in conversations with the fire services, as we are with the police. Their funding settlement is in a different cycle from the police, and we will address it in the next CSR.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Despite our having lost 1,000 police officers already, the Home Secretary's plan means that another 350 jobs are under threat in Hampshire. Did the Minister really think that we would not notice this cut in disguise? How many more police officers will be cut in Portsmouth?

Mr Hurd: There is a suggestion from Labour Members that there is some sort of stealth arrangement around this position from the Treasury. That could not be further from the truth. It was signalled very explicitly in the 2016 Budget. What has changed is the discount rate applied, and that is the result of independent advice. I repeat what I have said. I have been to Portsmouth, at

the hon. Gentleman's request, and had many conversations with Hampshire police. It is doing an excellent job under difficult circumstances, and I am determined to do what I can to make sure that it has the resources available to continue to recruit more officers.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Northumbria police have already had budget cuts of over £140 million and lost 1,000 staff. If this goes through, the cost of £11 million over two years could equate to 220 officers lost. Can the Minister assure me and other Members that a way will be found to ensure that this cost is met?

Mr Hurd: Labour MPs, for reasons I understand, keeping popping up talking about cuts. They always ignore the fact that additional money has gone into the police system this year, with millions of pounds more going to Northumbria police—voted against, for reasons I continue not to understand, by the hon. Lady and others. The Government are extremely aware of the pressures on the police system. Another £460 million has gone into that system this year. I will come back to the House in a few weeks' time with our proposals for next year. Meanwhile, we work very closely with the police to make a case at the next spending review for the next stages of resources that our police system needs.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): In the west midlands, murders are up by 33% in the last year and violent crime is up by 20%. Only last week, I went out on patrol with police in the west midlands, and I found that dedicated, devoted public servants are getting desperate because of the lack of support and resources. These cuts will make their position even worse and more demoralising. Will the Minister impress on the Treasury that the cost to the community and, in the long term, to the Treasury, will be far greater if it does not meet these costs?

Mr Hurd: Again, the hon. Gentleman talks about cuts when his force has received additional investment of £9.9 million in a settlement that he voted against. I repeat what I said. I am aware of the demand on the West Midlands police. I am aware that this is an unfunded cost. I am aware that we have to find a solution for it, and that is what I am doing, together with my colleagues at the Treasury.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that violent crime is up in our borough and police numbers are substantially down. When does he expect those trends to reverse?

Mr Hurd: As I have already signalled, the battle against violent crime and the determination we have to bear down on it is long-term work. We were in a similar place 10 years ago, and it took time to bear down on it then, but we know what works, and that is what we are applying.

In relation to the Met police, there is, as I said, an additional £100 million going into the Met this year. They are recruiting hundreds more officers at the moment, and the Met has over one and a half times the national average in terms of police officers per head. It is a stretched force, and a force that we ask to do a great deal. But, again, I hope to come back to the House in early December with our plans for next year.

Assessment and Treatment Units: Vulnerable People

1.19 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the long-term seclusion and deaths of autistic people and people with learning disabilities in assessment and treatment units.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenge): I want to address the care that the NHS and social care system gives to some of the most vulnerable in our society. The millions of people who work in the NHS and social care do so every day with compassion and commitment to care for us all, but sometimes the system gets in the way, and when we see that, it is our task and our duty to change it. That is the case with the care given to people with some of the most significant and complex needs, such as those with learning disabilities and autism who are in-patients in assessment and treatment units and other mental health in-patient settings across the country. The care received by some of the people with the most significant needs quite simply is unacceptable.

With respect to in-patient care in assessment and treatment units and other in-patient settings, I absolutely share Members' concerns about reported deaths, and I want to restate my Department's commitment to reducing the number of preventable deaths among people with a learning disability. NHS England is ensuring that relevant investigatory processes have been followed in respect of each and every one of the cases it has responsibility for, and it is seeking assurance from all relevant clinical commissioning groups that they too have ensured appropriate investigation. As it stands, there is no indication that any of the deaths were untoward or that due process was not followed in every single case, but we are double-checking each and every one.

The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) mentioned seclusion. Like everyone in the House, I have been incredibly moved by reports of the care for Bethany and by the dignity of her dad, Jeremy, who has described the daily battle he has fought to get her the best possible care. It is completely unacceptable for seclusion to be used in this way. Restrictive practices must only ever be used as a last resort, and we must strive to totally eliminate them. With that in mind, the Secretary of State has instituted a serious incident review in Bethany's case, and we will act to ensure that she gets the best possible care for her.

However, this is not just about individual cases; it is about the system. Three years ago, the Government committed to reducing the number of people with learning disabilities or autism detained in mental health hospitals by at least a third. The latest information we have shows that the number is down by around 20%, but that is not nearly enough. Today, 2,315 people with a learning disability and/or autism in England are held in mental health hospitals. I want to see that number drastically reduced, and in the first instance I want us to meet the target of reduction by a third. I want to see everyone who can be cared for with their family living as normal a life as possible.

The Secretary of State has instituted a wide-ranging review into the inappropriate use of prolonged seclusion and long-term segregation as restrictive practices. He has asked the Care Quality Commission to initiate that review immediately, and it will be undertaken in two stages. Furthermore, he has asked the NHS to address this issue in the long-term plan that it is writing for the future of the NHS, and I know that NHS leadership shares our passion to get this right. We will also address the role of local authorities in the social care Green Paper, and both of those will be published before Christmas.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House that this question must finish no later than 1.45 pm, and if people have not got in by then, I am afraid that it is too bad.

Barbara Keeley: I want to put on record my disappointment that the Secretary of State tried to shoehorn an issue of this severity into an NHS policy announcement yesterday, and my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question.

The treatment of people with autism and learning disabilities in assessment and treatment units is nothing short of a national scandal. Six years ago, these units were described by the then chief executive of NHS England and the chief executive of the Care Quality Commission as a model of care that has

"no place in the 21st century".

Seven years after the Winterbourne View scandal, the Government have not rid the country of these units or substantially cut their use. Indeed, as the Minister said, there are still 2,315 people in assessment and treatment units, including 230 children, and the number of under-18s has been increasing.

A Sky News investigation last week revealed that, since 2015, at least 40 people with a learning disability or autism have died while in assessment and treatment units, and nine of those who died were aged 35 or under. Some of the country's most vulnerable people are being exposed to physical abuse in institutions that the chief inspector of mental health services described as being

"in danger of developing the same characteristics that Winterbourne View did."

Can the Minister tell us why the NHS is still sanctioning the use of settings that expose thousands of vulnerable people to abuse, at a cost of half a billion pounds, despite the Government pledging to close them?

The transforming care programme has manifestly failed. What are the Government going to do to ensure funding is available for cash-strapped local councils to pay for community placements with care support for autistic people and people with a learning disability? *The Times* has revealed that the private companies running these units are making millions of pounds out of detaining vulnerable people in unsafe facilities, in one case funnelling £25 million into a secret bank account in Belize. Can the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to immediately stop private companies that have a vested interest in keeping people with learning disabilities in these Bedlam-like conditions from doing that?

[Barbara Keeley]

On Saturday, as the Minister has outlined, the Secretary of State ordered the Care Quality Commission to undertake a thematic review of assessment and treatment units, and he has ordered a serious incident review in the case of one young autistic woman, Bethany. Reviews are not urgent action, there are very many Bethanys trapped in seclusion, and 40 people have died in these units. Will the Minister tell us the timetable for the completion and publication of the CQC review and what urgent action can be taken to free all the young people and adults trapped in these appalling conditions?

Caroline Dinagen: Hon. Members will be very aware of and concerned about the report published this week by University College London. As the hon. Lady said, the report, which was commissioned by the NHS, draws attention to how people with learning disabilities die on average 15 to 20 years sooner than the general population, often for reasons that are not an inevitable consequence of any underlying medical condition. I was reassured that this report shows that programmes and opportunities that Government are putting in place to improve outcomes for people with learning disabilities and autism are addressing some of the concerns. However, I share very strongly her views and the views of this report that there is still much further to go and that now is the time to take action.

As hon. Members will know, the LeDeR report—the learning disabilities mortality review—is looking into the deaths of all people with a learning disability. It published its second annual report in May and in their response in September the Government accepted all the recommendations and included detailed actions for implementing them. NHS England has also committed that the long-term plan for the NHS will include learning disability and autism as one of the four clinical priorities. The long-term plan will also set out the future of the transforming care programme, which the hon. Lady raised.

Government policy on restrictive practices, including seclusion, is to reduce their use. Where such interventions have to be used, they must be a last resort and the intervention should always be represented as the least restrictive option to meet immediate needs. Incidents of restrictive intervention are recorded in the mental health services dataset and this data is published. The Mental Health Act code of practice highlights the particularly adverse impact of seclusion on children and young people. It advises careful assessment and periodic reviews.

I want to turn to the Care Quality Commission review into the inappropriate use of prolonged seclusion and long-term segregation. The first stage of the review will focus on settings that relate most closely to Bethany's circumstances, focusing on people of all ages receiving care on NHS and independent sector wards for people with learning disabilities and/or autism and on child and adolescent mental health wards. That will start immediately and this stage will report in May next year. It is very important that service users, their families and people with lived experience are able to contribute to that. The second stage will report in the winter and will examine other settings in which segregation and prolonged seclusion are used. That stage will include NHS and independent sector mental health rehabilitation wards

and low secure mental health wards for people of all ages, as well as residential care homes designated for the care of people with learning difficulties and/or autism. As I have said, individuals who have been subject to segregation and/or long-term seclusion and their families and carers will be invited to provide evidence, including through interviews. The Care Quality Commission will make recommendations at the end of both stages, which will seek to eliminate system-wide inappropriate use of prolonged seclusion and long-term segregation, and ensure that vulnerable adults and children supported by health and social care are accorded the best possible care.

I should point out that not all the numbers that the hon. Lady spoke about are in separately identified assessment and treatment units. The data reports there being 2,315 in-patients with a learning disability and/or autism in mental health in-patient settings as of September, but some 360 of them were in in-patient settings described as for people with acute learning disabilities

It is important that commissioners should be able to access very high-quality, value-for-money care in their local area, whichever organisation provides it. We recognise the concern that people have expressed about what happens in the transforming care process, but I see it very much as a process and not as an event that will continue. The NHS has transferred more than £50 million to ensure that the right care is put in place in respect of community support, so that people are better cared for when they are out in the community.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does the Minister accept that, fundamentally, far too many people are ending up in terrible conditions in secure settings because of the inadequacy of social care? Will she commit to include in the Green Paper, which is to be brought forward before Christmas, the Green Paper for young adults as well as for older people? Will she absolutely commit to that coming forward before Christmas?

Caroline Dinagen: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to recognise that the cases in which people end up in a long-term residential setting often reveal a failure of joint working—of the wraparound services that people need to keep them in the community. We are looking at working-age adults as part of the social care Green Paper, and it will be published before Christmas.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that I chair the autism commission, which has been looking at health and fake medicine—some serious reports. Will she expand her vision? There is obviously something seriously wrong in the justice system and the fact that police are not trained to recognise and understand someone on the autism spectrum. We need Health and Justice to look into the issue thoroughly, because something is going wrong. We need to train people, and to train them now.

Caroline Dinagen: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point: training is fundamental. We have already accepted the LeDeR review's recommendation that all health and social care staff should have mandatory training on how to care for people with learning disabilities and autism. I would very much like to see that sort of training spread more widely out into society.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Why has the number of children detained in assessment and treatment units more than doubled in the past three years, from 110 to 230?

Caroline Dinagen: That is a really good question. We are looking carefully at how we can support children much better so that they do not go into these sorts of units at all. As I say, it is about the wraparound services that can identify much earlier somebody who might be at a crisis point, and making sure that the care and support is put in place to prevent people from having to be admitted to units of this kind.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the Minister agree that the Care Quality Commission needs to look into the endemic use of force in these institutions, as well as at the use of exclusion? Does she agree that unless and until we find a mechanism to transfer money from spending in these institutions to support in the community, we will never solve this problem?

Caroline Dinagen: The right hon. Gentleman has done so much work on this issue and cares about it intensely. NHS England has transferred more than £50 million, up front, so that clinical commissioning groups that are planning to close beds can start to provide the community provision that is crucial to keeping people well in the community and out of residential settings.

Norman Lamb: And use of force?

Caroline Dinagen: We are absolutely clear that force should not be used at all.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Learning disabilities and autism are no respecters of “devolved” or “reserved”, so will the Minister join me in calling for NHS Scotland and NHS England to work more closely together, pooling resources and expertise, so that all patients needing in-patient care across the United Kingdom can receive the best possible care?

Caroline Dinagen: Yes. I think this speaks to the whole theme of people working together, communicating, collaborating, and putting the care that is needed in place for people when they need it. The ability to work across borders is fundamental to that.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): It was over seven years ago that we came to this House to reflect on the incredibly disturbing “Panorama” footage of what happened at Winterbourne View. We have had countless statements in this House. I obtained an urgent question about this two years ago. We have seen data about the deaths that have occurred, and the fact that the numbers have not reduced. I would echo the question asked by the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone). The number of children in these units has doubled in the period in which the Government told us they would reduce the number by 50%. It is, frankly, a dereliction of duty, and Ministers should be apologising to the people outside this House, in this country, who are detained in those assessment and treatment units.

Can the Minister tell us categorically, and actually answer the question—why has the number of children in these units doubled, and what exactly are she and her Government going to do to ensure that she meets their target of reducing it by 50% by next March?

Caroline Dinagen: I do not see this as a dereliction of duty. I think of the fact that the Secretary of State has triggered a serious incident review into Bethany’s case, that more broadly there is this thematic review, and that we are building the right support by means of the ongoing transforming care process. There is a meeting today, which I have not been able to attend because I had to be here, between all stakeholders in this area, but also with the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care, so that we can work together to ensure that children, above all, are protected.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I welcomed the Secretary of State’s words yesterday, when he made it very clear that he understands that the situation now needs urgent action. My constituent’s daughter died at the age of 25, having been sectioned, living in a padded cell; her weight rose to 26 stone when she was apparently being cared for. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just about money and how we can better spend it; it is about the involvement of families, and a profound cultural change as well?

Caroline Dinagen: Yes. I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. I think that the setting she describes that her constituent was in has now been shut, but the point is well made, and actually it is not just about keeping people safe; it is about treating them with dignity and respect, and providing care that is compassionate.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Several months ago, the Minister met my constituent Isabelle Garnett, whose son Matthew became seriously unwell as a consequence of the treatment he received at St Andrew’s Hospital in Northampton, where Bethany is also receiving such appalling treatment. Matthew’s parents were so worried about his health in St Andrew’s that they thought he would die there. He suffered a broken arm, bruises and other injuries and lost a catastrophic amount of weight.

Matthew is now, thankfully, thriving in a community setting, at significantly less cost than the £12,000 a week that the NHS was spending on completely inappropriate care at St Andrew’s. St Andrew’s is not a fit for purpose location for young people with autism and learning disability. Despite the testimony of Isabelle and many parents like her, why have hospitals like St Andrew’s been allowed to expand, while there has been no expansion of the type of entirely appropriate community provision that is needed?

Caroline Dinagen: The hon. Lady brought Matthew’s mum to meet me and I was very disturbed by the photographs she showed me of how poorly he looked when he was in the St Andrew’s setting, and how much happier and so much better he looks now that he is in the right kind of community provision. It speaks volumes about exactly what we are trying to achieve—to get people out of such settings into the right kind of community provision. That is what this is about, but people can only be moved out of settings like St Andrew’s—which is a place that does require improvement—about which the Care Quality Commission is concerned, when the right provision is available in the community. That is why we are putting the money through NHS England into local provision.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's recent request to the CQC for an immediate review; it is very timely. Can the Minister assure the House, however, that the Government and the NHS are prepared to hear the uncomfortable truth, and change to find the right and compassionate care for those with autism and those with learning difficulties?

Caroline Dinéage: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, which gets to the root of the issue. It is not enough to ask people what they think and set up commissions and reviews; we have to listen to what people are saying but then we have to act. The thematic review the CQC is starting straight away is reporting back in two phases. That is important as it means that, as soon as the first phase comes back, we can start action straight away.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Can the Minister say what resources will be made available to local councils to enable people with learning disabilities and autism to move out of the units as a matter of urgency and into community placements?

Caroline Dinéage: NHS England transferred over £50 million up front to CCGs that are closing beds over the course of the financial year, so that they can invest in community alternatives. In addition, between 2015 and March 2019 it will invest another £50 million in transforming funding to put in place things such as the much needed crisis prevention teams, which are focused on supporting children in the community.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The number of people with learning disabilities and autism in secure mental health hospitals is unacceptable and I welcome the commitment to reduce it. Can the Minister confirm exactly how she will monitor that and keep the House updated on progress?

Caroline Dinéage: That is the thrust of the whole transforming care and building the right support programme. We know that in some cases during the course of the programme people who have left residential units and gone into the community have gone back in to the units again. We have to keep a very close eye on the figures and ensure that the right package of support and care is provided so that once people leave a secure unit and go into the community, they are able to stay there.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The sitting is suspended until 3.15 pm, so that Members can attend the Remembrance service in St Margaret's Church.

1.41 pm

Sitting suspended for the Armistice centenary commemoration.

Child Maintenance

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

3.15 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to remove certain fees for child maintenance services; to make provision about the calculation of child maintenance payments; and for connected purposes.

I thank the co-sponsors of the Bill for their support. I also thank a number of Members who have introduced their own private Members' Bills to reform and improve the Child Maintenance Service, including the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who is to be commended on the work that she is doing to improve the CMS system.

I have been approached by numerous constituents asking for help with their CMS cases, as many other Members will have been. I have been approached both by parents with care and by non-resident parents. It is clear that the CMS does not function properly in its current form. In other words, it is letting down the children who should be at the heart of what it does. We have a duty to provide a system that respects the rights and obligations of both parents, but, ultimately, the rights and interests of children are paramount, and, sadly, I do not believe that the CMS meets that fundamental goal.

There are four specific ways in which the CMS could be improved in order to fulfil its intended purpose, and the aim of my Bill is to enact them. The 4% maintenance levy on parents requiring the collect-and-pay service should be abolished, as should the £20 application fee. There should be a reduction from 25% to 10% in the change-in-income threshold that must be breached for maintenance payments to be recalculated. Finally, the value of any equity in the non-resident parent's primary residence should be included in maintenance calculations when it exceeds £500,000.

The Child Maintenance Service is there to help when parents cannot agree on child maintenance. It is supposed to be a public service that ensures that parents meet their responsibilities to their children, especially when they may not want to. I do not think anyone here thinks that a parent should not pay for their child, but believe me, there are parents out there who do not believe that they should—parents who attempt to duck and dive their way out of paying a single penny towards their child, because they perceive every payment as a payment towards their ex-partner.

Whatever reason a non-resident parent has for not paying, they should not be allowed to renege on their responsibilities, but most of all, their child should not pay the price. Currently, if a non-resident parent fails to make full and timely maintenance payments that the CMS has calculated on their behalf, the case will move to collect and pay. The CMS will then chase down the non-paying non-resident parent and collect maintenance on the receiving parent's behalf. Parents with care—and therefore their children—then incur a maintenance tax of 4% on all payments collected. They are penalised for requiring the help of the CMS. They are charged because their ex-partner refuses to support their child. They are taxed through no fault of their own.

Using figures from the Department for Work and Pensions, the Library has estimated that in 2015-16 and 2016-17, £3.3 million was taken from families through the 4% maintenance tax. As a punishment, the non-paying non-resident parent will incur an additional 20% penalty and, potentially, other fines based on action such as a deduction from earnings order. How can it be justified that a child loses out because one of their parents will not meet the obligation to provide for them? The maintenance levy is not a tax on parents; it is a tax on children. It takes food from their table, clothes from their back, and money from their pockets that would allow them to enjoy the upbringing that every child should have.

The UK Government said in answer to a written question that the maintenance levy exists to encourage “parents to make Direct Pay work where they can.”

The point of collect and pay is that all attempts have failed; parents have no choice but to turn to the CMS to collect the maintenance that their child is owed. It often feels as though the CMS is more intent on collecting payments to maintain itself than on maintaining the children whom it is supposed to serve. In the grand scheme of things, the collection of 4% charges is a pittance to the UK Government, but it could make a massive difference to children’s lives.

Likewise, the £20 application fee takes more money from families. It is most likely to be a parent with care who starts an application with the CMS because they have not been able to reach an agreement with their ex-partner. Again, they are being penalised for needing help in securing for their children the support they have a right to.

The Library estimates that in the past three years alone, the CMS has collected £4.8 million in application fees. That is money that could be spent on heating and eating, materials or clothes for school, or sports activities. Sadly, these are simple but common things that many families today struggle to afford. Single parent families are more likely to be in poverty than couples. A £20 application fee is another barrier that blocks low-income families from accessing vital support, and it can deter them from applying. The CMS should be free at the point of use to meet a need. It should not use parents and children as clients, and as a source of income.

I do not want to paint all non-resident parents as negligent—most want to do well by their child—but the CMS is unfair not only to parents with care, but to non-resident parents. A paying parent can amend their income, and therefore their calculations, only if their income changes by more than 25%. That is a huge threshold to meet. It can disproportionately affect parents on low incomes if their income decreases, while disproportionately benefiting those on higher incomes.

A constituent of mine had a low income that decreased by 24.9% exactly; he was struggling to make ends meet, as the maintenance that he has to pay is still based on the higher income he previously earned. For many parents, this could be an income that they earned up to six years ago. My constituent still wanted to support his child, but at a rate he could afford. Likewise, parents with care have approached me for help as they know that their ex-partner earns far more than they did when they disclosed their earnings to the CMS, but because their change in income did not exceed the 25% threshold, those parents with care were left receiving a lower rate.

Ultimately, a lower threshold of 10% would ensure that maintenance payments more accurately reflected what a parent earned; maintenance calculations would therefore be more accurate, which would benefit parents and children. That would still be in keeping with the Government’s aim of ensuring both minimal administration and financial stability for the parent with care.

I welcome many of the steps that the UK Government are only beginning to take to ensure that parents pay their maintenance on time and in full. What was needed was not necessarily more powers, but rather a greater willingness for the CMS to use the powers it had. It is also important, however, that maintenance calculations be a true reflection of parents’ incomes. The private Member’s Bill tabled by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire goes to great lengths to ensure that a person’s real worth is used in calculating their maintenance. The Government are introducing regulations that will take assets such as gold bullion into account, but we need to go further and take into account a person’s primary residence where there is equity in it of £500,000 or more. I do not know many people who have gold bullion lying about, but I do know people who own their home and have no mortgage or loan on it.

Homes are a major way in which a non-resident parent can increase their net worth, if their home increases in value. A £500,000 threshold will ensure that those who live in smaller homes do not face unreasonable additions to maintenance that may require them to sell their home. Only those who live in more expensive homes who can afford to pay will pay. The Conservative Government make a big deal about personal responsibility and families being self-reliant; now is their opportunity to show that they mean it with action, and to ensure that parents meet their responsibilities to their children.

The CMS is a public service, and it seems strange that parents are deterred from, and even charged for, accessing it when the cost to the public purse is so small and the benefits to children so large. With every pound collected under collect and pay, the UK Government are taking money that is rightfully the child’s. There has been recent progress on improving the CMS. I believe that the steps in my Bill will make a discernible difference to people’s lives—the life of the paying parent, the receiving parent and, ultimately, the child—and ensure that children have their rights respected and get the start in life that their parents owe them.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Marion Fellows, Neil Gray, Angela Crawley, Mhairi Black, Antoinette Sandbach, Liz Saville Roberts, Jim Shannon, Caroline Lucas, Alison Thewliss, Carol Monaghan, Sarah Champion and Carolyn Harris present the Bill.

Marion Fellows accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 284).

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), who unfortunately cannot be here today, is a member of the shadow Work and Pensions team and she has been urgently seeking an accessible copy of the managed migration regulations that the Secretary of State for Working Pensions announced

[Valerie Vaz]

yesterday. After numerous calls to the Department, my hon. Friend has finally been promised a copy on Friday. Mr Speaker, I am sure you would agree that that is unacceptable, and that a copy should have been made available in an accessible format immediately, from the moment of publication. It is vital that we should be representative of society as a whole, which means that such important Government publications should be provided in an accessible form on publication, rather than taking the best part of a working week to be provided. Can you advise me on how we can ensure that this document is made available immediately?

Mr Speaker: This is of course a matter for the occupants of the Treasury Bench, but my sense is that the hon. Lady has probably achieved, or will shortly achieve, her objective. She has aired the matter in the House, it has been heard by Ministers and it is on the record. The resources available to the Government are very considerable, and it is simply not acceptable that a Member of Parliament with a known additional need should not have that need, as near as possible, immediately satisfied. This was an entirely predictable request, and I hope that it will not be necessary for this matter to be aired again. I appreciate the fact that Ministers are nodding from a sedentary position on the Front Bench and I hope that the matter has been settled. I would be loth to have to pronounce on it again, and I rather imagine that the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) would not want that either. She should be able to just get on with her job, suitably supported.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Over the past few days, residents in my constituency, and particularly in Pollokshields, have been plagued by fireworks being set off and used as weapons. I understand that injury has been caused to a child, and that fireworks have been aimed at police officers, as well as members of the public. Have you been given any indication, perhaps by Ministers from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who have responsibility for fireworks, that they might make a statement or issue any guidance on this matter?

Mr Speaker: As of now, I have received no indication of any intention on the part of a Minister to make a statement to the House on this subject, or indeed to provide guidance. The former is something of which I would have expected to be notified; the latter, probably not. My advice to the hon. Lady, who is most dexterous and adroit in the use of parliamentary devices, is that if her wish remains unmet by the time the House returns next Monday, she should seek to draw the matter to the attention of the House then.

Centenary of the Armistice

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to move the motion, I should advise the House that no fewer than 34 Back-Bench Members wish to contribute. I know that the Secretary of State and his shadow, with their usual and customary sensitivity, will wish to tailor their own contributions to take account of colleagues' interest.

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the centenary of the Armistice.

In May 1915, my grandfather arrived in France to fight for his country. Three years later, he came back. Millions of others did not or, if they did, came back terribly damaged, visibly or invisibly. They went to fight in what they knew as the great war: four years of blood, mud and misery in which humanity found new ways to kill and injure on a previously unimagined scale. When the cost and enormity of it could be better grasped, they came to call it, in shock, horror and, sadly, unrealistic optimism, the war to end all wars.

On Sunday, the nation will come together as one to pause and remember all those who died during this conflict and all those that have happened since. This year's act of remembrance will be particularly special and poignant, however, as we mark the centenary of the end of the first world war. We have sought to commemorate the war in many ways over the past four years. For everyone, different events will stand out, but I will always remember the commemoration of the battle of Amiens at Amiens cathedral, which I was fortunate enough to attend. I sat in that magnificent cathedral with representatives of many countries that fought on both sides of the battles that marked the beginning of the end of the war, and I listened to the words of those who experienced them. Their emotions were deeply felt by those in the cathedral and, I am sure, by the millions watching on television and online.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I remember that I prepared a scrapbook of cuttings at the 50th anniversary for my grandfather who had fought in the first world war, but I was rather embarrassed in front of him because the coverage in the 1960s was relentlessly negative. Will my right hon. and learned Friend confirm that historiography has now changed? Most people realise that it was a sacrifice worth making, that the alternative would have been militarism and that the soldiers were actually well led in 1918.

Jeremy Wright: It is undoubtedly right that the vast majority of people in this country will come together on Sunday, as they have come together on many occasions over the past four years, to remember the sacrifice of those who gave their lives and who did so without a thought to their own interests and in the service of their nation.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Many Members will have had a family member who was involved in the first world war in one way or another, and some of us will have family memories of different battles. Like the Secretary of State's grandfather, my grandfather took part in the battle of Loos, which is not

as well remembered as other battles. Does the Secretary of State agree that we should not forget such battles and the people who fought in them?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have not remembered every single battle over the past four years, but we have tried to remember a number of them. However, our collective effort to commemorate what happened is designed to encompass all battles and all those who fought in them.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his generosity in giving way. In common with many other Members, I will be joining remembrance events in my constituency on Sunday. I understand that the event held at Mirfield is the biggest and most well attended outside of London, so will he join me in welcoming the people in Mirfield who attend that event?

Jeremy Wright: I join the hon. Lady in welcoming that occasion. I am sure that it will be a particularly special year for her and for all those who attend.

The high-profile ceremonial events that I mentioned have been complemented by an extensive and engaging programme of cultural and educational activities. In 2012, the Government established the 14-18 NOW cultural programme to work with artists to tell these important stories through the mediums of culture and art. There has been a particular focus on engaging children and young people, with events including the great war school debate series and school battlefield tours, in which nearly 6,000 students and teachers visited the battlefields of northern France.

The groundbreaking 14-18 NOW programme has used its remit to enthral people from all walks of life. More than 35 million people have engaged with the centenary, including 7.5 million young people under the age of 25. It has clearly demonstrated that contemporary artworks in public places can attract large, diverse audiences. Whether it was turning the country dark as part of the "Lights Out" programme or the ghost soldiers that appeared across the country to mark the centenary of the battle of the Somme, these events have all captured the public's imagination and have given remembrance prominence in our daily lives.

The ceramic poppies at the Tower of London were another moving tribute, bringing the programme to one of our most popular and cherished attractions. The poppies have since travelled to 19 locations, from Belfast to Southend and from Orkney to Plymouth, and have been visited by more than 4 million people. From next year, they will be part of the collection of the Imperial War Museum, where they can be viewed for many years to come.

As part of our programme, we have sought to highlight the enormous contribution made by those who came to our nation's aid from across the world. Some 2.5 million men and women from the Commonwealth answered the call to fight, with 200,000 laying down their lives. They left their homes thousands of miles away to serve the allied cause with unstinting bravery, often in unimaginable conditions, and they must not be forgotten or overlooked.

Works by an extraordinarily diverse range of artists from the UK and abroad have helped us to highlight those contributions. Poets from the Caribbean diaspora, visual artists from India and Bangladesh, performers

from South Africa, musicians from Syria and many more have all highlighted the global reach and impact of the war. That was shown vividly in March 2015, when an event commemorating the second battle of Neuve Chapelle took place at the Imperial War Museum North. The event was co-ordinated by British Muslim, Hindu and Sikh organisations, supported by the Government. It compellingly showed the partnerships and friendships that we hold so dear and that were so instrumental during the war.

We have seen all too well how history can divide, but one clear and ambitious goal throughout this centenary period has been to seek to use history to bring us together. The Government have worked closely with the Irish Government, for example, over the past four years to mark these events. That was most clearly demonstrated in the shared approach to the battle of Messines Ridge commemoration in June 2017, which was attended by both His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge and the then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny. The battle has considerable historic and symbolic significance for the UK and Ireland, as it was the first time that the 36th (Ulster) and 16th (Irish) Divisions fought alongside each other during the great war. The event provided a valuable opportunity to remember the service and sacrifice of those who fought, as well as to explore our shared history and support efforts to build a peaceful future.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the changing attitude, particularly in the Irish Republic, where for many decades there was little or no appreciation of that contribution? Does he agree that that should continue and, in fact, increase over the coming years?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The co-operation and full support we have received from the Irish Government has been most welcome, and I hope it will set a new tone for future commemorations. It is deeply appreciated by those on both sides of the border who have been involved in these commemorations.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Another way to commemorate the shared interest between Ireland and the UK is through the merchant navy. Many vessels sailed constantly through the great war between Ireland and Welsh ports, and there were many casualties. We have had commemorations of that this year, so will the Secretary of State put on record his thanks to the merchant seafarers of Ireland and Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom?

Jeremy Wright: I will certainly do that. I am sure the commemorations that will take place in the hon. Gentleman's constituency will make particular reference to those people, and that is entirely as it should be. It is also important to say that the German Government have been hugely supportive of our commemorations. Germany has been represented at very senior levels at all our events, and German military representatives have participated extensively.

One hundred years ago, the news of the Armistice was celebrated on these shores. On Remembrance Sunday this year, out of respect for living veterans, and the service's wider purpose in remembering the fallen of all conflicts, we will share our usual sombre moment of

[Jeremy Wright]

remembrance, with the customary two minutes' silence. Wreaths will be laid at the Cenotaph, including, uniquely, one by the President of Germany. In recent months, there has been an unprecedented amount of commemorative activity up and down the country, leading up to that day. The nation is truly coming together, because 11 November 1918 is a significant day in our history. In dispatches from the frontline, soldiers often struggled to articulate how they felt when the guns stopped firing. They reported a mixture of joy, relief, numb disbelief and grief. For many, there was also a sense of achievement and justice.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Let me remind my right hon. and learned Friend of the words of Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy—"Woodbine Willie":

"There are many kinds of sorrow in this world of love and hate but there is no keener sorrow than a soldier's for his mate".

Jeremy Wright: Those words put it well. It is evident in all the commemorations we have witnessed how much of what was done and sacrificed by those who fought was done in fellowship for those they went to fight with. I agree with my hon. Friend.

After the service of remembrance this year, we will give our thanks for the end of the war and show our support for those who returned. The traditional Royal British Legion parade of veterans will this year be followed by an additional procession of 10,000 members of the public paying personal tribute and giving thanks to the generation who served then. The procession will be complemented in the afternoon by the nationwide ringing of bells, across the UK, and throughout the rest of the world, echoing the bells that rang out after many years of silence 100 years ago. In the evening there will be a national service of reflection and thanksgiving in Westminster abbey, with similar services taking place across the UK. This will be a moving and inspiring day that will unite us all.

I am sure we will hear plenty more reflections on these events during this debate. Many people have been involved in making these commemorations a success: charities, including, of course, the Royal British Legion; civil society groups; officials from across the Government, including, in particular, those from my Department; and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. They all deserve our thanks and congratulations. I would also like to thank the first world war advisory group for its guidance throughout this process. I want to make special mention of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), who has acted throughout this period as the Prime Minister's special representative for the first world war. I hope the House will hear from him this afternoon, and I think it true to say these commemorations would not have had the same shape and resonance as they have had without his considerable efforts. I would also like to pay tribute to the work of the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), whom I am also delighted to see in his place this afternoon. I know he has also been passionate in wanting these commemorations to have the widest possible reach.

The first world war started more than a century ago, yet these commemorations have brought that war to life in ways that feel tangible and within our grasp. It is so

important that future generations have the opportunity to hear these stories. This was a war not about monarchs or generals, but about people like us. In fact, 264 Members of this House served in that war, 22 of whom were killed. We remember the remarkable challenges faced by all those who fought, but we also remember that they came from our cities, towns and villages. They were people like us, and that should give us hope, as well as pride and sadness, because in those whom we remember, we see the huge capacity for service, for sacrifice, in people just like us, just when history needed it. They went off to war with friends and neighbours and workmates, or contributed in other ways, not because they thought they were special, but because they thought they were ordinary. They did what they thought everyone did for their country in its hour of need, but we remember them, and honour them, 100 years later, not because we know they were ordinary but because we know they were special.

Over the past four years, we have done our best to remember them all. I believe that we have done it well and that we can be proud not just of the people whom we have remembered, but of the way in which we have remembered them, and this House, and this nation, will always remember them.

3.46 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for what I thought was a solemn, dignified and thoughtful contribution to open the debate. I join him in paying tribute to the work of the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) and my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis).

It is genuinely a great honour to speak on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition to mark Armistice Day in this debate and the centenary of the end of what was then the greatest military conflict that the world had ever seen. It is both a privilege and a duty, shared by all of us, to honour the sacrifice of all those who served in that war.

Today, I want to talk of remembrance but also of reconciliation, of internationalism, conflict resolution and the lessons of war. I wish to touch on the work of some of the institutions that support our veterans and honour the memory of the fallen. Remembrance Day and the poppies that so many of us are wearing today have come to symbolise not just the sacrifices of the great war, but the sacrifices made in all wars by all who play a part in them.

I remember when I was a child, many of the veterans of the great war were still with us and the veterans of the second world war, my grandparents' generation, did not seem old—although they seemed old to me at the time. Today, all of those who served between 1914 and 1918 have passed away. Even the number of second world war veterans is dwindling. Just over a decade ago, I was privileged to play a part, along with the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and other Members of this House, in efforts to ensure that the last great British war veteran, the last Tommy, to pass away, was properly honoured whoever they might have been.

Harry Patch, the last surviving British soldier to have fought in the trenches, died in 2009. Claude Choules, the last English-born great war combat veteran, who

served in the Royal Navy, died in 2011. Florence Green, the last surviving great war service veteran, died in 2012. With them, the great war passed irreversibly from living memory to history. As the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said in his intervention, it is the responsibility of all of us to continue to recognise the sacrifice that that generation made and to learn the lessons of history. No organisation has done more to recognise the sacrifice and the contribution of that first world war generation than the Royal British Legion.

The Legion was formed just after the war—the poppy of Flanders fields is its emblem—but it does not just commemorate; it also runs impressive modern campaigns relevant to today's veterans, providing them with financial, emotional and psychological support. The Legion is desperately short of members. People think it is necessary to be a veteran to join, but it is not. In fact, it is a pleasure to see so many civilians in my constituency of West Bromwich East supporting this important organisation. As the Secretary of State alluded to, the legion's commemoration this year is particularly important. We welcome the special khadi poppies that honour the 74,000 Indian soldiers who lost their lives fighting for Britain.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the contribution of soldiers from the Indian subcontinent, and for having signed the early-day motion for a national Sikh war memorial in central London. That is one of the reasons that he is held in such high regard within the global Sikh community, along with other right hon. and hon. Members of this House. Does he agree that it is wonderful to see many Sikh war memorials popping up in small towns across the country including in Gravesend, Coventry, the National Memorial Arboretum and now in Smethwick, and that those memorials are a symbol of people in those places displaying their pride?

Tom Watson: I do. My hon. Friend—the first turbaned Sikh on the Labour Benches in the House of Commons—stands up for the Sikh community and unites the House in our desire to show respect for the Sikhs who lost their lives in the great war.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a very measured speech. During the remarkable service that we attended, I was thinking that my wife's great uncle signed up at 17 years old in 1914 and was dead just before his 18th birthday in 1915 in the Battle of Loos. Many of my own family also served. We talk about remembrance a lot, but 28 years later this country was back at war again and my father was fighting for his life, to save democracy and to save freedom. Although we may not forget them, we also have to remember that we never want to repeat that process ever again.

Tom Watson: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Later in my contribution I will touch on some of the lessons learned, and perhaps the mistakes that were made, after the Armistice was signed.

This year the Royal British Legion has also produced gold leaf poppies specifically to commemorate the centenary of the war. What is most remarkable about the Legion is not just the inspiring work its people do in the weeks that are leading up to Remembrance Sunday;

it is the work they do all year round, reminding us all that remembrance is something we should do all year round.

Armistice Day has always been a bittersweet commemoration in this country: sweet because it marks the end of a war that scarred Europe and the world, the end of four years of industrialised killing, the like of which had never been seen before; sweet because for Britain and our allies it celebrates a victory against a war of aggression by Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire, so it was celebrated at the time. When the news of the Armistice came through, cheering crowds gathered in every town square. There was dancing and singing, and church bells rang out for the first time in four years. It is fitting that bell ringing—not just in this country, but around the world—is part of this year's centenary commemorations. And yet it is far more bitter than sweet. Armistice Day is always a solemn event of reflection and remembrance, and it is treated as such in wreath-laying ceremonies at memorials all over the country that hon. and right hon. Members from across this House will be attending in their constituencies this weekend.

Millions of men never came home—nearly 1 million British dead alone, lying alongside hundreds of thousands from what was then the British empire. Millions more returned with physical or psychological injuries, and with memories of the friends and comrades they left behind in the trenches of Flanders and the Somme, in Turkey and Palestine, in the Atlantic and the North sea. Of 14,000 parishes in England and Wales, only 50 saw all their soldiers come home, and every single community in Scotland and Ireland lost at least someone. Many places lost far more. The small village of Wadhurst in East Sussex lost 25 men in a single day in 1915, and 149 men altogether over the course of the war, from a total of just 3,500.

The so-called Pals battalions, made up of men from a particular local area, especially from our industrial towns and cities, serving alongside each other, often suffered losses whose impact on their communities is almost unthinkable and unimaginable today.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is giving an extraordinarily powerful tribute. Will he take into account the sacrifices in communities in Cheltenham, where, for example, in one street, Queen Street, of the 31 men who went to fight, a full 21 were killed—in one street alone? Does that not give an idea of the sense of the sacrifice and the extent to which communities were truly hollowed out by this ghastly episode?

Tom Watson: It does. The hon. Gentleman honours them by raising their memory in the House today, and I thank him for it.

Paula Sherriff: On Saturday, I attended a Dewsbury Sacrifices event. One thousand and fifty-three local men perished during the first world war, and Dewsbury Sacrifices has taken it upon itself to build a profile of every single one of those men. Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming what it is doing?

Tom Watson: I do join my hon. Friend in that. In remembering them and knowing their lives, we honour their sacrifice. These events are taking place up and down the country.

[Tom Watson]

To take just one of many more examples, on 1 July 1916, the opening day of the battle of the Somme, 235 of the Accrington Pals—the 11th (Service) Battalion East Lancashire Regiment—were killed, and 315 wounded, in the space of just 25 minutes. The fighting continued right up until literally the last few seconds before the Armistice was signed. More men died in 1918 than in any previous year of the war. The last British serviceman to be killed, Private George Edwin Ellison, died just one and a half hours before the Armistice, on the outskirts of Mons in Belgium, almost exactly the same place where British forces had first seen action in 1914. Indeed, George Ellison's grave now faces that of John Parr, the first British soldier killed during the conflict. Between the deaths of John Parr in August 1914 and George Ellison in November 1918, 1.1 million British service personnel lost their lives—more than in any other conflict before or since.

Almost every city and town and village in Britain has a war memorial listing those who never returned from the great war. Thanks to the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the brave men and women who lost their lives during the war are remembered with gravestones and memorials across the world. I know the whole House would like to thank the gardeners and staff of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, who do so much to ensure that our service personnel are honoured in fitting resting places. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Yet perhaps the bitterest element of this bittersweet commemoration, as the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, is that almost all of those war memorials have another plaque or another set of carvings listing those who never returned from the second world war, less than three decades later. The Armistice Day hopes of Lloyd George were dashed. Whatever else we might want to say about what was described as the war to end all wars, it turned out not to be the war to end all wars.

The great war was perhaps the last war in which people signed up to fight out of deference and patriotic fervour. We have all seen the photos of lines of young men, some of them perhaps lying about their age, desperate to join up and see action before the end of a war they believed would be over by Christmas. But in quite a short time, those deferential and patriotic sentiments were not enough to meet the needs of the military in a war on this scale, which is why conscription had to be introduced in 1916. The horrors of the western front made many in Britain doubt whether the war was worth it.

It was not only in this country that the success of the war effort relied on popular support. Russia's experience on the eastern front, the gradual breakdown of its economy and the Russian people's discontent with its leadership was a direct cause of the Russian revolution, which shaped global politics for the rest of the century and beyond. The mutinies of 1917 crippled the effectiveness of the French army. America's entry into the war, which contributed so much to the allied victory, might not have been possible at all without the popular outrage generated by the German U-boat campaign sinking US civilian shipping, and the final German collapse owed much to the suffering of its population under the British naval blockade.

Leaders and generals do not operate in isolation, cold-bloodedly moving around blocks of troops, disconnected from the societies from which those troops are drawn. Political leaders have to earn and secure support for any military action, not just at the start but on an ongoing basis. That lesson has had to be learned again and again, from Algeria to Vietnam to Iraq.

The great war changed Britain forever in so many ways. This year we have also been celebrating the centenary of many women getting the vote—another momentous event in the momentous year of 1918. The achievement of women's suffrage had many causes. The movement long preceded the great war, and achieving the vote was just one step on a path towards equality that still stretches before us. But the contribution of women to that war effort, in filling roles previously reserved for the men now fighting overseas, helped to solidify the argument that women were just as capable as men and had just as much right to political representation, making progress faster than it might otherwise have been.

In some ways—I realise that this could be controversial—Britain was lucky in 1918. Unlike France and Belgium, it was not scarred with bomb craters and ruined towns. Unlike Russia, it had no revolution or civil war. Unlike Germany, it had no reparations to pay or territory to concede. But its people bore the scars of war on their bodies and in their minds. They deserved and needed what Lloyd George promised them—a land fit for heroes. Instead, they got nearly two decades of economic slump, unemployment, poverty, poor housing and the great depression.

Both then and now, Britain has not always treated its service personnel with the respect they deserve. As a Defence Minister, I met Gertie, the daughter of Private Harry Farr, and her daughter, Janet Booth. They campaigned tirelessly for a pardon for their father and grandfather, who was shot at dawn for cowardice. Harry Farr was no coward. It was the dignity of his family and their tireless campaign that led to the pardons for the "shot at dawn" generation.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): As vice-president of the Greenford branch of the Royal British Legion, I am sure I speak for the whole House when I express gratitude for my hon. Friend's words about the Royal British Legion.

Harry Farr was one of 306 British and Commonwealth soldiers executed for what was then called cowardice or lack of moral fibre. I would like to thank publicly my hon. Friend, who was then the Minister, on behalf of my constituent Joannie Farr, one of Harry Farr's granddaughters, for the pardon that he was so instrumental in gaining, along with Des Browne, now Lord Browne. Will he put it on the record once and for all that if, God forbid, we ever face such a situation again, we will look to offer compassion, not condemnation, to young men who buckle and sometimes crack in the face of horrors that we in this House cannot begin to imagine?

Tom Watson: I can, and we should. I thank my hon. Friend for the work he did on the campaign to ensure that Gertie's dying wish was met.

I am proud of my role in righting what I saw as the injustice of the 306 soldiers that my hon. Friend mentions. Many of them had clearly been suffering from what was then called shellshock and what would now be called

post-traumatic stress disorder. Their families were not entitled to a military pension and often faced great hardship. Granting them a pardon did not change what was done to them, but it eased the stigma felt by their loved ones over the generations. Anybody who has ever visited the National Memorial Arboretum to see the commemoration to those who were shot at dawn cannot fail to be moved.

We should pay tribute to the work of the National Memorial Arboretum in the west midlands, which allows so many to pay their respects to the men and women of our armed forces. As a young Minister, newly in post, I remember feeling my heart in my mouth when I had to give what is called a ministerial direction to underwrite the cost of the magnificent armed forces memorial that was opened by Her Majesty the Queen in October 2007 to honour the sacrifice of those who, in more than 50 operations and conflicts since the second world war, lost their lives in service. Today, we understand the impact of war better than we did 100 years ago.

With a smaller professional military, we do not have to face the challenge of reintegrating millions of ex-service personnel into the civilian economy. However, we do owe a duty of care to veterans and their families that lasts beyond the last echo of gunfire. That has to include physical and mental health support, as well as efforts to ensure that they have the skills they need to find civilian employment.

Both the great war and what came after it show us the need for internationalism. It was rival nationalisms that caused the war—rival imperial ambitions, rival insecurities and the escalation of responses to perceived threats until it was easier for the great powers to go to war than for them to back down from it. There can be no greater failure of diplomacy than the resort to armed conflict, even if armed conflict sometimes is the right response to a failure of diplomacy.

One of the causes of the failure of the Armistice to hold was the disastrously punitive terms imposed on Germany by the treaty of Versailles in 1919 and its insistence on German war guilt, which both crippled its economy and fed the resentment that the Nazis were able to harness so effectively. As Marshal Foch prophetically said, Versailles was

“not a peace treaty, it is an armistice for twenty years.”

After the great war, the world failed to build a sustainable peace.

The post-war League of Nations was a well-intentioned attempt to stop such a thing happening again, but it proved inadequate to the task of responding to the nationalism, fascism and territorial ambition of Hitler and Mussolini, Soviet expansionism, or indeed America First isolationism. The failure of the League of Nations showed the need for stronger international institutions, and since the second world war, for all their flaws, institutions including the United Nations, NATO and the European Union have helped us to avoid any repeat of war on a global scale, even if they have been unable to prevent myriad smaller conflicts.

Building lasting, sustainable peace is not easy, but it requires a commitment to internationalism, development, diplomacy and the fostering of economic ties between nations. Where necessary, it requires conflict resolution, but also a strong defence posture and a willingness to countenance military intervention as a last resort, not

as a first step, as well as a framework of international laws and justice. Too many of these were absent in the aftermath of the great war, and the whole world paid a terrible price for the fragility of the Armistice.

If ever there is a time to forgive and reunite, it is 11 November 2018. This year, of all the articles written on the great war, the one that moved me the most was that written by Lord Michael Ashcroft, who made the case that courage is something displayed by service personnel on both sides of war and conflict. We should never forget that. He made a strong case for reconciliation in his tribute to the courage of Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron.

There was some controversy last month when the Government revealed their plans to invite the German Head of State to the Cenotaph. However, it strikes me that in this year—100 years after men and women of courage gave their lives fighting for their countries—we should, in the spirit of reconciliation and peace, honour the valour and sacrifice of our opponents in the great war by inviting the German President to share in our remembrance. The Secretary of State was absolutely right to make that commitment.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate, and to colleagues for their thoughtful and humane interventions. We owe so much to all those who served and to all those who gave their lives in the great war that ended on 11 November 1918. One hundred years later, they still have much to teach us. As the Bishop of Lambeth said in his address to us in that very moving service: “War starts in the hearts and minds and souls of men and women like us. And peace, too, starts in the hearts and minds and souls of men and women like us.” Let us not just speak of peace, but let each and every one of us be the peacemakers.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before I call the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), I am moved to note for the benefit of the House the presence in our midst of members of the United Kingdom Youth Parliament, who spoke so movingly and so well in the service in St Margaret’s church. It is wonderful to have you with us today and I very much hope that I shall be seeing you again in this Chamber on Friday.

4.11 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is truly an honour to follow two such humane and comprehensive opening speeches.

Seventy-nine men from the village of Brockenhurst in the heart of the New Forest lost their lives in the great war—21 of them in the last year of that war alone—so it is hardly surprising that the village of Brockenhurst should have been early in the process of commemorating this particularly poignant centenary. Only last Saturday, I attended an outstanding commemoration concert that was held in the village. Back on Trafalgar Day, 21 October, the Tile Barn Poppy Pod village was dedicated to the memory of Enda Ryan, Hampshire County Council’s greatly respected outdoor facilities manager who recently died, far too young, from cancer. Each unit in the village commemorates a first world war battle, and service families can have respite breaks in the poppy pods at weekends, free of charge. The Tile Barn where they are sited was one of three New Zealand general

[Dr Julian Lewis]

hospitals set up in 1916, during the first world war, to care for the wounded. Thousands of New Zealanders passed through it, and the 93 who did not survive are buried in nearby St Nicholas' church.

I am sure that in this debate we will hear many tales of poignant recollection of the sacrifices made in villages such as Brockenhurst up and down the country, so I wish to list briefly what I regard as nine necessary lessons from the first world war. First, we must not think that we can successfully predict when a war will break out. I have often quoted in the House Sir Maurice Hankey—I shall not quote him again today—who in 1931 reviewed all the previous great conflicts in which the nation had been involved. He pointed out that, far from having 10 years' warning—which is how far ahead people were saying in 1931 that we ought to be able to predict a great conflict—in the run-up to world war one, we had had barely 10 days' warning of that war.

The second necessary lesson is not to sign up to multiple bilateral alliances rather than a single multilateral alliance. In the terrible connected development of circumstances that led to the catastrophe of 1914, we saw how individual separate alliances triggered one country after another in a process of what I suppose one could call falling dominoes, which meant that we ended up with a global conflict out of something that started on a relatively small scale. That is what explains the success of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation—the certain knowledge that any aggression against any one of its members will immediately trigger defence of that member by all the rest. I do not wish to be controversial in this debate of all debates, but that is why we have to be careful about other organisations, including the European Union, issuing security guarantees willy-nilly here and there, because we do not wish once again to get into a cross-cutting system of obligations and alliances that can lead to a chain reaction such as happened so disastrously in 1914.

The third lesson is this. Do not think that humanitarian restrictions on methods of warfare at the outbreak of a conflict will last very long. The idea, before the great war, that civilians would be deliberately targeted by the fighting services would probably have been scornfully rejected, yet as early as December 1914 we had the bombardment by the German navy of the seaside towns of Scarborough, Hartlepool and Whitby, when 137 people were killed in their own homes and 455 injured. That was followed by the Zeppelin airship raids, and the more lethal but less scary Gotha bomber raids—and who can forget that, in 1915, we saw the barbaric initiation of poison gas warfare?

The fourth lesson is, do not imagine that individual valour can overcome the mechanisation of warfare. We had the lethal combination of the machine gun and the barbed wire emplacements. Those defences could not be breached by hurling wave after wave of human bodies against them.

The fifth lesson is, do not repeat the failed methods of warfare time and again. My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said that the troops were well led in 1918. Well, they were, at the tail end of the war; it is just a great pity that they were not a lot earlier, because time and again it was shown beyond doubt that attrition did not work, and time and again—at

the Somme and Passchendaele most outstandingly—it was tried long beyond the point where failure was an absolute certainty.

Mr Duncan Smith: I am listening with great interest to my right hon. Friend and I recognise what he is saying about that issue. There is another feature, which is often not well reported; I think Keegan brought it out in his book on the first world war. The fact that communications had not advanced at the speed with which munitions had, meant that often news of what was actually happening on the front took nearly half a day to arrive back at divisional headquarters, so nothing could be changed. It is a really important issue. We tend to condemn the commanders, but we forget sometimes that they had no idea, quite often, what was happening for hours, let alone minutes.

Dr Lewis: I hesitate to disagree with my right hon. Friend, particularly because of his own gallant service and that of previous generations in his family, but I would refer to accounts at the time, such as that of such a considerable figure as Sholto Douglas, later Lord Douglas of Kirtleside, who became one of the most senior RAF officers in its history, who was flying over the battlefield of Passchendaele, and who observed in his memoirs, with all that retrospective knowledge, that it was still inconceivable that the troops were sent forward time and again into a sea of mud, when it was absolutely clear that the attack had failed and had no prospect of success. I know there is a revisionist view of history that says the lessons of the Somme and Passchendaele were needed so they could get it right for the 100 days campaign at the end of 1918, but frankly, with the greatest of respect, I do not buy it.

The sixth lesson is, do not underestimate the value of surprise. The decisive allied breakthrough on 8 August 1918, the so-called “black day of the German army”, depended crucially on the strictest operational secrecy and dominance of the airspace over the battlefield, just as the Normandy landings did a quarter of a century later.

The seventh lesson is, do not forget—we have heard a bit of this today—why the war was fought in the first place. The war was fought because Prussian militarism and sense of entitlement to invade, overrun and occupy Prussia's neighbours proved to be something that could be stopped only by force. Again, there are revisionists who say it would have been better if we had just let Germany get on with it and done nothing about it. I would just briefly quote the former Cambridge professor of French history, Professor Robert Tombs, who wrote recently in *The Daily Telegraph* that

“democracy and liberal government would have faced a bleak future. Authoritarian regimes would have been in the driving seat.”

He concluded:

“If tomorrow the Russian army marched through Poland and we were faced with the prospect of hostile aircraft based just across the Channel, would we react any differently? Let us hope we never face such a choice as our great-grandparents did.”

The eighth lesson is, do not settle for anything less than unconditional surrender in a conflict of this sort. Germany did not accept that she had been fully and fairly beaten in the field. The myth of the “stab in the back” gave fuel to Hitler's subsequent evil campaign to say that Germany had not been defeated but betrayed.

The final lesson speaks for itself and requires no elaboration because we have heard it time and again in the present day in this House: do not stint in peacetime on investment in our armed forces—or we will pay a cost thousands of times greater when we fight a war that we might otherwise have deterred and completely avoided.

4.22 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I pay tribute to the Minister and the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) for their introductions to the debate. I also pay tribute to the contribution of my colleague and Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis). Other Members will speak at length. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who cannot make it to the debate—he and others are in either Westminster Hall or Committee—would like me to mention the commemorations taking place in Nitshill this weekend.

The eloquence of commemoration is often beset by flurries of grandeur and peppered with words of valour and heroism. Those words are often spoken with full generosity and belief, yet more often than not, speeches are bereft of names, ages and commemoration on a human plane. When spoken, personal commemorations are like stones thrown upon a loch, sending ripples through time itself. Indeed, the greatness of war is the greatness of loss, and only as time passes do we come to understand the profound and unintended historical consequences of those individual losses.

For many, 100 years is an age; for historians, it is a mere moment in time. Yet by its end, the great war had justified its name, at least in our minds. Some 6 million UK troops were mobilised, with a loss of 700,000. It was also a war fought on all fronts: a war of the industrial age on land, at sea and even taking flight to the skies. While some would state that it was an un-won war, there is no doubt that the allied powers in fact forced the Kaiser and his advisers, such as Ludendorff, to accept that surrender was the only way forward for Germany. They, at least at that point in history, recognised that a hopeless struggle to the bitter end would be in no one's interest.

Some have said that it was the best of times and the worst of times. For one family, I know that it was indeed the worst of times. Far from the front at the age of 24, James Timlin, son of Barbara and Richard and brother to Anne, Bridget, Thomas, Sarah, Maria and Anthony, joined the 2nd Battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers, in Kilmarnock in that great county of Ayrshire, and undertook a journey that would see him, by the age of 28, travel through the horror of conflict. Little did he know that his great-nephew Sean would join us in the Under-Gallery for this debate; nor could he have known that his sister Sarah and her husband John would settle in the great industrial burgh of Clydebank, and that his other great-nephew would, on these Benches, utter his name and have his medals at his side.

Unlike James, many did not make it to the front, for one of war's best-known supporters rode into battle, in three waves that lasted beyond the war: plague, or as we now know it, the Spanish flu—a reflection of the truly global nature of modern war. Even as they boarded troop ships in the United States, troops were marching to a fate that they could not imagine. On reaching the

ports of Europe, many would disembark not as strong, valiant soldiers, but as corpses to be buried at haste and with no commemoration. Those troop ships sailed the seven seas, and there is no doubt that global war saw the plague of flu grasp the opportunity to wreak havoc, with nearly 100 million human beings dying in every corner of the globe bar Australia. In modern-day Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, the global movement of troops back and forth condemned at least 20 million of some of the poorest people on earth to a death most terrible.

It was a global war that saw battles on all fronts: the western front, the Italian front, the eastern front, the Romanian campaign, the Caucasus campaign, the Serbian campaign, Gallipoli, the Macedonian front, the Sinai and Palestine campaign, the Mesopotamian campaign—in which my friend Anne's grandfather, George Harvey, served—and the ill-named Africa campaign, which covered vast swathes of that mighty continent. It was a war that even reached to the skies. And how could we forget the loss of life among those in peril on the sea? How could the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire not reflect on the role of the Royal Mail Ship *Lusitania*—built in Clydebank—the sinking of which shifted opinion in the United States towards supporting the allied powers?

The victory of war was no solace to those lost. It was also a war that saw—I must disagree with the hon. Member for West Bromwich East—a revolution, even in this state, with effective martial law being declared in the great burghs and cities of Scotland. Workers there demanded that at its end, they, and their sons and brothers returning from the frontline, would no longer live and work as they had—in slums, with early death at home and at work. This was also a world in which women would at last rightly demand equality.

By 1939, we had marched blindfolded toward a war that would shake the very foundations of the earth. Fascism, founded on hate, antisemitism, lies, fear and the targeting of the weak, had filled a vacuum in Europe that many would say the League of Nations had allowed, with the failed peace offering a false hope.

This was a war that James Timlin's sister, Sarah, knew at close quarters, through her two elder sons—one was in the merchant fleet and the other in the RAF—and her husband, who was in the workhouse of the Parkhead forge in neighbouring Glasgow. Those workers were on the frontline, and it is often forgotten that they are the other veterans of war. On 13 and 14 March, hearing the siren along with her younger children, Kathleen, Mary, Irene, Joseph, Patrick and Francis—names are important, for it is individuals, people, who make up the communities we represent—Sarah sheltered from two nights of intense blitzkrieg by the Luftwaffe. As was testified to on the Floor of the House on 15 March 2016,

“proportionally, Clydebank lost more people and buildings than any other major community anywhere in the United Kingdom.”—*Official Report*, 15 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 928.]

Sarah was lucky. She and her children survived. She lived a long and eventually happy life, but she did not live to see her grandson Ronald, my brother, serve twice, in Iraq and Afghanistan. No doubt she would have known the terror a family feel when their loved ones are on the frontline; the human cost of war was known to Sarah. Her brother, James, born in 1890 in Ballinglen, just south of Ballycastle, County Mayo, Ireland, fell on 29 September 1918 during the third battle of Ypres. He lasted longer than most.

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

As other hon. Members have said, my constituents and I will soon gather in my constituency—in Clydebank, Dumbarton, Alexandria and the surrounding villages—to commemorate the fallen. War comes about for many reasons, but at the end of it are always the dead, military and civilian. For all our disagreements on these Benches, let us commit again to that word, peace, for without it we live in a world in which democracy cannot flourish.

4.31 pm

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I begin by offering my warmest congratulations to the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State on two very thoughtful and moving speeches in this important debate. I also welcome the new Minister, who will be winding up. I am sure that she will understand if I say that it is with sorrow that I recognise that her predecessor had to resign.

Like a number of colleagues, I am haunted by the first world war. I am of an age to not have had to fight a war—I was too young for national service during the cold war—but my father and uncles served in the second world war, as did those of many hon. Members, and both my grandfathers served in the first world war.

I am by training a military historian. I have written books on the British Army in the first world war, and I interviewed dozens of survivors in the 1970s, but the question in my mind is that which my son, aged 27, put to me. He is interested in history, but he said, “Why do we continue to put so much emphasis and effort into commemorating the first world war and the Armistice, which are as far away from my generation as the battle of Waterloo and the Peninsular war were from that generation?” That is a crucial question. As the Secretary of State said, through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, a lot of effort has been put into involving young people—much younger than my son—in understanding what the first world war was about.

I have been privileged to serve on two organisations as a parliamentary representative: the Prime Minister’s advisory committee on commemorating the first world war and, along with the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Both of us finish in December. I will have done 10 years. The commission is an amazing organisation, as the shadow Secretary of State said. Formed in 1917 as the Imperial War Graves Commission, it owed its organisation and purpose for the next 20 years to a remarkable man, Fabian Ware. He was not a soldier—he was too old in 1914—but he organised a Red Cross unit that went out to France. In 1915, he was conscious of the question of what would happen to the thousands of men who were killed. In previous battles, that had been limited. Often the private soldiers had merely been dumped in a great pit and, if they were lucky, a single cross had been put over it.

Many wealthier parents, usually of officers, brought their sons home, and, indeed, a number of families tried to do so in 1914, but it was going to be on such a scale that Ware persuaded GHQ in France that another organisation had to be set up. The first was the Graves Registration Commission, which attempted to find out

the names and the units of the men who had been killed; and, of course, in thousands of cases, it knew not where their bodies were. As a result of Ware’s determination, the Imperial War Graves Commission obtained its royal charter in 1917, although not without a great deal of opposition on the part of many people who, understandably, wanted to bring their husbands, fathers and sons home. Ware was also determined that there should be absolute equality in terms of the sites in which men were buried: that the aristocrat would lie next to the pauper, and the officer next to the lance corporal.

What we all see today in the gardens of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission—which also looks after the men who died in the second world war—is worldwide. The biggest number who are commemorated are not in Belgium and France, but here in the United Kingdom. Those who visit the south coast, by the old hospitals, will see many War Graves Commission cemeteries where lie the men who were brought back wounded from Belgium and France in two world wars, but who then died.

This is a Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and, as other Members have rightly pointed out, we need to continue to emphasise the role of what we then called the British empire. We did not fight the war on our own. We suffered horrendous casualties, but without the active participation of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the colonies in west Africa and, above all, the Indian empire, we would not have been able to fight the first world war. We went through the motions of recognising how important they had been, but I think that it is only in the past 20 years that we have given them the full recognition that they deserve.

The Australians and New Zealanders have, of course, concentrated on their role at Gallipoli, rather brushing aside the fact that they lost more men in Belgium and France. The Canadians are the unsung heroes of the two world wars. Canada put in so many troops: in the second world war, about a third of the Royal Canadian Navy was fighting the battle of the Atlantic. We could not have fought with our infantry battalions in Normandy and Germany in 1944-45 without what were called “Canloan officers” and non-commissioned officers. So in considering the Armistice, we should bear in mind the role of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and drawing attention to incredibly important matters. May I take the opportunity to say how grateful I am personally for the fact that my own father, who was killed in Normandy in 1944, is buried in one of those cemeteries? May I also take the opportunity to commemorate all those people from my constituency and from the whole of Staffordshire? I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) concurs with me in that. I want to commemorate, as we will on Remembrance Day next weekend, the bravery of the people to whom my right hon. Friend has already referred, and I should be most grateful if he would be good enough to accept that as my congratulations to him on a very fine speech.

Mr Simpson: I thank my hon. Friend. He and I have spoken before about the tragic death of his father and about what that meant to him. I am always conscious, as I know we all are, of the impact that losses had in

war, on families but on friends as well. One of the memories in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission archives, which are now being put on its website, is contained in the letters—the desperate letters—that the commission received from relatives trying to find their husbands, sons and brothers who had been killed.

I do not have to remind this House that some of the biggest memorials for which the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is responsible are to those who have no grave: the Menin Gate, Tyne Cot at Passchendaele, Thiepval and quite rightly—I know the Secretary of State mentioned this—the memorials at Portsmouth, Plymouth and London to members of the Royal Navy and the merchant navy who were lost at sea, which at the time must have been totally and utterly devastating.

The Armistice did not end the first world war; the first world war was concluded at the peace conference in 1919, but, as other Members have mentioned, the conflict continued. The British Army was demobilised, but it was maintaining peace and order, as it saw it, in Egypt and Palestine and through the First British Army of the Rhine, and I would argue that the first world war did not really end until 1922 and the Chanak incident when we backed down over Turkey: Lloyd George had backed the Greeks; the coalition Government fell; and the rest is history.

I would like to leave the House with just one quote, if Members will allow an old military historian. I am holding the diary of Brigadier General Jack, which was edited by John Terraine in the early 1960s. Jack was born in 1880 and died in 1962. He was a conservative Scottish officer—a rather shy man. He was 33 in 1914, a platoon commander in the 1st Cameronians, the Scottish Rifles. He survived all that. He became a company commander and then became the commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion, the West Yorkshire Regiment. He was wounded in late 1917 and had nearly four months out of the line. He became a staff officer and was then put back into the line in 1918 to become the commanding officer of the 1st Cameronians, and in September 1918, he was made a brigade commander, commanding about 1,300 men. And off and on, he kept a meticulous diary.

The short quote I want to read out is from 11 November 1918, and it is his final reflections:

“At last I lie down tired and very happy, but sleep is elusive. How far away is that 22nd August 1914, when I heard with a shudder, as a platoon commander at Valenciennes, that real live German troops, armed to the teeth, were close at hand—one has been hardened since then. Incidents flash through the memory: the battles of the first four months; the awful winters in waterlogged trenches, cold and miserable; the terrible trench-war assaults and shell fire of the next three years; loss of friends, exhaustion and wounds; the stupendous victories of the last few months; our enemies all beaten to their knees.

Thank God! The end of a frightful four years, thirty-four months of them at the front with the infantry, whose company officers, rank and file, together with other front-line units, have suffered bravely, patiently and unselfishly, hardships and perils beyond even the imagination of those, including soldiers, who have not shared them.”

And most of us did not share it either.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am going to bring John Cryer in, but after his speech, I will be setting the time limit at six minutes.

4.43 pm

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson). On the quote he just gave the House, it is interesting that the poets and writers of the first world war were overwhelmingly drawn from the intelligentsia and middle classes. I can only think of two working class writers—Isaac Rosenberg and Frank Richards—who are still read and talked about now, and indirectly I will come on to talk more about that later.

The first world war, or the great war as it was called then, changed British society irrevocably. In the 1960s, Zhou Enlai was asked what the consequences of the French revolution were, and he said “It’s too early to tell.” We could almost say that about the first world war today.

The trenches effectively destroyed liberal England, to paraphrase George Dangerfield, and led to the rise of the Labour party and far more class-based politics and to the rise of the trade unions. In 1923, the first Labour Government was formed, and in the 1920s, the Transport and General Workers Union, under the great Ernie Bevin, and the Miners Federation both achieved real industrial power. The question why the first world war led to such an increase in militancy and class consciousness has occupied historians since the 1920s, and it probably always will. I will say more about that in a couple of minutes.

In the meantime, I want to talk about my constituency. Like everywhere else, Leyton, Wanstead and Leytonstone made enormous sacrifices in the first world war. For instance, Leyton Orient lost three first-team players in the first few days of the battle of the Somme, and Jack Cornwell, the Navy’s youngest recipient of the Victoria Cross and the third youngest VC in the entire British forces, was born in Clyde Place in Leyton, on what is now the Beaumont estate. There is a blue plaque there commemorating his birth. He was born in 1900 and volunteered for the Navy in 1916, so he was only 16 years old when he found himself serving as a Boy Seaman on board HMS Chester. Boy Seaman was then a rank in the Navy, although it was abolished a few years later.

The Chester was heavily involved in the battle of Jutland, one of the turning points of the great war, which was where Boy Seaman Cornwell was mortally wounded. Two days later, he died in Grimsby Hospital, and he was awarded the VC three months later in the autumn of 1916. His father and brother were later killed in the war. The Navy established the Boy Cornwell Memorial Fund in his memory to help the dependants of those who had served and been lost in the Royal Navy, but when his mother applied to the fund for assistance in 1918, she was, incredibly, turned down. She died the following year. Apart from being almost the definition of rubbing salt into a wound, that tells us a lot about how society changed during and just after the first world war. A child of 16 was put on a very inadequately armoured ship and probably died partly from shock. To raise public morale—let us remember that this was in the middle of the Somme, when virtually every family in the country was losing relatives—he was given a VC in a populist attempt to appeal to popular opinion. His family had been plunged into poverty by the first world war, but when the opportunity arose for

[John Cryer]

his mother to apply for funds, having lost her husband and their two sons, she was rejected and died in poverty the following year.

This was the same military establishment that was sending men on the Somme uphill in the rain, which Field Marshal Lord Haig argued was not a problem. He said that it was possible to attack heavily armoured German defences by going uphill in the mud and the rain. Personally, I am very proud to wear the poppy every year, but the one thing that stuck in my craw for a long time was that the black centre of the poppy had the words “Haig Fund” written on it. This was a man who sent thousands to their deaths without any good reason, because of his own stupidity and egotism, but that fund was named after him. I always found that a bit odd.

Some Members will have read a book called “The Donkeys” by Alan Clark, the former Conservative MP, who is now, sadly, no longer with us. The right hon. Member for Broadland will certainly have read it. It is quite rare and difficult to get hold of now, but I recommend it to anyone who gets the chance to read it. It is a scathing and contemptuous attack on the British military establishment in Edwardian England. When I was first elected to the House of Commons in 1997, Alan came back having been re-elected as an MP after five years out of Parliament. I remember talking to him about “The Donkeys”, and he said that he had not set out to write a scathing attack on the British military establishment. Indeed, he described himself as a fully paid-up member of the British establishment—he was: he lived in a castle, among other things—but he said that the more research he did into what happened during those four years, the more he became convinced that thousands of lives had been sacrificed unnecessarily.

In fact, that was one of Alan’s motivations for becoming an MP. He was always of the view that the Tory party was the natural party of the working class—[*Interruption.*] I hear a few “Hear, hears” from Conservative Members, but we on the Labour Benches find that view slightly odd. He felt that that link had been broken in the trenches, and it was his mission to re-establish it. That is a fairly abstruse reason for coming into Parliament, but it was entirely typical of Alan Clark. He never did anything by the book. Anyway, the more he read, the more he discovered that there had been an almost unbelievable degree of incompetence among the British leadership during the first world war. While Alan would not have approved of the sort of revolutionary instincts of some who came back in 1918, 1919 and 1920—demobilisation did not finally play out until 1920—he fully understood, because he said and wrote this, that many of those returning did not want to go back to and support the society that they had lived in before in which people were sacrificed, and their children were sacrificed, for the whims of their leaders.

4.50 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow all today’s speeches, but I want to pick out and commend the excellent speeches of both Front-Bench spokesmen and the preceding speech from the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer).

He touched on one of the outcomes of the first world war, talking about the rise of trade unionism. If there were benefits from the war, they were few, but we have also heard about the beginnings of the suffrage for women and the gaining of the vote.

I want not only to pay tribute to my constituents who gave their lives and made the ultimate sacrifice, but to say how much I have learned over the past four years since we have been marking the centenary of the first world war. Whatever our generation or background—I was proud to serve as the first female Minister for Veterans at the Ministry of Defence—we have all learned things. Only the other week—perhaps to my shame, but this will be fresh to many—I learned that some 2.5 million Muslims served with the allies, something which has not really been heard of or understood.

I mention my constituents and the sacrifices that many made, but the commemorations in Nottinghamshire did not begin only in 2014. In fact, they go back way before then, and I pay tribute to my constituent Dr David Nunn, who has led eight groups of mostly volunteer historians to create the most remarkable resource on Nottinghamshire County Council’s website. Building on some of the work done by the “Trent to the Trenches” programme, they have created a roll of honour by visiting every single war memorial in the county, looking at every name and then researching each one to create an online picture of all those who fell in the great war.

By way of example, there is John Fowler, whose father was the blacksmith in Trowell. There is Charles Clarke from Awsworth, who was killed aged 19. Like many of my constituents at the time, he worked down a pit—he was there at the coalface. Then, of course, there are some even greater heroes who are not on our war memorials. For example, Walter Parker, who earned a Victoria Cross, was not made in Nottinghamshire, but he certainly settled in the town of Stapleford after his great service. He was a marine who served with great distinction in Gallipoli, where he was a volunteer stretcher-bearer, earning his VC while acting with great courage in the face of appalling gunfire.

Like everywhere in the country, Nottinghamshire’s war memorials are numerous. Kimberley’s war memorial was unveiled in 1921 and has just been restored. It was dedicated by the vicar, whose own son was killed in action, and bears 60 names from world war one and, interestingly, 26 names from the second world war. It was in Kimberley in March that I was so proud to join children from a local school in creating a poppy stream, sowing the seeds that then flourished with such beauty in the summer, when we had a freedom parade and the Royal Engineers marched through the town. Unfortunately, Bramcote’s stream of poppies was not so successful. However, it put on a wonderful play, which gave to the children of Bramcote, in particular, an understanding of the lives of the 15 locals who were killed in the first world war.

I have mentioned the role of women in the first world war. We had a shell-filling factory in Broxtowe—the Chetwynd factory—that employed 1,000 people, many of them women. They were called “canary girls” because their skin turned bright yellow due to the chemicals they used. There was a terrible explosion, and it was the biggest loss of life in any explosion during the first world war. The explosion was of such magnitude that not only did 134 people lose their life but its effects were

felt as far away as Beeston, some three to four miles away. We finally opened a proper memorial to them in July, 100 years later.

I have not yet mentioned Greasley, where the war memorial lists a woman, Lilian Holmes, who served in the Women's RAF.

I conclude with an "in memoriam" that was placed in the *Nottingham Post* by Elizabeth Chettle. Three of her four sons were killed in the first world war, and she wrote:

"Bitterly oh bitterly we miss them: aching hearts alone can tell: the circle of our home is broken, for why none but God can tell." I am proud to say that, all these years later, at least she has a woman MP to read out that fitting tribute to the sacrifice and loss.

4.56 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and to speak in a debate that has already had so many excellent contributions, including from both Front Benchers.

Many people and many organisations have been involved in these commemorations, but I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). He and I have been discussing these commemorations for six years, and I commend him for the excellent job he has done in bringing people together to make the most of this important opportunity. The House, and indeed the country, owes him a great debt of gratitude. I say that because there are few moments in modern society when we come together as a country to reflect on our shared history, and these moments of reflection are not only rare but precious. That is why our commemorations must be inclusive, engaging and respectful, as they have been. This has been a commemoration, not a celebration.

On Armistice Day 1918 the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, announced the end of what was described as the war to end all wars. Today we know that it was not that, but it was the war that changed life in our country forever. The first world war touched every family, affected every community and fundamentally altered our country's place in the world. It was a conflict that brought profound political, social and economic changes that we still feel today. These centenary commemorations have provided us with a unique opportunity to reflect on that, to pay tribute to those who served and sacrificed 100 years ago and to pass on those memories to future generations.

At the beginning of the commemorations in 2014, I travelled to northern France to retrace the steps taken by the Barnsley Pals battalions. Looking out from the French positions, I tried to imagine what it must have been like for them. It was hard not to be overcome by the emotion of what had happened in that place. I walked the ground over which they had fought, and I stood in front of their graves. It felt like they were a long way from home.

Later that day, I visited the memorial to the missing at Thiepval. As I gazed at the thousands of names inscribed on the memorial, I saw the name D. Jarvis—my own name—staring back at me. It was a sobering moment. I finished the day by visiting the Devonshire cemetery near the village of Mametz. At the end of the

first day of the battle of the Somme, over 160 men of the Devonshire Regiment were retrieved from where they had fallen in action. They were carried back to their starting trench positions and buried there. Their comrades from the Devonshires put up a makeshift wooden cross and on it were carved the words, which can still be read at this place:

"The Devonshires held this trench, the Devonshires hold it still."

This centenary has also given us the opportunity to remember those who contributed on the home front during the war, not just because of the significance of their service, but because this is an important part of the story of how our country changed: the war led to more women in work than ever before; they took on roles that had previously been the preserve only of men; and with an estimated 2 million women entering the workforce, they joined countless individual heroines, such as nurse Edith Cavell and Doctor Elsie Inglis. Our democracy expanded, society became less deferential and the role of the state changed, and our politics would never be the same again.

Britain's place in the world shifted, and men who had never before been to Britain would come here to defend it. Millions of people from across the Commonwealth served in the British war effort. Some 1.5 million came from the Indian subcontinent alone, fighting side by side with British troops, on land, at sea and in the air. They would, of course, be joined by soldiers from many other countries, including volunteers from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the West Indies and parts of Africa. One hundred and seventy-five of those servicemen from overseas would be awarded the Victoria Cross for their courage and gallantry, and we must never forget them and their outstanding service.

As well as looking back, these commemorations should be about looking forward, as they are as relevant to the lives we live today and they will be in the future; 100 years ago nobody had heard of post-traumatic stress disorder, but today the issue is not just what we can do for our veterans returning from the frontline, but how we can prioritise the mental health of everyone. One hundred years ago, people from all over the world fought and died to protect our country, and today we need to remember the debt we owe people who were not born here but who helped to make our country what it is today. One hundred years ago, the first world war changed the role of the state; Government took action on food, rents and wages. That links to one of the central arguments in our public life today: what Governments should and should not do in the 21st century.

A number of us in this place know from personal experience that this was not the war to end all wars; wars continue to scar our world. I hope that in due course we will remember not only those who fell in the service of our country in the first world war, but those who have fallen more recently.

5.2 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): Now that I have said about three words, it is obvious that I have dual nationality, so I want to support those who have mentioned the Commonwealth. When Britain is under attack, here or elsewhere, the formidable troops of the Commonwealth nations rally to help. In world war one, some, such as the New Zealanders, came from so far

[Sir Paul Beresford]

away that if they had gone any further they would have been going back. For some nations there is a huge kith and kin bond, whereas for others it is predominately the Commonwealth link, with some kith and kin. The second group includes the Caribbean, the Maoris, the Pacific islanders and India—we must bear in mind that India in 1914 included Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. As we are well aware, the kith and kin nations are, in the main, Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand. My grandparents' generation in New Zealand and Australia were the world war one generation. I remember them talking fondly of the UK as home, even if they had never been here, unless they came to fight.

In world war one, the troops from those Commonwealth nations were at the forefront, volunteering to fight for Britain. For many of those nations, I found that the figures were unreliable, but millions of Commonwealth men came. Mostly they fought in the Army, but many fought in the Navy, and some in the fledging air forces. Their losses were huge and they were heartbreaking. Again, I found the figures to be unreliable, but one source said that the Canadians lost just over 50% of their troops, the Australians 50% and the New Zealanders about 60%. There is, as has just been mentioned, recognition of their bravery—something in excess of 170 Victoria Crosses were awarded to Commonwealth soldiers.

We in the United Kingdom have Remembrance Sunday. Australia and New Zealand have Anzac Day derived from the appalling Gallipoli battles. Equally, I understand that the Canadian equivalent derives from the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I pay tribute to all those New Zealanders who lie in my constituency on Cannock Chase in Stafford where every year we commemorate Anzac Day in the presence of representatives of the Australian and New Zealand high commissions. It shows how much we value the huge amount that the Australians, New Zealanders and indeed all those from around the world did on behalf of the United Kingdom.

Sir Paul Beresford: I thank my hon. Friend for that. Interestingly, in my constituency, we looked after the Canadians.

In Vimy Ridge, 10,500 people died or were wounded. On Remembrance Day here, I attend a service in one of my villages. We always read out the names of the village men who were lost. That was not done when I was a child attending my small New Zealand village service on Anzac Day—there are just too many names to read out at a simple service.

I have spoken about the dead and wounded combatants from the Commonwealth, but we must not forget those who returned to their nations, many of whom were physically damaged and many, many of whom were left with mental nightmares, which we did not understand, but which we have better recognition of now. They tried to return to normality in their Commonwealth lands. Europe owes so much to these men who travelled so far to fight for the allies in a war that technically was not theirs, but Europe's. They came and I suspect they would come again.

5.7 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) and so many eloquent speeches from the Front Benches of the Government, Her Majesty's Opposition and the SNP. The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), spoke about port communities and in some of my speech I wish to concentrate on those communities.

As has been said, the great war, world war one, impacted on every community in our country. Every town, village and city was affected. The seafaring communities were very badly affected. Like many others, the seafaring community that I am proud to represent had service personnel in the battlefields, but they also guarded our trade links, which carried people, goods and service personnel during the great war, and indeed in subsequent wars.

The greatest loss of life on the Irish sea during the great war was on 10 October 1918, when the RMS *Leinster* left Dún Laoghaire, then Kingstown, carrying His Royal Highness's mail to Holyhead in my constituency and was sunk just a few yards from the port of Dún Laoghaire. Among those who perished were children, crew members and service personnel from the Commonwealth—from New Zealand, Australia and Canada—and from the United States of America.

That vessel was carrying out its normal duty of moving people and the royal mail across the Irish sea. Many of the 500 who died had been just carrying out their normal duties; they were seafarers. They were given an exemption from going to war because of the essential duties that they carried out, keeping our sea links open. The tragedy unites the Irish community, the British community and the Welsh community. I am proud today to wear poppies from Ireland and Wales. On 10 October, we had a special commemoration in Ireland and Wales for the loss of those 500 people, and I met their families. It is right that Members have spoken about survivors and the families of the survivors, because those communities and families have been scarred by the great war. It was a tragedy.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Like my hon. Friend's constituency, communities in Coventry also made contributions in the great war. As he and the House will know, Coventry suffered in two world wars and was bombed in the second world war. The people of Coventry sympathise with his remarks about the sacrifice that was made.

Albert Owen: I know a lot about Coventry. My son-in-law comes from Coventry, as my hon. Friend knows; I think that he was his MP for some time. My speech is concentrating on the families of seafaring communities. I welcome the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) mentioning that many were lost at sea, so their bodies were never recovered and there were no proper funerals to honour them.

A lot of hon. Members have rightly spoken about the personal experiences of their own families. My grandmother was born in 1888. As a single parent who had lost her husband to disease, she became a nurse and worked in the convalescent home at the port of Holyhead during the great war. Many people came to her with severe shellshock, including her youngest brother, who did not recognise her for two years because of the trauma that

he suffered on the battlefields. It is worth bearing it in mind that many mothers and other family members had such experiences.

The other stark memory that I am sure we all have after seeing first world war graves is the age of those who died. Many who suffered were young men and boys; I do not know the exact average age, but these men were in their 20s. Their parents will never have forgotten that throughout their lives. My grandmother's son—my father—served in the second world war, and she always told me that every day that he was away was a dark day until he returned home safely.

One hundred years after the guns fell silent, the House of Commons is right to remember our communities, and those who sailed across the Irish sea and around the coastline. The RMS *Leinster* reminded me that vulnerable people were shot by U-boats. Going to sea—I speak as an ex-merchant seafarer who worked on that route—is dangerous enough. Crew members look after each other, but imagine being faced with the potential of being sunk by a U-boat, as cruelly happened to the RMS *Leinster*. The irony of that story is that the German submarine UB-123 was itself shot and blown up on the north coast of Britain as it went back to Bremerhaven.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) is right that we must also respect the bravery of our opponents because they carried out their duties. It is hugely appropriate—I give the Government credit for this—that the German President is attending ceremonies this year, because we want to look forward as a nation.

Our forefathers made the pledge in 1918 that we would remember those who died, and we are honouring that pledge today, as we have done over the years. As an ex-seafarer representing a proud seafaring community, I will be proud to stand up on 11 November and say to all those people and their families, “We will remember them; we will remember.”

5.13 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is an honour to speak in this debate and to follow so many moving and erudite speeches.

War is a ghastly failure of all other possible negotiation methods to resolve disputes over territory and resources. As a mother, alongside every other mother since time began, the prospect of war makes me feel sick to my stomach; the prospect of our children, of those we love and are responsible for, having to put their lives on the line—a brutal and sometimes fatal last line—to defend our values and population. War goes against every possible mother's instinct, except of course the most profound one—that every mother would give up her own life for her children's to be saved. But in times of war, it cannot work out like that.

A hundred years ago, mothers across our country and around the world were mourning the loss of millions of young men who had gone to war in far-flung trenches, hundreds of miles from their homes, to places they had never heard of and could not pronounce, in support of their Government's call to stand against an enemy trying to destroy a neighbour's way of life and identity. This was brought home to me four years ago when my children and I visited the Somme and a number of those fateful battlefields, and went to a place called

Ocean Villas—or so I thought—to explore a series of real trenches unearthed by a British lady who had retired to the area and found them in her back garden. On arrival, I realised, as a French speaker, that the name of the village is Auchonvillers, which, if you say it in an English accent, sounds like Ocean Villas. It sounds like a rather lovely place when you say it like that, but it is very far from the ocean and the view would have been unimaginably different from a pleasant sea view. So as young men in 1914 headed over the sea to northern France and elsewhere, mothers waited at home for news of their boys, willing them to make it back home, broken perhaps, but alive, rather than buried in far-flung fields.

In the far western part of my constituency is a large area of high moorland territory known as Otterburn Ranges. It is one of the Army's largest training areas for young soldiers and cadets, and in the heart of this training area are some of Britain's best-preserved world war one trenches. Hundreds of trenches were dug in Britain by some of the 1 million men who volunteered in 1914, as a way of preparing them for warfare.

From Northumberland went thousands of young men, many of them joining up to go to war as members of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers. The regiment raised 52 battalions, with 29 of them serving overseas. It was awarded 67 battle honours and five Victoria Crosses, losing 16,000 men during the war. It had ever been the case that soldiers who die in battle are buried where they fall, and for all those mothers and wives whose menfolk never returned, the loss was compounded by the inability to say goodbye or to find any peace in their bereavement by visiting their graves. So the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in the years that followed the war to end all wars, and the slaughter of a generation of young men, to help those who remained to learn to cope, is extraordinary. I thank all those across the world who care for them.

Some of Northumberland's young men, however, went further afield than Alnwick to join the Fusiliers and headed to the sea, to Tyneside, to join the Royal Navy—or, indeed, to join the Submarine Service. It is of those young men—the submariners—and the maverick, unconventional and challenging new part of the Royal Navy's fleet of weaponry that I want to speak for just a few moments. The Submarine Service is often referred to as the silent service, because of course a submarine can sneak up on an enemy unheard and unseen, and because we never really talk about the incredibly dangerous work that it does.

In the early 20th century, submarines were considered somewhat shocking—not really sporting—by our own naval chiefs, but a few who understood their military potential for advantage quietly got on with building these strange underwater tubes; or, as one modern-day submariner described it to me, a caravan with no windows with a gang of friends in it, and you have no idea where you are. Modern-day submarines are highly technical, very expensive bits of kit, some more complex than a space station, but back in 1914 they were simpler and less safe, and the chances of survival as a submariner were very low. If a submarine was hit or had mechanical failure, it nearly always ended up at the bottom of the sea: a cruel and brutal death, and for the whole crew. The technology moved fast as the Germans built up their U-boat fleet and demonstrated how they could

[Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

sink our ships, so the Royal Navy encouraged more use of this maverick weapon, with the support of the then First Sea Lord, Winston Churchill.

A young lieutenant commander, Max Horton, said to have been an aggressive and self-confident gambling man, daring by nature—we do not get those these days, somehow, in the world of peace and safety that we can enjoy—took on the challenge of demonstrating the power of the submarine. He later became an admiral and commander-in-chief of the Western Approaches in the second world war, responsible for the battle of the Atlantic. But back in 1914, Horton and those young Northumbrians who had joined up were living in inhuman conditions in those early submarines. We might consider today that their work was guerrilla warfare. Both our submarines and, as the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) mentioned, German U-boats targeted enemy military surface fleets, and both took hits. In fact, out of 17,000 German men who served in submarines, more than 5,100 lost their lives. Serving on a submarine was, without doubt, one of the most dangerous occupations of that entire war.

We read the historical records about the battalions and their battles; the bravest young men with battle honours; statistics and events; moments of critical importance in those battles; and leaders' decisions made always with imperfect information, some leading to victory, some not. But human conflict was always the ultimate consequence. Armistice—that moment when a cessation of hostilities is agreed by all parties; the start of the negotiations to find a solution for a lasting peace—has to be the moment that we must celebrate and remember that every mother always has to carry this burden.

5.19 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): May I begin by congratulating the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State on their excellent opening speeches?

My constituency office is in the Fulforth community centre, in a small pit village called Sacriston. In the entrance to the community centre is a war memorial that was rescued from the memorial hall, which was pulled down several years ago. On that beautiful mahogany memorial, inlaid with gold lettering, are the names of 122 men just from Sacriston and the surrounding area—it is a very small area—who lost their lives in the first world war. This Sunday, the local community will plant 122 crosses and a few more, because some people are not on the memorial, in the garden of remembrance next to the community centre, and I congratulate the community on doing that. I know that similar ceremonies will take place throughout the nation.

The individuals marked and remembered on that memorial were sons, brothers and husbands. When I look at their names, I think of the sacrifice that they made for this country, but I also remember that their ambitions and dreams were unfulfilled, and their loved ones left behind were worrying and thinking about what could have been.

There was an outpouring of remembrance after the Armistice. Throughout the nation, memorials such as the one in Sacriston were built, as well as clocks, parks and memorial halls. I live across the road from

the Pelton Fell Memorial Park, which was dedicated to those who lost their lives in the first world war, with the money raised by local miners and the mine company.

Those are physical memorials, but I would like to join the Secretary of State in congratulating the Heritage Lottery Fund. Over the last four years, it has allowed local communities to bring to life the stories behind some of the casualties and tell the wider story of the effects of the first world war. I had the privilege last week of going to the exhibition it has funded, where I met two young ladies from North Durham, Jade Hay and Caitlin Dobby. They had worked on a project that told the story of what happened to children who lost their fathers during the first world war, and, in some cases, their mothers to Spanish flu after the war. They were horrendous stories of children committed to industrial schools or transported to Australia and Canada—stories never told before. Their only crime was that they were poor, but society just left them. It is thanks to the HLF funding for the project that a spotlight has been shone on that human face, not on the battlefield, but on the home front.

The right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) and I have had the privilege of being Commonwealth War Graves Commissioners. I have been a commissioner for the last eight years; unfortunately, all good things come to an end, and that will end in December this year. He explained how the commission came into being. Like many great things in this country, it came into being by accident. Today the commission is held in high esteem, but it was not just after the first world war. At the time, some argued that we should repatriate the dead and that people should be able to put up their own memorials and crosses. It was a hugely controversial event but, thankfully, the commission saw through and became the great organisation it is today.

The commission commemorates the dead of the first and second world wars in 23,000 locations in more than 150 countries. I want to thank the staff of the commission and the partner nations that have contributed—Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India—and make it all possible. It has been a great privilege working with them.

May I say to right hon. and hon. Members that, while they should remember the great iconic sites in France, they should also visit their local cemeteries? We have over 300,000 casualties in cemeteries in this country, and if they can visit them, they should do so. We have an ongoing project to put up signs to commemorate them. They should give recognition to the sites that we in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission look after in their local communities.

In finishing, let me say that remembrance is important not just in remembering the sacrifice that individuals made, but, as was eloquently put forward by both the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, in learning some of the lessons for the future.

5.25 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Some full tributes have been paid this afternoon, and I add mine to them. In particular, I pay tribute to the civil servants who have worked tirelessly throughout this centenary period, and to colleagues, who have been unstinting in their advice; perhaps I can single out the

hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for all his wise counsel over the six years that we have been debating these matters.

My fullest tribute is to the public, because they have made this centenary. Their appetite for this was unknown when we started on this journey seven years ago, but it has exceeded all our expectations. The centenary has been a tonic in a rather shouty and cynical age, and the public's maturity and reflectiveness have shown through. Throughout, there has of course been pride, yes; but jingoism, no. I have been enormously proud of them.

When the President of Germany lays his tribute at the Cenotaph in a few days' time, it will not be an act of reconciliation. The people of our two countries are well beyond that now. It will be the solace of a friend, and of an equal in all the acts of remembrance that we will carry out on Sunday, when we look to the future while respecting the past.

Two small villages in my constituency, Upton Scudamore and Chicklade, last month unveiled new memorials to villagers—ordinary men who had been forgotten for decades, and are now remembered. When we commemorate events of this sort, we very often remember the great men—generals and politicians—and perhaps less so the ordinary men, but society is the poorer for the loss of them. They are men such as Private Fred Barnes, Bombardier William Beak, Private Job Daniells, Private William Hinton and 19-year-old Serjeant Albert Greenland MM—military medal. Now, after a gap of 100 years, they are memorialised in the village of Upton Scudamore, overlooking Salisbury plain. Stalin is alleged to have said that one death is a tragedy, but 1 million deaths is a statistic. Interestingly, Mother Teresa said more or less the same thing from the opposite end of the moral spectrum. Reflecting on those five ordinary men, we begin to understand what those two individuals were thinking of.

Of all the projects and initiatives throughout the past five years, it is invidious to pick out any, but I will pick out just two. One of the most striking, backed by the Government, was called the Unremembered, about which I wrote to colleagues in the summer. Its poster boy is the remarkable Lieutenant Walter Tull, a footballer and black Army officer. He was a truly inspirational individual whom the centenary has taken from obscurity and given the prominence that he so richly deserves. Projects such as the Unremembered and No Barriers have touched those in society who may have felt, quite wrongly, that they had no equity in this material. It has all been about drawing people together and facilitating, as it were, the big society—not by distorting facts for political ends or photoshopping history, but by shedding light on it.

I will not rather presumptuously try to draw the lessons from the four years of the great war, but I want to make some observations. The first is that once we have committed to a war, it has a momentum and a life of its own; we cannot predict it, and we certainly cannot control it. My second observation is on the need for eternal vigilance. There never was, and probably never will be, a war to end all wars. That is not in our nature. Instead, war just mutates, and we need to be prepared for that. My third observation is that peace is even more difficult than war. What happened in 1945 suggested that we had learned the lessons of 1918, but the events in the Gulf in 2003, in which I was involved in a small way, suggested that those lessons were quickly forgotten.

My fourth observation is that war most definitely has consequences that are difficult to predict. Some of them are good and some of them are very bad. More died from world war one-related Spanish flu than in the trenches, but then we got universal suffrage. Society was never the same again—in the main, very much for the better. My fifth observation is that we should always pursue war criminals. The German people were dealt with very harshly in 1918, but their leaders certainly were not.

My sixth observation is that the loose concert of Europe failed so spectacularly in 1914 that we spent the next 50 years forging institutions that would underpin the international rules-based order. Today, the people of America, the greatest nation on Earth, go to the polls. I very much hope that they reflect on the duty that they owe us all in attempting to underpin that rules-based system.

5.31 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is an enormous privilege to serve in this Chamber, and especially to take part in this debate. I wish to pick up on one comment by the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison): he talked about how the public have engaged with the commemoration of the first world war, and I completely agree with him on that. I disagree with whoever said earlier that young people have not shown quite the same engagement. In my constituency, young people have absolutely engaged. The schools have been engaged and have taken part thoroughly, encouraged and educated by the Sefton libraries and many volunteers throughout the constituency. They are taking forward that knowledge and understanding of history for future generations.

On Sunday morning, I shall be at the Alexandra park memorial in Crosby to remember the 4,000 people from Sefton who were killed during world war one. We will then go to the Royal Naval Association comrades club—another fine institution to go with the Royal British Legion, which my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) mentioned in his fine opening speech for the Opposition.

Today is the launch of the Sefton libraries project Beyond the War Memorials, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The journalist Peter Harvey has explained the project on Twitter. It includes the sending of letters to the last known addresses of some of those named on the memorials. It also includes a short film in which the current occupant of one property in Crosby, 70-year-old Terri Whitaker, reads her letter to the three Grossart brothers who were killed in the war, aged 19, 20 and 21. They had lived in her house before they went off to war. It is a fitting tribute from her to those from Sefton who were killed.

On Sunday, on the beach at Formby, the National Trust will hold its Pages of the Sea commemoration to recognise the many people who left for war by sea. The event will centre around the drawing of large-scale portraits of casualties, which will be washed away by the sea, representing and reminding us of the millions of lives lost or changed forever by the war.

That brings me to my main point. The hospital at Moss Side, Maghull, in my constituency is now part of the Ashworth high-security psychiatric hospital, but in world war one, Moss Side hospital pioneered the treatment of shellshock. The work there paved the way for much

[Bill Esterson]

of our understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder, and for modern mental health practice and medicine. At the time, the *British Medical Journal* described the treatment at Moss Side, which is recognisable today, as “suggestion, persuasion, therapeutic conversations, re-education. The physician masters the patients, gains his confidence and analyses his troubles and morbid ideas and sets his mind at rest”. This was the forerunner of both cognitive behavioural therapy and EMDR, which, for those of us who have not come across it before, is eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing. We can trace their origins straight back to the work done 100 or so years ago at Moss Side.

At the same time that treatment was starting at Maghull, soldiers who were ill were being executed. Arbitrary decisions were taken about whether a man was suffering from shellshock and should be sent for treatment, or should be deemed a coward, convicted and sentenced to death. There is no adequate explanation for the gross injustice suffered by those labelled cowards and shot at dawn in world war one.

Take the case of Private Jimmy Smith of the Liverpool Pals. Jimmy survived Gallipoli. He was decorated at the Somme, where he was seriously injured, but he was forced to return to duty on the frontline, despite clearly suffering from shellshock. He was found guilty at court martial after going absent without leave, and sentenced to death by firing squad. The officer in charge ordered Jimmy’s friend to fire the fatal shot after Jimmy was only wounded by the firing squad, most of whom deliberately missed because they did not agree with the sentence. They knew Jimmy was not a man lacking in moral fibre.

As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East mentioned, 306 men were shot for cowardice, and he spoke of his role in achieving the pardon of those 306. I am very pleased that he did so, and that the Labour Government gave that recognition to those men. The military cemetery at Kemmel Chateau, where Jimmy is buried, has the inscription, “Gone but not forgotten”. How appropriate for him and for all the 306.

Today, veterans are still suffering. In my constituency we have a fantastic support group, Veterans in Sefton, who counsel other veterans. The stigma, and the lack of parity of resource and esteem with physical health, in the military and beyond, are the reality today. It would be a fitting mark of respect to those who came home bearing the psychological scars of world war one; it would be right, too, for those who were shot at dawn; and it would be a tribute to those pioneers at Maghull for their groundbreaking work if we were to make good today on the shortfall in mental health support for veterans, and for everyone else.

5.37 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Mr Speaker, thank you very much for allowing me to participate in this important debate, in which we have heard excellent Back-Bench and Front-Bench contributions in commemoration of all those who gave their life in that epic conflict which became the first world war. Although I do not come from a military family per se, my father Reginald Francois fought in the second war, on a minesweeper at D-day, and my grandfather Matthew John Francois served in the first war in the Rifle Brigade, joining up in his 30s. He lost his leg as a casualty.

The first world war massively influenced the development of this country in social, economic, military and political terms, but I would like to focus on another area in which it greatly influenced this country: our cultural history. The first world war has been depicted in many art forms, not least in film. Famous movies such as “Oh! What a Lovely War”, “All Quiet on the Western Front”, “Gallipoli” and, more recently, “War Horse” have given us vivid depictions, both satirical and brutally realistic, of life in the trenches. There have also been books and plays of many kinds; “Birdsong” and “Journey’s End” are two that spring readily to mind.

However, some of the most evocative memories from the first world war are brought to us by the soldiers who became known as the war poets. These were young men, mainly—although not exclusively—from English public schools, who served as junior officers or in other ranks, predominantly on the western front. One of the earlier, arguably more optimistic, war poets, Rupert Brooke, was born on 3 August 1887, the son of a housemaster at Rugby School. Educated at Rugby and then King’s College, Cambridge, he was commissioned into the Royal Naval Division in 1914, before being redeployed to Gallipoli in March 1915, where he became fatally ill and died of blood poisoning that April. However, while on leave in December 1914, Brooke wrote his five war sonnets, of which the most famous is undoubtedly “The Soldier”.

“If I should die think only this of me:

That there’s some corner of a foreign field

That is forever England. There shall be

In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,

Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam;

A body of England’s, breathing English air,

Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,

A pulse in the eternal mind, no less

Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;

And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,

In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.”

As the war progressed, the mood of the war poets changed. In Siegfried Sassoon’s “The General”, he expresses great scorn for those who gave the orders that led men to die. In the latter stages of the war came Wilfrid Owen, who was born on 18 March 1893, the son of a former mayor who had fallen on hard times. He never attended university, but in 1916 he was commissioned into the Manchester Regiment. In 1917, Owen wrote arguably the most famous of all the war poems, “Dulce et Decorum Est”. The final verse refers to a casualty:

“If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est

Pro patria mori.”

Contrary to the “Blackadder” theory of world war one—of senseless slaughter in the trenches, with no gains by either side—in the summer and autumn of 1918 the British Army did get it right. It breached the impenetrable Hindenburg line and broke the back of the German army. Using new tactics of combined arms, short and sudden artillery bombardments and the mass use of tanks, the British Army comprehensively defeated the Germans in the field and brought about the Armistice. By a great irony, Wilfred Owen was awarded the Military Cross in October 1918, and on 4 November, just one week before the Armistice, he was killed leading his platoon in an assault on the Sambre-Oise canal.

The great writings of these men live on today to remind us of the horror of war, and of trench warfare in particular. We must never forget the sacrifices that were made so that we can continue to live in a free country. Lest we forget.

5.43 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I want to speak about two men who never came home from the great war: my great uncle Oliver Williams Benn and George Edwin Ellison.

Oliver was little spoken of in our family when I was growing up, I suspect because the pain of his loss was still too raw despite the passing of the years. What we do know about him now is thanks to my son James, who wrote a book about his life. He was commissioned into the Somerset Light Infantry and arrived in Gallipoli on 26 May 1915, landing on W beach at Cape Helles, where he was posted to the 1st Battalion the Essex Regiment. Ten days later, on 6 June, he was posted missing after the third battle of Krithia. The family desperately searched for news in the hope that he had been captured. His mother wrote to him regularly, but gradually hope faded and at the end of the war all her letters were returned unopened.

A few summers ago, we retraced Oliver’s journey from the beach to the place where he died. The trenches, their edges softened by the years, are still visible in the woods, but the site of trench H12, where he was last seen, is now a field of sunflowers. As we stood there in the burning midday sun, my son James read from Oliver’s last letter to his mother, in which he wrote:

“Good-bye mother darling... Please don’t worry... All my best love, your very happy boy. Nol.”—

Nol was the family nickname for him. His body was never found and he is one of over 20,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers whose names are inscribed on the Helles memorial. He was 27 years old.

George Edwin Ellison lived in Leeds and joined the 5th Royal Irish Lancers at the outbreak of war. He fought at the battle of Mons in 1914 and in the years that followed, at Loos, Ypres and Cambrai, before returning to Mons on 11 November 1918, when, while scouting in the woods on horseback, he was shot and killed by a sniper—a “goodnight kiss”, in the slang. It was around 9.30 in the morning, an hour and a half before the Armistice. George Ellison was 40 years old. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) reminded us in his magnificent speech—as was the speech of the Secretary of State—he was the last British soldier to lose his life in battle in the great war, and he rests in the St Symphorien cemetery, as beautiful in its own way as the field of sunflowers in Gallipoli. How quickly nature covers up the horror of war.

Whether by design or fate, George Ellison’s grave is just a few footsteps across the grass, as we heard, from the resting place of the first British soldier to die in action on the western front, John Parr, who was with the 4th Battalion the Middlesex Regiment. He was just 17 years of age. The first and the last, and in between them in time, if not in place, lie the millions who gave their lives in the war that was meant to end all wars, but did not.

Philip Parker wrote this poem inspired by the life and death of George Ellison and John Parr. It is part of “The Centena Collection” of Armistice poems, produced in collaboration with the Imperial War Museum by a group of writers known simply as 26. Each poem is exactly 100 words. It is entitled “Goodnight Kiss”:

“Five strides apart, five summers past, I saluted you and the old sweats riding to War.

I fell first. And waited: while you mined the frozen mud. Ducked into crump holes. Pinched lice from your seams. Felt the pear drops’ sting at Wipers.”—

“pear drops” was the slang for gas—

“You drink Hannah’s words from home; Jimmy’s walking now.

Then you’re following the tank tracks from Cambrai. The chase draws you to Mons, where your War began. In the woods on the eleventh day, a goodnight kiss. Ninety minutes to Armistice.

My wait ends. First and last in a bunker for pals, we lie five strides apart.”

May those who fell forever rest in peace as we who are left resolve always to remember them.

5.48 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thought the speech by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) was very touching; I thank him for giving it.

I want to talk about an incident in my life that connected me to the first world war. On Friday 17 December 1982 at St George’s church, Stockport, I attended the funeral of a young soldier from my company who had been killed in Northern Ireland. Sadly, it was the sixth funeral that I had attended that week; all were for men from my company—the company I was commanding was A Company of the 1st Cheshires. In all, 11 soldiers and six civilians—five of them young women, one of whom died in my arms—were killed by an Irish National Liberation Army bomb on Monday 6 December at Ballykelly, County Londonderry.

As I came out of St George’s, a very old lady was weeping quietly on the far side of the road. I had not noticed her in the funeral, but she might have been there. I crossed the road and spoke to her. I think I said, “The soldier is out of his pain now, you know.” She looked up at me and replied, “You don’t understand.” To be honest, I was somewhat irked by that comment, as I was with my soldier when he died and I was grieving, too. I must have shown unworthy irritation to her, because she said, “No, you really don’t understand.” I remember asking her why, and she said something like, “When I was a young girl, I stood where I am now and watched 800 young local boys of the 6th Cheshires go into that church. I knew many of them. That must have been in 1915. They went off to the war. When they came back home there were only enough of them to fill three pews in that church.”

That brought me up short. That lady was recalling hundreds of boys who certainly did not want to die in battle—battles such as the Somme, where, as we all

[Bob Stewart]

recall, 19,240 of our soldiers died on the first day alone. Those soldiers had very little choice. Of course, we must remember them, but personally I always remember everyone, soldiers and civilians, killed in conflict, and right now I am remembering every day the soldiers, the girls and the one boy killed at Ballykelly on 6 December 1982.

5.52 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a huge responsibility to follow the last two extraordinary speeches from my friend the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). I think that everyone in the Chamber was touched by both.

We use the phrase very easily, but it is a genuine privilege to take part in this debate and to pay tribute to all those who serve and have served and especially to the memory of all those who fought in the great war of 1914-18 and their families. For the first time in history, an entire generation was touched by the horrors of war. One hundred years on, there are still no words to articulate the sacrifice they made or the debt we owe. There can be no tributes to meet the measure of the price paid, lives lost or impact on our society.

In the spirit of honour and remembrance, however, we try as best we can. As we approach the centenary of the Armistice, it has been awe-inspiring to see the outpouring of support and commemoration across the country, especially in my own constituency. I recently had the great pleasure of visiting the Weeping Window installation at Middleport pottery, installed in the heart of my constituency. As well as being a powerful and beautiful commemoration of our fallen heroes, the ceramic poppies that cascaded from our bottle kiln served as a beautiful tribute to our own city's heritage and craftsmanship.

These commemorations convey so clearly and so movingly the Potteries' wartime history and the people of our community who lived in the shadow of war. North Staffordshire has a proud military tradition, past and present, and my constituency is home to many service families, for whom this season of remembrance holds a deep importance. I am sure I speak for everyone in this place when I say to them: thank you. Thank you for what you have done for our country and for the sacrifices you have made in our defence.

In each of the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent and the villages and communities in between, our permanent memorials have been joined by other tributes as our community comes together to pay our respects. One example is the brilliant *There But Not There* project, which was honoured in the recent Budget. It is an art installation whose aim is to put figures representing every name on local war memorials in the places around the country where their absence was felt, whether in schools, workplaces or places of worship. From St John's Church in Burslem and its beautiful poppy display to Milton parish church, where parishioners have knitted more than 3,000 poppies to adorn their building, local people are doing their part to mark this historic occasion.

As part of the Stoke-on-Trent Remembers campaign, a series of silhouettes—made and designed locally by Andy Edwards and PM Training—has been installed in each of the six towns. The 8-foot-high steel figures depict a real account of a local person's experiences of war. There are stories such as that of Corporal A. P. Oakes, of Scotia Road, Burslem and the 1st Battalion, North Staffordshire Regiment, who was present for the Christmas Day truce at Flanders in 1914. In his diaries, Corporal Oakes described his experience of that all too brief moment of humanity between the trenches:

“Our chaps started to shout across good humouredly, and the Germans replied in the same spirit. Then both sides got on top of their respective trenches, and one man from both sides met half way. Then peace on earth, good will to all men! was the order of the day, or rather the night... They all seemed anxious for a speedy termination of the war and one fellow made us all laugh by saying that both sides should stand back-to-back and advance.”

Across our community, there have been so many wonderful stories of commemoration. I was particularly struck this week by news that a quilt embroidered by 60 soldiers who had been recovering at the Stoke War Hospital had been rediscovered more than 100 years after it had been stitched. The quilt had previously been unveiled at Newcastle-under-Lyme's municipal hall in 1917, and raffled to raise funds for the hospital. It is a beautiful and touching reminder of the hardships that so many faced in those years. I hope that that beautiful quilt will end up alongside the recently found “Bayeux tapestry” of world war one, painted in 1923 by members of the 5th Battalion, North Staffordshire Regiment to remember 960 of their fallen comrades. It is now on display at the Potteries Museum in the constituency of my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell).

It would take far more time than I have today to offer a full account of North Staffordshire's contributions to the war effort. Undoubtedly, such a history would include the likes of Corporal Albert Ernest Egerton, a Potteries soldier with the Sherwood Foresters, who earned the Victoria Cross during the Battle of the Menin Road Ridge on 20 September 1917. Corporal Egerton single-handedly charged a machine gun nest, shooting three German gunners, and forced the surrender of 29 enemy soldiers. His comrades in that assault included another Stoke-on-Trent soldier, Sergeant Major E. Kelly, who led a charge in which four machine guns were taken out of action and 30 enemy troops captured. He received the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his actions.

These were incredible acts of heroism, but such acts were repeated a thousandfold by so many men, from the Potteries and beyond, who risked, and so often lost, their lives in the defence of their country and of the men serving beside them. These were the extraordinary deeds of ordinary people.

Mr Francois: Does the hon. Lady agree that as she has two pages left and only 15 seconds, an intervention would come in handy?

Ruth Smeeth: The right hon. Gentleman is a good man.

This Sunday, one century on, we will honour and remember those people. We will remember, too, all those who have lost their lives in all the conflicts since and pay our respects to today's serving and veteran armed forces personnel. However, as chair of the all-party

parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant, I am all too aware that we owe much more than respect. We owe a duty of care to those who continue to serve in our military. That means ensuring that the armed forces covenant is really delivering and that our service personnel are getting the support that they need. It also means supporting local groups such as the brilliant Staffordshire Tri Services and Veterans Support Centre, so that they can continue to work to support veterans.

At the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, we will remember them. But we must ensure that our history informs our present and that our commemoration of those who have gone is matched by our commitment to those who remain.

5.59 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate and a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and all who have spoken.

I want to concentrate on a theme that was brought up by I cannot remember which Front Bencher: how we will remember them. I want to give three examples from my own past of how I have participated in these acts of remembrance.

Ten years ago, before I came into this House, I used to conduct a choir, and I decided on one occasion that it would be a great thing to take that choir to Ypres. The choir consisted both of young children and a 90-year-old lady—who could still sing, I should say—whose brother had fallen in the trenches at the battle of Ypres. It was a wonder to see her wandering around the trenches. We sang choral evensong in the Anglican chapel at Ypres, which was a wonderful experience. Then we went to sing under the Menin Gate. I had been asked to do something different—they were used to the usual Anglican repertoire—so I decided to do an arrangement of the negro spiritual “Steal Away”. As we were finishing that, we got quieter and quieter as the verses went on, and at the end of that rendition the only thing that could be heard under the Menin Gate was the sobbing of those who had been listening and remembering. To this very day, people who went on that trip cannot recall it without tears coming to their eyes as they remember the experience they had.

My second experience is with the town of Thame, which started a project a couple of years ago to lay a Thame cross—it is like the cross of Lorraine—on the grave of every soldier killed in acts of conflict since the first world war. The people of Thame have done this, and that has included marine graves, where they have sent divers down to place the cross on the grave. So far over 300 people have travelled 150,000 miles to lay a cross on the graves of 212 people who lost their lives.

I was very privileged to be able to do this for Second Lieutenant Richard Hewer, who had fought in the battle of Jaffa and was observing for the infantry at the attack on Jerusalem when he was killed. His body lies in the cemetery in Jerusalem, and I went to it and laid the cross on his grave. And I pay tribute to those who look after our cemeteries; the cemetery is absolutely immaculate, and that made the experience of going there to lay this cross all the more telling and emotional.

The third experience involves a gentleman from my constituency called Mike Willoughby, who has over many years undertaken a project called “Bringing them

Home” in which he has set out the lives of 298 soldiers who were killed or who died between 1914 and 1921. That has resulted in a number of memorials, and I was privileged to go to the Townlands Memorial Hospital, named after the first world war, only recently and see a memorial unveiled by the lord lieutenant for Oxfordshire. That, too, was a very moving experience, as we read the names on the brass plaque that had been produced there.

Earlier in this debate, many institutions were mentioned as playing a part in keeping the peace in Europe since the end of the second world war, and I would like to mention one that was not mentioned, because I think it has played a phenomenal part in that process: the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe is not part of the EU; in terms of its membership it is almost twice the size of the EU, and although it was set up with a human rights focus in its initial creation and it looks after the European Court of Human Rights—the only court in Europe to which we elect the judges ourselves—it goes far beyond that.

If anyone is looking for an organisation that, alongside NATO, has helped to keep the peace in Europe over this time, they need look no further than the Council of Europe. I sincerely hope that it will rise to the challenge again in the future. It is unusual in having both the Israelis and the Palestinians on it, but it has not yet made a great effort to try to get them to engage in peacemaking rather than simply standing up and posing their usual views when they speak.

In giving the House those three examples, and setting out the importance of the Council of Europe, I hope I have demonstrated that I attach a great deal of importance to remembrance.

6.5 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate, with many touching and enlightening contributions. This is a moment when Parliament rises to the occasion and speaks for all the people of Britain and beyond.

In the limited time that I have, I want to highlight the role of all the women and men from the far-flung parts of our globe, in addition to those from the UK, in the first world war, whose contribution often seems forgotten or understated in modern-day Britain. That may sound controversial, but even in the arts and culture, in our war movies, there is a palpable lack of black and brown faces. For some, it almost seems as though they were not there. This omission, or lesser emphasis, is a mistake, and I feel that it is one of the reasons why we as a nation are unable to effectively counter the rise of the far right, which seeks to divide us and to sow the seeds of suspicion and hatred.

Many thousands who gave their lives were cremated and hundreds of thousand lie at peace in Commonwealth war graves in 150 countries. Thousands of troops from across the mighty continent of Africa lost their lives, and 166 were decorated in recognition of their valour. The British West Indies Regiment, which provided 15,000 troops, fought in France and won 81 medals and 51 mentions in dispatches. The Canadians who fought at Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele earned a fearsome reputation among the enemy on the western front. The Australians and New Zealanders suffered disproportionately huge losses fighting alongside the

[*Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhessi*]

French and British on the western front, in Mesopotamia, in Palestine and in the fateful Gallipoli campaign in 1915.

Then we come to the contribution from the Indian subcontinent. More than 1.5 million people came from what is modern-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and they were overwhelmingly volunteers. This was the largest volunteer army in history, and it contained Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and others. Khudadad Khan, the first Indian soldier to win the Victoria Cross, for heroism in Flanders in 1914, was followed not many weeks later by Darwan Singh Negi, who was also awarded the VC. The House will note from their names that the first of them was a Muslim and the second was a Sikh. It would be remiss of me, as the first ever turbaned Sikh in our Parliament, not to dwell on the incredible gallantry of serving Sikh soldiers and the contribution that they have made.

Sikhs made up just over 2% of pre-division India, but 20% of the Indian army in world war one. The Sikhs are rightly proud of their distinct heritage and their rich military tradition, which dates back centuries and was demonstrated on many occasions during the great war. More than 83,000 turbaned Sikh soldiers laid down their lives, and more than 100,000 were injured, during both world wars. We are so proud of our forefathers who fought so bravely, and every family has its story to tell, including mine.

In the first months of the war, some Sikh soldiers even refused to take shelter in the trenches because they felt that this suggested cowardice, but where is their monument in our capital city? The National Sikh War Memorial Trust, of which I am president, has campaigned for a memorial in a prime central London location, and many hon. and right hon. Members have signed our early-day motion, including all the leaders of the parliamentary Opposition parties and the Mayor of London. The EDM has been signed by 266 Members—the highest number for many years—and I encourage those who have not yet signed it to do so. I also encourage people to sign the online petition, launched in December 2017, which already has more than 46,000 signatures.

At the parliamentary launch of the campaign for a national Sikh war memorial, a staggering £375,000 was pledged by 15 generous donors. I place on the record my immense gratitude to you, Mr Speaker, for agreeing to our humble request that you preside over the launch. The fact that you took over one and a half hours out of your busy diary and made stirring introductory and closing speeches was not lost on the global Sikh community.

The Government have since pledged their support, for which I thank them, and I am sure that they will impress upon Westminster City Council the need for a prominent location. It would be fitting if we could have a statue of two turbaned Sikh soldiers representing the contribution of Sikhs in each world war. I believe it should be close to Parliament and a place where little Sikh boys and girls can see a representation of turbaned soldiers and feel a deep connection to their history. It should symbolise our unity, our diversity and our integration.

In the first world war, soldiers, sailors and airmen came from every faith and background. The allied armies were racially, religiously and ethnically diverse—just

like modern-day Britain. If anything, those armies are a true representation of modern-day Britain, and that is why we will remember them.

6.11 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a real privilege to speak in this debate and to follow such wonderful, heartfelt speeches.

H. G. Wells, who attended school for a time at Midhurst in my constituency, described the great war as the war that will end all wars. However, the fact that we refer today to the first world war shows that his belief was sadly misplaced. Only two decades after the war to end all wars, the world was again plunged into conflict, with millions of British and Commonwealth soldiers slain on faraway battlefields after fighting, for a second time, for the survival of our democratic institutions, our freedom and our liberty.

Not far from H. G. Wells' school is a village called East Wittering. It was the only parish in Sussex not to lose a single soldier during the great war. Just 53 parishes in the country can claim that and together they make up the thankful villages. More than 16,000 villages across Britain were not as fortunate as the 53. The names of the 6,800 servicemen from the Royal Sussex Regiment who gave their lives are fittingly inscribed on the regimental walls in Chichester cathedral, which also commemorate the 351 soldiers from the Chichester district who gave their lives. Soldiers died in lands they had only heard of in books so we can stand here today as free men and women. Private Samuel White was born in Chichester. He enlisted in Brighton and is now buried in Jerusalem's war cemetery after being assassinated by a sniper in 1917. Private William Turner, also born in Chichester, drowned in the battlecruiser HMS Queen Mary, which was sunk in the North sea during the battle of Jutland in 1916. He was just 20 years old.

For many like William, their final resting place is on the ocean floor. The ships they once served on are now their coffins. It is for that reason that I welcome the work of organisations such as the Maritime Archaeology Trust, which raises awareness of the forgotten shipwrecks of the first world war along our coastline. Thanks to Heritage Lottery Fund money set aside to mark the centenary of the Armistice, the trust's online interactive map serves as a poignant reminder of not only the sheer volume of ships that were destroyed, but crucially the number of crew members who went down with them. Not far from the Selsey coast lies His Majesty's Australian Transport Warilda. Converted to a hospital ship from a requisitioned transport vessel, she was torpedoed by a German submarine on 2 August 1918, with 123 of the 801 passengers and crew on board losing their lives. Violet Long, who had received an OBE earlier that year for her service in Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps, was one of those who drowned that night. Thanks to the hard work of researchers and funding, her story is now available for us all to hear and commemorate. It is appropriate in this Armistice debate that we call for everything possible to be done to preserve these war graves.

Equally, it is vital that we continue to honour everybody who has given service in defending us. Although this centenary year has made us all more aware of the sacrifices made by past generations, we cannot let names like Samuel White and William Turner vanish from

the record. It will be a humbling experience again to join city leaders at Chichester cathedral to pay our respects in this Sunday's centenary commemorations and to remember the bravery of the people who gave their lives.

Over the past year, volunteers at the University of Chichester have been researching the accounts of local residents who were sent overseas during the war, and that work allows us to remember and honour their role in the conflict. As part of the Priory Park 100 Armistice celebrations in Chichester, a life-size model of a local soldier, Maurice Patten, was created by our celebrated local sculptor Vincent Gray. Maurice enrolled in Chichester and died in battle in France in 1916, aged just 24. One can hardly imagine the bravery of those young men as they huddled together in their trenches, awaiting the order to go over the top and face death in no man's land. Vincent's sculpture of Maurice is a fitting tribute to his memory.

The guns fell silent at 11 am on the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, 100 years ago. Our voices in this place should never fall silent in honouring, respecting and remembering the sacrifice and bravery of these young men and women who gave their today for our tomorrow.

6.16 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I am delighted to take part in this debate. I have had the honour of chairing the Northern Ireland world war one centenary committee since 2012 and of representing Northern Ireland on the national advisory group that advises the Secretary of State and his Department.

It has been a privilege to be involved in helping to organise the main events in Northern Ireland to mark the centenary of the war, and I commend the committee I have chaired. Its members have come together from all walks of life to prepare and organise these events in the spirit of cross-community remembrance and reconciliation. Those were the two themes we chose for the centenary in Northern Ireland, because we recognise that remembrance has not always been a unifying theme in Northern Ireland.

Sadly, we saw that all too well in Enniskillen during our troubles, when men and women who had gathered to remember the dead of the first world war were cut down by an IRA bomb. The poppy became a symbol of that but, sadly, there were some who sought to make it a symbol of controversy, of division. I am proud to stand in this House of Commons today wearing a symbol that has become common in both parts of the island of Ireland: the poppy set into a three-leaved shamrock. The three-leaved shamrock represents the three divisions that were raised in Ireland and that served in the first world war, the 10th and 16th Divisions and the 36th (Ulster) Division. It is good that Members of the Irish Parliament are now wearing this symbol, and I am proud to stand in solidarity with them, as a Unionist Member of Parliament here in the House of Commons, wearing this symbol to reflect the sacrifice of Irish men of both traditions on the island who gave their lives in common cause in that war.

As we have navigated our way through this centenary, through the centenary of the Easter rising—a historic event that is important to Irish republicanism—and the centenary of the Somme, an event that is not only

marked by Unionists, we must recall that as many nationalist soldiers as Ulster volunteers died at the Somme. We have sought to reflect that, because this is our shared history. I am proud that in every county in Ireland today there is now a war memorial, representing the men from those counties who sacrificed their lives during the first world war, and that out of the lofts of many Irish homes have come the medals of those Irish men who served, as families once again lift the lid on this part of our shared history. More than 40 Irish men won the Victoria Cross in the first world war. Today, the British Government have provided to the Irish Government a memorial stone for every one of those men, and those memorial stones sit today in Glasnevin cemetery in Dublin, under the shadow of a cross of sacrifice, erected in the cemetery that holds within its grounds people such as de Valera, Michael Collins and the leaders of the Easter rising. Those graves stand alongside the graves of British soldiers, a cross of sacrifice and tablets memorialising the Irish VC winners. That is a mark of the progress we have made in the past four years in making commemoration and remembrance of the first world war a shared experience on the island of Ireland, and not just something that is commemorated by one tradition on one part of the island.

I am struck by the fact that three Members of Parliament from this House of Commons from the island of Ireland fought and died in the first world war: Arthur O'Neill, a Unionist representing Mid Antrim; Tom Kettle, a nationalist from East Tyrone; and Major Willie Redmond, who died at Messines in 1917.

I have always been struck by the story of Willie Redmond. He was carried off the battlefield, mortally wounded, by an Orangeman from County Antrim, from the 36th (Ulster) Division, because at Messines the Irish Division and the (Ulster) Division fought side by side, in common cause. In the winter of 1916, Willie Redmond, writing home to his friend Arthur Conan Doyle, the famous author, in the aftermath of the carnage of the Somme, where Irish men and Ulster men had fallen in that terrible battle, stated:

"It would be a fine memorial to the men who have died so splendidly, if we could over their graves build up a bridge between the North and South."

That is what we have sought to do in the past four years through remembrance of a war in which Irish men from all parts, in every county, in every village and town across the island of Ireland, came forward and fought under the Crown, in common cause. We have recognised this period of our shared history. That inclusive approach to commemoration is surely the greatest tribute we can pay to the Irish men, to the Ulster men, to the Unionists and nationalists, to the republicans who put on the uniform of the Crown and fought in common cause for the freedom of so many in Europe.

6.22 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): A hundred years ago on Sunday, a deafening silence broke out over the vast battlefields of Europe. Then, as now, there must have been very mixed emotions. There would have been that great sense of loss and remorse that so many people had been slaughtered, and so many people maimed and incapacitated. I guess that for those in the trenches there was apprehension. Was this for real? Could they trust the enemy? Would this truce hold? Could they stumble out of those muddy dungeons that had been

[John Redwood]

their safe houses over all those long weeks and months of toil into a more open and free world where they could behave more normally? But they were, and we are, also permitted some joy that at last this murderous, bestial war was over. After four years of mass industrial slaughter, with millions of individual tragedies between the men and the families of the different combative nations, at last the slaughter was over. There was a chance to build something better.

When I lay a wreath in the morning in Burghfield and in the afternoon in Wokingham, I will be very conscious of two things. I will be conscious that there are war memorials in every other village and town in my constituency that time does not permit me to visit that day. As I look up at those lists of names on those two war memorials, I will be very conscious of how long those lists are and of how many brothers are together on the same list, with a double or treble tragedy for the family. That scale of loss is difficult to comprehend and to wrestle with.

It reminds me of my two grandfathers. As is the case with most of us, our great grandfathers or our grandfathers were the survivors. They were young men who fought as young men and then tried to build a more normal life when they got back from the trenches. They had not had time to have girlfriends and to marry and produce children before they went off to war. My two grandfathers, like many others, went at the earliest possible opportunity, or may even have misled those involved about their age so keen were they to volunteer. Both fought on the western front. One was badly injured, but, fortunately, recovered. I wanted to know from them, as a boy and as a teenager, more about these terrible events. Like many of their generation who had been through the war, they did not really want to share it with us. It was obviously so awful. They did not seek my praise and they did not seek my sympathy. They wanted to shield me from it. I wanted to know more about it, but I think that they took that view because it was so awful.

We have heard many moving remarks today, particularly about those who died, but let us think about those who survived. Let us think about what it must have been like to have four years of no normal life—as someone who was 17, 18, 19, 20 or whatever they were—where they had no normal social life and no normal family life apart from very rushed periods of leave, when they could not pursue their normal sports and leisure pursuits because space would not allow it, when they had no privacy, and when they had very repetitious food. The dreadful things they fought are obvious—the shells, the bombs, the rifle bullets, the snipers and the machine guns. You can just about imagine how awful it must have been to have that fear that you were going to be asked to advance on barbed wire and machine guns, knowing that you had very little chance of surviving, but what about the boredom? What about the relentless discipline and the inability to know how to fill the time while you were worrying about what was going to happen next? All of those things must have been dreadful. So this is what I think we need to do. We owe it to them, to all those who directed the war, and to all those in this Parliament who sent our army to war—time does not permit this afternoon—to have a proper analysis and discussion about how we can

do better in future. I am no pacifist. I think we have to arm ourselves well to protect ourselves and to preserve the peace. We have fought too many wars and, too often, we sent our Army into wars where they had limited chances of winning. We did not have a diplomatic and political strategy to follow the war. There is no use in winning a war, unless we win the peace as well. We know that the sequel to the first world war is the second world war—the tragedy that it all had to be done again on an even vaster scale with even bigger munitions and more terrifying bombs, eventually ending with the explosion of two atomic bombs to bring it to a very sad conclusion.

We need to ask ourselves how we can make sure that diplomacy and politics does not let people down so much again. How was it part of our strategy that, twice, this Parliament sent small highly professional British Armies on to the continent to fight a war against a far bigger, better armed foe when they had no chance of winning because they had too little resource, the wrong weapons and the wrong tactics? In the first world war, it took four years to recruit a mighty citizens' army, to invent a lot of new weapons and to develop new tactics during the war. We were sadly unprepared. We asked them to do too much and it is amazing what they did.

6.28 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a great honour to represent my party in this debate. I simply thank all the speakers across the House who have made some truly magnificent speeches.

Mr Speaker, may I take you north to the Cromarty Firth, beneath the waters of which lies the wreck of HMS Natal, a heavy cruiser and the pride of the Royal Navy during the first world war? On 30 December 1915, the captain decided that there would be a film show on board, to which were invited mothers and children from the shore. At 25 minutes past 3 o'clock, on that same day, there was a massive explosion that ripped through the cruiser, which sank very, very rapidly. We do not know whether it was a German torpedo. It is probably unlikely. It is more likely that it was what sealed the fate of the HMS Queen Mary, which has already been mentioned in this debate—an explosion of the magazines because the cordite was notoriously unstable. A few months later, the Admiralty published a list of 390 casualties, but no mention was made of the mothers and children who died on HMS Natal. Today, the estimate is between 390 and 421. This incident in my constituency, not far from my home town, underlines to me the absolute horror of the first world war. As time goes on, I hope that we may be able to establish some kind of memorial to the mums and children who died so cruelly and suddenly.

My grandfather's elder brother, Arthur Stone, joined up in 1914. By 1917, he was oddly enough in a Pals battalion as a major and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for gallantry. It was a matter of great family pride when he went to collect it from Buckingham Palace with his parents. But I now turn to my grandfather's youngest brother, Walter Stone, also known as Wally, who was a bit of a tearaway. Before the war, he had fathered a child out of wedlock in Canada—something that did not become evident until quite recently, although my father had long suspected that there had been something like that lurking in the background.

Wally also joined up in 1914, going into the Royal Fusiliers. By 1917, he was a captain. On 30 November 1917 at Bournon Wood near Cambrai, there was a massive German attack and my great uncle was at the front. As the attack seemed to centre on his position, many soldiers were ordered to retreat, but he opted to stay at the front. He died, it is said, fighting to the last, along with the soldiers who stayed with him. It is a point of family pride that some time afterwards it was announced that he had been awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross. Now, that is family pride and I boast not of it, but I do wonder about the soldiers who stayed with him. Those soldiers did not desert him. They all lost their lives; none of them survived. None of their bodies was ever found, although it is hoped that the Germans buried them. The award that my great uncle received is about all those who stayed at the front. In a way, I think that all honours and medals awarded apply to a much broader spectrum than just to the people who won them.

To return to the present in the short time available, on Sunday I shall lay a wreath in my home town of Tain in the northern highlands. There will be a parade from the Church of Scotland parish church to St Duthus church, where the war memorial is located. I dare say that it will probably be a cold day. For all I know, the wind could be in the north, coming straight from the Arctic, and may be seasoned with a dash of sleet. That is all part of the job of laying a wreath in the highlands. I have done this for many years, and each time I go into the church where the memorial is and read the names on the plaque, it is the nature of the highlands that I recognise so many of the families, who are still living in the area. And that is what I shall think about.

I think about the past, what my great uncles did and what my father told me. He was a man who always wore a poppy. He told me that, when he came down from the highlands to work in London in the 1930s, the whole city would fall silent at the stroke of 11 o'clock—that people would stop in the street for the two minutes' silence. He told me how extraordinarily moving it was, and that memory stayed with him. I did not know my great uncles, but I knew and loved my father, who fought in the second world war in the 14th Army, and on Sunday I shall think of him. Let me just put it this way: he wore a poppy and so do I, with some pride.

6.34 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): We always say it is a great pleasure to talk in this place, but today it is actually a great honour. It is a remarkable occasion, and it is very fitting to commemorate the Armistice in this way.

I start by paying tribute to my British Legion branches in Ilkeston and Long Eaton for their relentless selling of poppies, aided by cadets. I will join them on Friday and Saturday to add to their collection, I hope. Like every other constituency, I am sure, mine is full of poppies of different sizes, made out of different materials, be they made of paper, knitted, made from the bottom of plastic bottles sprayed red, or khadi poppies. Every single type of poppy is around. I am sure that the schoolchildren, seeing the swathes of poppies everywhere, will be inspired to look into the history of the first world war, and hopefully it will help them to remember and appreciate what happened.

The commemorations have really captured the imagination in many different ways. Last Friday, I attended a performance of a very humbling and moving piece called "Standing in Line". It is a story of the great war, but specifically about Albert Scrimshaw, one of the performers' great-uncles who bravely marched to war but never came home. He died at Passchendaele, and left a widow in Derbyshire who never remarried.

Two local people did come back, one of whom was the great-great-uncle of my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely). He was called Major-General Jack Seely. He was the MP for Ilkeston from 1910 to 1922, and Secretary of State for War in 1912. He was the only serving Cabinet member to go the front in 1914 and still be there in 1918. He took part in one of the last great cavalry charges in history on his beloved horse, Warrior. Many people think that the play "War Horse" is based on the character of that horse. The other great political war hero that Erewash can lay claim to is Lord Houghton of Sowerby, who was born in Long Eaton. He survived Passchendaele, unlike Albert Scrimshaw. Lord Houghton had a distinguished political career, but is quoted by Lord Graham in *Hansard* as describing Passchendaele in one word—"mud". I have talked about three people whose stories we know, but across my constituency, on every war memorial, as other Members have said, there is name after name—sometimes more than one with the same surname—of those who gave their lives for our future.

Members have touched on the contribution that women made. My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) talked about the Chetwynd munitions factory. Some constituents of mine who went to work there lost their lives because of the industrial explosion. Women also worked at Stanton ironworks, making casings for shells. In the 1939 to 1945 war, they made concrete air raid shelters. Pressed concrete is still made at Stanton today for smart motorways and HS1, and hopefully HS2, so production continues. The suffragettes were great in the way that they campaigned for women to have the vote, but, to me, it would have been incomprehensible if politicians had not given women the vote after women gave so much in the great war.

I will briefly touch on something very personal, and move on to the second world war. We have talked about not being able to remember the first world war or talk to the people who lived through it. Last Sunday, I was polishing my father's medals for him to wear next Sunday as he watches the service on TV; sadly, he is no longer well enough to go to any commemoration. He has a Burma Star. My sister and I tried to encourage him to write his story down, and he wrote some scribbled notes, but sadly, because of his stroke, he can no longer communicate, so once again a whole story is lost. It made me realise that nobody under the age of 90 will have experienced the second world war. Obviously, we have lost the last surviving participant in the first world war. We need to make sure that we can capture history at first hand before it is too late. We always say "Lest we forget" and "We will remember them", but let us make sure that we say those phrases with great meaning, and that we remember them for many years to come.

6.39 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate. We started with two wonderful

[Vernon Coaker]

contributions from the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, and have heard from many Members across the Chamber.

We all have our own family references, and I want to start by referencing two individuals. The first is my uncle, Sergeant Vernon Coaker, who is buried in Normandy, in Ranville cemetery near Caen. He served with the 3 Commando Devonshire Regiment and was killed on 6 June 1944, so this is always a particularly poignant time for me. The second is my wife's grandfather, Captain William Roper Weston of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, who won the Military Cross, and whom I had the honour of meeting on a number of occasions before his death in the mid-1980s. I have been trying to reflect on what people like them would think if they looked at our commemorations and our remembrance today.

We should be particularly proud of the number of young people who are involved in these commemorations and ceremonies. I have no evidence for this, but I think that the numbers have been increasing over the last few years, thanks to the uniformed organisations—the Scouts, the Guides and the cadets, who march with such pride and are phenomenal young people—and our schools. My colleague from Nottinghamshire, the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), mentioned the schools in our area, but all of us can see this happening.

When you talk to these young people, they have an understanding—some at a very young age—of what they are remembering. All of us need to think about why that is, because it is so important that it carries on. I think it is happening because the schools and uniformed organisations teach the values; they teach that these people died because people failed to work together, to be tolerant, to respect one another and to co-operate. People sacrificed themselves to try to win that back, but it was also because of the failure of us all to respect those values that those people are in graves or became veterans. I may be wrong, but I think that young people understand that. It is really moving to go to a primary school and hear children of 10 or 11 years talking about the need for us to work together. It is with great pride that all of us, I am sure, will look at the uniformed organisations marching this weekend. The contribution they make is quite phenomenal.

Something else has changed in my area, and it is a great credit to us all. As well as the sacrifice that was made at the front, the sacrifice that was made on the home front is now respected and talked about. The role of women, the way they worked and all they did is respected and spoken about in a way that it has not been before, and we see that in the exhibitions all over the country.

I want to finish by reflecting on what this should mean for all of us now. I went to the marking of the 100th anniversary of the start of world war one at the St Symphorien cemetery, to which the Prime Minister is going on Friday. As has been mentioned, in that cemetery are the graves of the first British soldier killed, and the last British soldier killed. The horror and the poignancy of that brings home to all of us across our nation the sacrifice that was made. What was so powerful at the ceremony to mark the 100th anniversary of the beginning of world war one was the fact that in that very cemetery

are German soldiers. On the occasion at which we marked the outbreak of the war, German military officers and German Government officials stood alongside our royalty and our politicians. Their standing together at that ceremony reminded us that the horror of what happened must be a challenge and an inspiration to us all to ensure that we do not let it happen again.

6.45 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), and indeed all hon. Members on both sides of the House, in what has been an extraordinarily powerful and emotional debate.

I have not been able to think of anyone other than my great-grandmother this afternoon. She was born in 1895, and she lived with me and my parents until she died when I was nine, in 1987. She was a great woman—a forbidding matriarch—and I loved her dearly. She gave me my first job, which was to take her her tea in the morning and to put whisky in it, for which I received the princely sum of 10p a week. That was a great deal to a seven-year-old in 1985. I would sit on her bed while she sipped her tea and whisky, and she would tell me stories.

One morning, I remember asking her why her friend—I will call her Miss H—had never married, and she told me about this terrible war in which all the young men had gone away and had not come back. It made me cry; it makes me cry now. I found out subsequently that my great-grandmother's husband, a guy called Harry who was a cider farmer in Somerset, had not gone to war because he had a heart murmur. It was a very curious moment in history when biological weakness actually caused someone's DNA to be passed on. Miss H did not have any such luck. I also found out subsequently that she had worked in a butcher's shop, and when the butcher died, he—much to the shock of the town—left the business to her, not to his wife. We do not know whether it was love, but if it was, it perhaps speaks of a time when there were not very many men around.

I think of the norm now. In the first census after the great war, in 1921, it was revealed that there were 1.7 million more women than men in Britain. The press and politicians rather coldly and cruelly dubbed them the “surplus women”. I also think of a speech given in a school in Bournemouth, quite close to where I grew up, in 1918, when the headmistress is said to have told the girls, “I have come to tell you a terrible truth: nine out of 10 of you will not marry. This is a mathematical fact. The local men whom you would have married have been killed, and you must make your way in the world as best you can.” Indeed, they did: they went out and made the best of it, and went on to ensure that their gender was no longer quite so defined by its relationship to men.

All those men who died were sons; many were brothers, and many were husbands. A great many of them were not married, and the women they did not marry did not marry either. This generation of maiden aunts were widowed before they wed. I dare say a great many of them had enormous satisfaction from the jobs and the lives that they built, but as D. H. Lawrence wrote, if mutual love is

“Like a magnet's keeper

Closing the round”,

then for a great many, the years to come were incomplete. I say their sacrifice deserves no less remembrance.

6.50 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is an honour to speak in this important debate. I pay tribute to all those speakers who have made such moving contributions today.

Let me start by making a special mention of the contribution made by the officers and men of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The regiment raised a total of 16 battalions and was awarded 68 battle honours in the first world war, including six Victoria Crosses. They came at a terrible price, though, with almost 7,000 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders losing their lives between 1914 and 1918. Although the regiment recruited throughout west-central Scotland, I wish to single out the 8th Battalion, the Argyllshire, which was stationed in Dunoon and raised no fewer than eight companies from the towns and villages throughout Argyll. Of course, many others from Argyll and Bute joined other regiments or, indeed, other branches of the service. Their contributions are equally valued. As the Member who represents the submarine base at Faslane, I am pleased that the sacrifice made by those in the submarine service has already recognised in the debate.

I have no doubt whatsoever that come Sunday at 11 o'clock, there will not be a town or village in Argyll and Bute that will not stop and remember all those we have lost. As we have heard, every family has their own story to tell, and I wish to share with the House that of my grandfather, John O'Hara, who as a 17-year-old from the Calton district of Glasgow joined the Royal Army Service Corps in the autumn of 1916 and was sent to London to be trained as a transport driver. Having completed his basic training, however, he was spotted, singled out and seconded to the Machine Gun Corps, and then sent to Clipstone camp, near Mansfield, for basic training as a machine gunner.

In the summer of 1917, John O'Hara was sent to France, where he joined No. 13 Machine Gun Company, which was preparing for what would be known as the second battle of Passchendaele, in which he was injured when a bullet entered his shoulder and went through his hand. He was admitted to the military hospital in Flanders before being repatriated back to the UK. Every soldier who was sent back injured was accompanied by what was known as a soldier's character reference. The report on machine gunner Private John O'Hara described him as being "sober, reliable and intelligent". I like to think that that was the start of a long family tradition. Back in the UK, he was treated for his injuries at Old Park military hospital before being sent back to France in early 1918 to join the Machine Gun Corps of the 52nd Lowland Division.

For reasons which I have never managed to fathom, when he was back in France, John O'Hara was stationed at the town of Armentières and was part of a group tasked with salvaging sacred relics from the bomb-damaged church of St Vaast in the town. While they were working there, the celebrated *Daily Mirror* photographer turned official war photographer David McLellan happened by with his camera and took a series of photographs of my grandfather and his comrades at work both inside and outside the church.

The photograph of those otherwise anonymous Tommies, one of them my grandfather, standing to attention on the steps of the church, carrying the rescued wooden statues, has become very well known and, I

think, rather poignant. It is one of the great images of the final days of the great war. I refer Members who have not seen the photograph or who do not know the story to the excellent article by Tom Parry in the *Daily Mirror* just last month, for which he recreated the photograph, with the villagers of Armentières on the steps of the church of St Vaast—on the exact spot—carrying the original statues rescued by my grandfather and his comrades exactly 100 years ago.

Thankfully, and rather obviously, my grandfather survived the last terrible months of the war, but I have always wondered what happened to his four comrades. What fate befell them in those last awful months?

My grandfather was discharged in October 1919, and in the years immediately following, he enrolled at Glasgow University, where he gained a medical degree. He worked as a general practitioner in the east end of Glasgow for many years and was for a while the official doctor to Celtic football club, which brings great pride to the family.

Ours is just one of the millions of stories that families across the UK have. We are in the fortunate position that ours also comes with a remarkable photographic record. So when I lay a wreath at the war memorial in Helensburgh on Sunday to remember all those who gave their lives, I will say thanks for my grandfather's safe return, but I will spare a thought for his four comrades and hope that they, too, made it back home safely to their loved ones.

6.55 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a great honour to speak and to listen to so many moving speeches today, including the excellent speech by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), and to be able to pay tribute to so many Thirsk and Malton constituents of yesteryear, including in my home town of Easingwold, where it is my great privilege to lay a wreath on Sunday and pay tribute to all those who gave so much in the great war and to the sacrifices of their loved ones, their friends, their families.

Even 100 years later, every family is touched in some way by world war one. For the story I am about to tell, I should like to thank my relatives, Richard and Penny Booth, born Hollinrake, of Wells, Somerset. Some time ago, they wrote to me to tell of the incredible feats of Penny's father, my grandfather's brother, Ernest Hollinrake. It is a striking example of the millions of individual contributions on both sides of the conflict.

Ernest enlisted on 7 September 1914 alongside his pals in the Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire), an infantry regiment. Defence of the realm against a foreign aggressor, of course, was every person's duty. His Pals battalion was known as the Lydgaters. Lydgate is a small village just outside Todmorden, West Yorkshire, where my family originate. Ernest was only 18 years old. His occupation: cotton operator in the local spinning mill.

There are few accounts of Ernest's infantry service other than the official records, the first of which is three years into his service. During the third battle of Ypres, where 77,479 men were lost in the month of September alone, for his action on 20 September 1917, Second Lieutenant Ernest Hollinrake was awarded the Military Cross. The citation reads:

[Kevin Hollinrake]

“For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He...led (his platoon) forward under covering fire from Lewis guns and rifle grenades, and assaulted a strong point which he captured with thirty prisoners. His courage and determination were a splendid example to his platoon.”

Then, on 27 May 1918, near Rossignol Wood, in the northern part of the Somme, Ernest Hollinrake was awarded a bar to the Military Cross. The citation reads:

“When two of his front line posts were attacked by a strong hostile raiding party, and one section, greatly outnumbered, was overrun, he dashed up, leapt on the parapet, shot the enemy leader with his revolver, and led his men in a charge on the remainder, putting them to flight. By his great courage and promptness he undoubtedly saved his section, and prevented the enemy securing a much needed identity, and gained what proved a valuable one himself.”

In 1919, in an undated newspaper cutting with the heading, “Todmorden Military Honour”, the following was published:

“It is officially announced that the president of the French Republic has been pleased to confer the Croix de Guerre, with Palm on Lieut. Hollinrake of Todmorden... He received his British decoration personally from the hand of His Majesty at Buckingham Palace a short time ago.”

He survived. Most of his pals did not. Ernest stayed in the Army until 1922 and later went into business in Leeds. He was lucky by comparison to many.

I am not sure what advice Ernest or any of my fallen constituents would give us today if they were here to listen to this debate or to speak in it. Whatever the unforgivable mistakes and unthinkable atrocities of war, I am sure, at the end of the day, they would be able propose no other alternative than the last resort of being prepared to send our troops into the tragedies of war. Today, all we can do is salute them and all those who made so many sacrifices. Today and every day, we say, “Lest we forget.”

7 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 15),

That, at this day's sitting, the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the centenary of the Armistice may be proceeded with, though opposed, until 8.00pm.—(Iain Stewart.)

Question agreed to.

Debate resumed.

Main Question again proposed.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in today's debate and to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). I associate myself with the remarks of a number of hon. Members. I was particularly impressed by the speeches from the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson), as well as those from other colleagues.

Like many Members, I lost relatives in both world wars and I have found today's debate deeply moving. I want to briefly mention one particular relative, my wife's great uncle Albert Woodhead, who died at the Somme aged 19. He has no known grave. Our family visited the Thiépval memorial a few years ago. It was incredibly moving.

My constituency of Reading East, like the whole of the UK, Ireland and the Commonwealth, was deeply affected. I pay tribute to all the men and women who served in our armed forces, as well as in other roles such as in the merchant navy and the munitions factories, and on the wider home front. Britain owes a huge debt of honour to the Commonwealth and to what was then the British empire. It is important to remember the bravery and sacrifice not only of British forces, but of all those who served from Ireland, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Africa and the West Indies, as well as Australia, Canada, South Africa and other dominions such as New Zealand. Indeed, 1.5 million men served in the Indian army alone. Commonwealth and British empire forces were engaged on a wide range of fronts across the globe.

I would like to turn to the effect of the great war on Reading and Woodley and to mention some outstanding local people. Thousands of people from Berkshire served in many capacities. In particular, I would like to mention the story of Trooper Potts, who is the only person from Reading to have won a Victoria Cross. Frederick Potts, who came from the Katesgrove area of Reading, which I used to represent as a councillor, was awarded a Victoria Cross for his outstanding bravery. He saved the life of an injured comrade by dragging him to safety from no-man's land during extremely heavy fighting in the Gallipoli campaign. Although injured in the thigh himself, Trooper Potts dragged his severely wounded comrade 600 yards on a trenching shovel. Fred Potts ultimately survived the great war, dying at the age of 50 in 1943. Arthur Andrews, whom he saved, lived until he was 89. This moving story reminds us again of the service and self-sacrifice of the first world war generation. It is just one of many incidents we remember today.

In my own life many years later, my son used to play football with one of Trooper Potts' descendants, and I got to know the family well, which was a huge privilege. In this strange way, our history is all around us. For me, it has been a personal privilege to take part in this debate and to commemorate a small part of that history with colleagues from across the whole House.

Before I finish, I would like to thank the many organisations involved in commemorating this important anniversary. In particular, I would like to mention Berkshire branches of the Royal British Legion and Wokingham and Reading Borough Councils. Woodley Town Council has put up an extremely moving display featuring some of the servicemen from what was then the village of Woodley. Woodley is now a large suburb of Reading, with thousands and thousands of residents. Sadly, many of the small number of soldiers from that once village never returned. I also thank the many clubs, charities, employers and other organisations who have helped to mark this important commemoration and the local historians who have taken part.

7.4 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. At the outset, I want to observe how well the debate was started by my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and, in particular, the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson). The tone they set was dignified, moving and absolutely appropriate for this occasion.

On Sunday, we will mark the Armistice and 100 years since the guns fell silent, although it is worth noting, as has been said, that the war did not formally end until the signing of the treaty of Versailles, so we still have all the stories of attacks being launched right up to the final moment that the guns stopped. Generals feared that the war could restart if a treaty could not be negotiated, so they wanted to have the best position possible. That is why we have the tragedies of people being killed a couple of minutes beforehand. When I was out in Belgium earlier this year on Great Pilgrimage 90, I saw that one of the casualties was at 10.58 that morning.

What really brought home to me the enormity of the sacrifice was attending, at the start of the centenary commemorations, one of the "Lights Out" events, held at the local St Marychurch war memorial in Torquay. At the time of the war, St Marychurch was a small, still relatively rural community on the edge of the town. Ninety-four names are on the war memorial. I was 35 then, which made me older than absolutely everyone on it, which I found particularly poignant. These men had been in the queue at the recruiting office, smiling. There are probably still some photos of them leaving some of the local stations, having signed up expecting the war to be over by Christmas, before finding themselves, two years later, on the Somme.

This is about remembering that it was a war on an industrial scale for the first time in human history, with gas, planes, tanks, trench warfare and mass artillery barrages, and lines that stayed still for years. These were all things that had never been seen before. It was also a crossover between two generations of warfare. New technology was coming in, but it was still the age of the horse. In the first part of 1914, the British cavalry was still advancing across France and attack cavalry charges were still being mounted. On Saturday I was in Cockington, where there is a plaque as part of the purple poppy campaign, which reminds us of many of the animals that went away to war with their owners. It was a unique partnership, as they faced the horrors of the battlefield together.

I mentioned that I went out as part of Great Pilgrimage 90 to revisit many of the sites from 90 years before. Old comrades and families went to see where their loved ones were killed. The battlefield from the battle of Loos was particularly remarkable. It was totally flat, easy to look across, and overlooked by a couple of slag heaps that provided superb observation points—the army could be seen forming from miles away. That is where, in about a five-mile stretch, about 20,000 of our soldiers were killed. It was particularly moving when we asked about the attack—it was in September 1915, and it failed. When did the line finally move? In about August or September 1918. For three years, the bodies lay in the field. In a distance not that different from the length of this Chamber, for three years British and German forces looked at each other over this field, where so many of their comrades had fallen. This meant that, unsurprisingly, by the time that most of the bodies were recovered, they could no longer be identified.

It is moving to see where the first and last shots were fired and to note how close they are, and then to visit the cemetery where, as has been mentioned, the first and last casualties are buried. Interestingly, the cemetery was first constructed by the Germans in the war, and

our troops were treated there in a respectful way. One mistake was made. They called a regiment "royal" when it was not royal. They assumed it was a royal regiment because it was from Middlesex. The plaque is still there. It is a sign that in the middle of that horror respect was still being paid.

Thankfully, Europe today is very different from the Europe of despots and dictators who just over a century ago drove us to war, and today some of our former foes are now friends. It is absolutely right that the German President has been invited to the Cenotaph on Sunday. My grandfather was badly injured in world war two. His mother got the thing that was second only to the telegram saying your loved one had been killed: a rail warrant to go to meet him coming off a hospital ship. He was always very clear that he fought the Germans to get rid of the Nazis. His fight was not with the ordinary German, but with the leadership of Germany, and the only way of removing them was to go to war and remove the evil of national socialism from Europe.

It is right that on Sunday we remember the sacrifice of a century ago and that we never forget, because the first step towards it happening again is forgetting the lessons of how it happened in the first place.

7.10 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), whom I thank for his contribution, and to speak in this debate. Indeed, it is pleasure to follow all the incredible contributions from right hon. and hon. Members, particularly those of the Secretary of State and shadow Secretary of State.

I am proud to have served in the armed forces, in the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Territorial Army, in the Royal Artillery. I am proud to have worn that uniform and served my Queen and country. Northern Ireland has a very strong and proud service history. Newtownards, the main town in my borough, was home to the legendary Blair Mayne, who received the highest awards for bravery during the second world war and for whom we still await the posthumous recognition that so rightly belongs to him—his earned but withheld Victoria Cross.

I will take a similar theme to my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). A total of 206,000 Irishmen served in the British forces during the first world war, and another 130,000 were volunteers recruited from Ireland for the duration of the war; of these, some 24,000 originated from the Redmondite national volunteers, and 26,000 joined from the Ulster volunteers; and 80,000 of those recruits had no experience in either of the paramilitary formations before going to war. The recruitment rate in Ulster matched that in Britain itself, and that in Leinster and Munster was about two thirds of that in Britain, while Connacht lagged behind them. Northern Catholics enlisted just as often as Protestants. The German bullet did not distinguish between Catholic and Protestant, between nationalist and Unionist—anyone who fought the German empire was fair game.

Members might wonder why I have taken so long to outline the wholeness of Ireland at that time. The answer is this: I am tired of this remembrance event being politicised and turned so that wearing a poppy becomes a declaration of allegiance. Wearing a poppy is

[*Jim Shannon*]

merely being respectful and thankful to those who laid down their lives to allow us the freedom we so unthinkingly enjoy today.

I was not surprised to learn that more than 50 contracted and former Celtic football players fought in world war one. William Angus was awarded the Victoria Cross. I once read an article that stated:

“The remarks attributed to National Volunteer and poet, Francis Ledwidge, who was to die in preparation of the Third battle of Ypres in 1917, perhaps best exemplifies the changing...nationalist sentiment towards enlisting, the War, and to the Germans and British.”

Those remarks were:

“I joined the British Army because she stood between Ireland and an enemy common to our civilization, and I would not have her say that she defended us while we did nothing at home but pass resolutions”.

They fought while maintaining their nationalism, but now it seems that some refuse to remember for fear of somehow losing their nationalism. It is a very sad state of affairs. I am not swayed by the affiliation of any person who fought against the Germans. I am equally grateful to them all and honour them today.

In this the centenary of the first world war, I long for an end to the discussions of white poppies, for an end to the discussions of British imperialism, for an end to the discussions of sectarianism. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley, I long to stand as we did then.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman also recognise the great movement in recent years in terms of being able to recognise those who fought in the first world war from both Northern Ireland and the Republic? For example, the graves at Glasnevin cemetery are now marked by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and the remembrance wall, which for years was at the back of the cemetery, now takes pride of place at the entrance to the cemetery.

Jim Shannon: I have given an analogy from the past, and when the hon. Gentleman intervened I was about to give an analogy for the future. I too have been privileged to visit Glasnevin cemetery, as have many other Members. I was greatly impressed when we had the opportunity to visit the graves and see what the Republic of Ireland had done to remember those who had given their lives. Some of the history that we heard about was incredible.

Bob Stewart: May I pursue that point? I understand from what I heard last night that, as support for the poppy has grown in the Republic of Ireland, there has been a surge in the number of people from the Republic who want to join the British Army again. Is that not wonderful?

Jim Shannon: It almost makes me cheer. I am very pleased to hear about it, but it comes as no surprise to me, because there has always been a tradition of service in the Republic of Ireland. As I said earlier, the fact that 130,000 people from the Republic volunteered to fight in the first world war was an indication of their wish to do so. The Irish Guards have a strong association with us, and in my town a large proportion of recruits are

from the Republic. They are quite happy to swear allegiance to Her Majesty and to the British Army, and to do what they are instructed to do in their job.

I am also pleased—this is relevant to what has just been said by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones)—that we are beginning to see a tradition of change. War memorials down south that were going to rack and ruin have been spruced up, and memorial services are now being held as we hold them in Northern Ireland, over a period of time. Great changes are coming, and indeed change has come, but some people may still be unwilling to accept the new future.

I want us to stand shoulder to shoulder, regardless of religious belief, political ideals or anything else. I long for us to stand in simple gratitude and respect for those whose blood has marked the way and allowed us our right to debate these issues in the House tonight, along with the right to abstain—if that is what people want to do—and the right to voice opposing opinions, as we often do in the House, although we are still friends at the end of it. All those rights we have for one reason only: the sacrifice that was made with us in mind.

Some Members have referred to the role for youth. In my constituency, there is an incredible turnout on Remembrance Sunday for all the parades that I go to. How proud I am—indeed, how proud we would all be—of the uniformed church groups and the Army, Air Force and naval cadets: young people who are just starting out in life, but who want to serve in uniform. We also have an opportunity to see some of our older soldiers, although every year we look around and see one or two fewer. It is the same for all of us. That is life, but a new generation is coming in, and that new generation will follow all of us, and all those who have left us. It is good to have a remembrance service of that kind in my constituency, and I suspect that the same applies to every constituency that enrolls uniformed organisations and young people to make their contribution. They understand very well what is going on.

I wear my poppy, and so do my sons, who, in turn, have taught my granddaughters what it means to remember—not to idealise, not to seek to alter historical fact, and not to make any proclamation other than that, at the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them. That is what today’s debate is about. I long, in this special year, for those who have determined to disrespect the meaning of the poppy, and who simply do not care enough to buy a poppy or perhaps even to attend a remembrance service, instead to stand shoulder to shoulder with those who attend annually, and to express themselves in that way.

Let us all stand and take a minute simply to say, “We remember, we are grateful, and we will seek to ensure that the lessons learned through your tremendous sacrifice will be passed on to future generations”—which I know that they will. That is not just a phrase, but my enduring promise: I will remember them.

7.19 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and a great honour to participate in this debate and to give thanks for the service and sacrifice of the generation of the great war. I have been thinking a lot in these hours about my grandmother’s brother, Harry Blakemore, who as a boy signed up in August 1916

to the Shropshire Yeomanry—he was from Small Heath in Birmingham—ended up in the Cheshire Regiment and was killed in action on the western front on 28 February 1918.

Like many others in this House, I have the good fortune to be old enough to have actually known men who served on the western front. These old men of my boyhood had already outlived their biblical apportionment of three score years and 10, and when they said anything about the war it was only to speak of their pals and the horror of it all, with no detail.

As has already been said by an Opposition Member, my constituency of Stirling has a long association with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, a regiment that gave extraordinary service to this country. Stirling is a remarkable place for another reason: 43 Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps was founded, established and headquartered in Stirling. In fact the Scottish headquarters of the Royal Flying Corps was at the Station Hotel in Stirling. To this day Stirling retains its proud links to the Royal Air Force and honours the successors of those original men in their flying machines.

Of interest in Stirling over the past few years has been the way in which the *Stirling Observer* has reported the 100th anniversary of the war. Each week it has reproduced reports from the time, bringing to life the way Stirling was during the great war. It has been sobering. The *Stirling Observer* reports that tourists travelled from all over Scotland to see the new flying machines of the Royal Flying Corps based in Stirling, but it also printed week after week lists of casualties, with pictures of young men in uniform. The newspaper talked about shortages and inconveniences at home, too. This has been a remarkable act of remembrance by the *Stirling Observer*, and I would like to put on record my thanks to John Rowbotham, its editor, and his team, because they have provided for Stirling a remarkable and telling memorial.

Stirling's contribution to the war effort was not insubstantial and the number of people listed on each of the war memorials in all the villages of Stirlingshire give some sense of the sacrifice made by families, but there are two individuals I would like to mention today. The first is Lieutenant James Huffam. I recently had the honour of attending a ceremony in Dunblane to honour the 100th anniversary of the actions that led to him receiving the Victoria Cross for bravery. He rushed an enemy machine gun in France, crippling its attack, and under heavy fire he withdrew carrying a wounded comrade. Later on the same day, he led another attack, capturing eight prisoners and allowing the British advance.

I would also like to talk about 772 Private William Ebenezer Monteith, whose daughter, Margaret Davidson, I had the privilege of accompanying to the service of commemoration that we held earlier today in St Margaret's church. Private Monteith joined the Seaforth Highlanders in 1910 and was a member of the British Expeditionary Force, so he was among the first to be deployed in 1914. They were called a "contemptible little army" by the Kaiser and so proudly called themselves the "old contemptibles."

Private Monteith was soon captured at the retreat from Mons on 26 August 1914. He spent the rest of the war as a prisoner of war. It was his duty to try to escape, and he escaped from at least two prisoner of war camps, at Westerholt and subsequently at Friedrichsfeld. He was

recaptured each time. During his separation from his family, they received a letter, which is reported in the *Stirling Observer*. He said in the letter that the "food is inadequate" and he concluded it with his favourite battle-cry: "Roll on, Bonnie Scotland"—a battle-cry we can echo to this day.

That story and the many others of this generation tell of service—they put themselves last, putting service to their family, their community and their country first. Those who answered the call and those who were separated from their loved ones all served equally and we will remember them.

Lieutenant Huffam and Private Monteith both came back from the war and went on to live their lives—to marry, to have families of their own and to have careers. They gave us the country that we have today, and in honouring the sacrifice of those with whom they served who did not return, we also honour them. It is our duty and our privilege to honour their memories by seeking to prevent such sacrifices from being necessary at any time in the future, and also to build a country and a world of which they could feel proud. Every day in this place we are reminded of the great titans of Parliament whose statues are all around the building, and I am grateful that on Sunday we will all stand before memorials etched with the names of those who have given us the country that we have today. Such is our heritage, and such is the price of our liberty.

7.25 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is somewhat overwhelming to speak at the end of such an amazing debate with so many moving speakers, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). I was particularly moved by the comments from my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who spoke so movingly about the role of women.

The Essex Regiment Museum is based in Chelmsford and it is well worth a visit. We are proud of a number of the exhibits, not least the Napoleonic eagle captured from the French at the battle of Salamanca in 1812. There are also some grim memories there, however. There is a picture of the last stand at Gundamuck, when almost the entire 44th Regiment lost their lives in the first Anglo-Afghan war. We also have memorials to world war one, in which 9,000 members of the regiment died in Gallipoli, Egypt and Palestine, and at Arras, Cambrai, Ypres and the Somme. I visited Ypres four years ago and joined students from a British school based deep in the East Anglian fens and students from a twinned school in Germany. They visited the battlefields together and unveiled a memorial that they had jointly designed, at the site of the Christmas day football match in 1914. It was deeply moving to be there with the next generation as they came together to remember the previous ones. We must never forget.

My own childhood was spent, half a century ago, in Northern Ireland during the troubles, and I would like to put on record my personal thanks to those who stood up against terrorism in the United Kingdom. I first sold poppies 40 years ago on the streets of Omagh, County Tyrone. We had armed servicemen on our streets in those days. The weekend before last, I joined poppy sellers in Chelmsford and it was a very happy occasion. The town is covered with poppies, many of which are

[Vicky Ford]

like the knitted one that I am wearing today. I am also wearing the shamrock poppy, to remember those Irish soldiers who lost their lives and who have never been commemorated.

I also want to remember another group. Chelmsford has a long history of Quakerism. Quakers are members of a peace church who take a moral stand against participation in armed conflict. At the beginning of the first world war, a group of young Quakers created the Friends' Ambulance Unit. Its 1,200 members were all civilians, but they worked closely with fighting soldiers. The unit provided those conscientious objectors with a way to support the wounded, and an alternative to military service. They worked on the frontlines providing medical support for troops and civilians, and on hospital ships in the channel and the Mediterranean. They cared for everyone they found wounded, including Germans. By November 1918, 21 members of the Friends' Ambulance Unit had given their own lives. In 1947, the Quakers were awarded the Nobel peace prize. Even today, Quakers act as ecumenical accompaniers, working in Israel and Palestine to provide a protective presence and to monitor and report human rights abuses. They wear brightly coloured jackets to accompany children to school across the battle zones. Jesus said:

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends"

but he also said:

"Blessed are the peacemakers"

and we must remember them, too. We must remember them all.

7.29 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): As many have said, it is a privilege to speak in this debate. I feel completely unworthy to speak, in a sense, following the many extraordinary speeches that we have heard this afternoon and this evening from right hon. and hon. Members. By my count, we have had 26 speeches from Back Benchers, and two excellent speeches from the Front-Bench spokesmen. The debate was opened by the Secretary of State for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, who was extremely ably answered by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), the shadow Secretary of State, who spoke brilliantly.

There have been so many brilliant speeches that it would be invidious to single one out. What struck me, however, is that we have heard speeches from all four nations of the United Kingdom, and on a variety of aspects of the Armistice and the great war, ranging from the role of women and Ireland—being of Irish heritage, I found that deeply interesting and significant—to the role of the Quakers; I was glad to hear the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) mention them at the end. It has been an extraordinary, illuminating and, at times, emotional debate. Hon. Members did well to hold it together at times, because there has certainly been a catch in the throat and a tear in the eye across the House from time to time.

We are grateful for the opportunity to commemorate the Armistice that marked the end of the great war, and for the chance to speak of our armed forces communities, and the sacrifices that were made and continue to be

made for our safety. As we have heard, the Armistice put an end to over four years of tragic conflict between Germany and the allied forces, and mechanised killing on land, at sea and in the air. It was signed at 5 am on 11 November 1918 in a French railway carriage in Compiègne, and the guns stopped firing six hours later. As we heard earlier today in the service in St Margaret's, the Prime Minister of the day, the Welshman David Lloyd George, when announcing the terms of the Armistice, expressed relief at the ending of what he called "the cruellest and most terrible war that has ever scourged mankind."

It is interesting to note how different people approach history, because I visited that railway carriage in Compiègne many years ago, and of course the same carriage was used by Hitler in 1940 to force the French into signing the surrender that resulted in Vichy France and Germany occupying most of France. However, when I visited it 25 years ago, there was no mention of that anywhere in the entire French presentation—there was reference only to the 1918 signing of the Armistice. We should acknowledge all aspects of history. This afternoon and evening, hon. Members have given an honest appraisal of the great war, the Armistice, its significance and all aspects of it, good and bad.

Bob Stewart: We have not talked about the French much today, but the French suffered incredible casualties. My wife's family lost 17 members at Verdun. We have a biscuit tin full of Croix de Guerre, Légions d'Honneur and Médailles Militaire, but we do not even know to whom they were given. The French really suffered, as did the Germans.

Kevin Brennan: I am glad that the hon. and gallant Gentleman has had the opportunity to put that on the record.

It is difficult to envisage the scale of the scourge that Lloyd George talked about. Four million men served in the British Army, alongside 3 million soldiers and labourers from what was then the British empire and Commonwealth. Some 1.27 million served from India alone, as well as over 10,000 from Jamaica. There were over 10 million military and 7 million civilian fatalities worldwide. Around 1 million British military personnel were killed, and the fighting stretched from Flanders to Gallipoli, from Pilckem Ridge to Palestine.

On this centenary of Armistice Day, we ponder three central thoughts. First, we honour the memories of those who fought and died. Secondly, we are solemnly grateful that the terrible tragedy came to an end. Thirdly, we are committed to preventing such devastation from happening again. I have been present in this Chamber when the House has been in a different mood—when the drums of war have been sounding. We should remember this moment when, inevitably, such events present themselves to us again. We should remember this kind of debate, as well as the mood the House sometimes gets into when we hear the sound of the drums of war.

These moments of commemoration are important, and I thank all those involved: the Imperial War Museum, the BBC, the Royal British Legion, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission—we have heard so much about the commission this afternoon—and the Heritage Lottery Fund. The fund held an important reception last week, and the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Prime Minister's envoy, was present.

It really was a testament to the hard work done by him and by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on the commemorations.

Mr Kevan Jones: I think my hon. Friend has missed them by mistake, but he also needs to thank the parliamentary authorities, which have done an excellent job. The Library and the archivists have shown the history not only of Members of both Houses who fought and died in the war, but of the Clerks and other staff who served.

Kevin Brennan: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I acknowledge the work he has done with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, including with me in Wales; we did some work a few years ago on restoring some of the graves in my Cardiff West constituency.

Members will know that the legacy of the first world war resonates in all our communities. Most cities, towns and villages in the UK have a war memorial, and we will all be visiting those war memorials this weekend to lay wreaths and pay tribute to those who left our communities more than 100 years ago and did not return. I will attend the Welsh national wreath-laying ceremony in Cardiff, and a special service of commemoration at Llandaff cathedral in my constituency. Baroness Finlay of Llandaff and I will both lay wreaths at the war memorial in Llandaff city on Friday.

Every community has its own first world war story, and as many others have done, I will briefly pay tribute to those from my Cardiff West constituency whose courage has become part of our collective memory. On 7 July 1916, the 16th Battalion of the Welsh Regiment, known as the Cardiff City Battalion, fought at Mametz wood alongside other Welsh units as part of the 38th Division, which was devised by Prime Minister David Lloyd George and included the Welsh Regiment, the South Wales Borderers and the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

The Cardiff City Battalion was exposed to heavy machine-gun fire, and more than 150 men died, with many more injured. Welsh rugby internationals Dick Thomas and John Williams were among the dead. A survivor, William Joshua, recalled:

“On the Somme, the Cardiff City Battalion died.”

It might be of interest to you, Mr Speaker, that Fred Keenor, who subsequently captained Cardiff City football club when they defeated Arsenal in the 1927 FA cup final, was injured at the battle of the Somme, and it very nearly ended his football career.

Anna Soubry: We have the games of remembrance in Nottingham on Thursday. The German and British women’s army teams will play at lunch time at Notts County, and in the evening the British and German men’s army teams will play at Nottingham Forest. Although I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would love to attend, he probably will not be able to, but is it not a great event?

Kevin Brennan: It is a great event. I will not be able to attend, but I can do even better than attend: my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, will be there on behalf of the Labour party.

Vernon Coaker: And me.

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend will also be there, so I can supply the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) with some first-rate people in support.

I had better press on, Mr Speaker, before you call us all back to order. The following year saw the battle of Passchendaele, which carries particular weight in Welsh cultural memory, as my hon. Friends the Members for Llanelli and for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), who is sitting at the back, will know. We commemorated the battle’s centenary last year with a debate in this Chamber. Every village in Wales was affected by the battle, and 20,000 first language Welsh-speaking soldiers alone were killed at Passchendaele.

1917 was the year of Eisteddfod y Gadair Ddu, the Eisteddfod of the black chair. Some hon. Members will know that the Eisteddfod is the annual Welsh-language cultural festival, with poetry, dancing and singing. That year, Ellis Humphrey Evans, under the now-famous pseudonym, Hedd Wyn, was judged as the winner of the chair at the Eisteddfod, the highest honour available in Welsh culture, which is awarded to the best poet writing in traditional strict meter. However, when the winner’s pseudonym was called in the traditional ceremony at the Eisteddfod, no one stood up in the audience to reveal themselves as the triumphant poet. It was then announced that the winning bard had been killed in battle six weeks prior. Hedd Wyn had been one of 4,000 men killed on a single morning when the Royal Welch Fusiliers went over the top in the battle of Pilckem Ridge. The poet from Trawsfynydd has become the subject of poems and history lessons in classrooms across Wales, and even of an Oscar-nominated feature film.

That poignant story of Hedd Wyn captured the mourning of a nation. Stories such as these help us to remember the humanity of each individual who lost their life, and we have heard many such stories this evening. Each one was a son, a daughter, a loved one who was missed by someone at home. As we have seen today, they are still missed by their descendants in this House and across the country.

In my constituency, in 1917, the Women’s Land Army was formed; 20,000 women across the UK enlisted to work in places such as Green Farm in the Ely area of my constituency, which is now a council housing estate. As a farm, it was run predominantly by female farmhands during the war. One of the workers, Agnes Greatorex, left domestic service to work on the farm. She said:

“Every morning, we would get up at five o’clock and milk a hundred cows. We would then take the milk to Glan Ely Hospital.”

That is where the soldiers were kept. I am proud, as I am sure we all are, of the efforts of Agnes and so many women across the country; we have heard about those in today’s debate. In rightly commemorating the enfranchisement of some women in 1918, let us not forget that working-class women such as Agnes, or my grandmother, Gwenllian Evans, did not get the vote until nearly a decade later.

Albert Owen: My hon. Friend is talking about the effort of women during the great war. It is worth recognising that the Women’s Institute was founded during this period; as Mr Speaker knows, we held the centenary event in my constituency. These women were the stars of the home front as well, and they are worth mentioning.

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to refer to the founding of the Women's Institute. May I also pay tribute to him for rightly drawing attention, as a former merchant seaman, to the sacrifice of the merchant navy? It is of course because of these sacrifices that the centenary of Armistice Day, and Remembrance Sunday each year, are an essential part of our cultural life. We must remember those who fought to keep us safe. We must recommit to ensuring that we never allow such division and devastation to happen again.

With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will close, as others have done, with poetry. I turn to the words of Hedd Wyn's poem "Rhyfel", which means war in Welsh. I will read part of it in Welsh first and then give the English translation. It reads:

"Mae'r hen delynu genid gynt,
Yng nghrog ar gangau'r helyg draw,
A gwaedd y bechgyn lond y gwynt,
A'u gwaed yn gymysg efo'r glaw.

It translates as follows:

"The harps to which we sang, are hung
On willow boughs, and their refrain
Drowned by the anguish of the young
Whose blood is mingled with the rain."

Mr Speaker, we will remember them.

7.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Speaker. This has been a privilege and an education, a reminder that no community was truly unaffected by the visible and invisible scars of a century ago. Both Front Benchers spoke about sacrifice, and we have heard not only about emancipation, courage, gallantry, equality, bravery, impact, loss, opportunity, reflection, contribution, community, family, survivors, duty and tragedy, but about home and coming back safely.

This weekend, we will mark the Armistice with silence and we will pay our respects. This is an opportunity for all the communities represented in this House to come together. The Secretary of State spoke about blood, mud and misery, about a collective effort of commemoration and about using history to bring us together. He said that we should give thanks for the end of the great war and be ready for the special sound of church bells as they ring out across the land 100 years on. It is bittersweet, said the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), and what a magnificent speech that was. He talked about learning from living memories, not just from history, about the poppy from Flanders fields, about civilian support for our Royal British Legion, and, yes, about common cause and, again, about bell ringing for those millions who never came home.

It really has been the most poignant and often painful afternoon of debate. It has been touching, thoughtful, passionate, emotional and, above all, personal. I shall try to pay tribute to some of these heartfelt contributions this afternoon. There were Members of Parliament from across this land in the Chamber—from Aldridge-Brownhills, Eastleigh, Henley, Ynys Môn, West Dunbartonshire to Cheltenham.

Moving tributes will be made this weekend as we all give thanks. I, too, will lay wreaths in my constituency—nine will be laid across the day. In the afternoon, in Netley,

I will be at the site of the Royal Victoria Hospital, where only a refurbished chapel stands. It is also the site of the Netley military cemetery, in which 636 Commonwealth service personnel from world war one and 35 service personnel from the second world war lay. The site is maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. There are also the graves of 69 Germans, 12 Belgians and one Pole, all of which continue, rightly, to be cared for.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. It is always an honour to speak in this place, but, sometimes, it is also worth remembering that it is just as great an honour to sit and listen quietly, which is what I have done. I want her to do this, if she will. Many hon. Members have mentioned Victoria Cross winners—there were 627 in total in the first world war. Will the Government commit to ensure that every one of them, as a way to remember all those who served, are particularly marked in their locales—in the villages, towns and cities—perhaps by a plaque, by a road name, by a building or even by planting a tree? There will be war memorials, but I think that we can do more in this centenary year.

Mims Davies: My right hon. Friend is tenacity itself. It is right that such important people are raised in this debate, and I thank him for making such an important point.

Where do I begin with some of the contributions this afternoon? My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) spoke about Brockenhurst. He said that we must not stint on defence and resources in peacetime. As we heard from the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), we need to commit to peace, to remember the people who were in peril on the sea and to remember the pain that they felt. Also among us was a historian—my right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson)—who has headed off to talk some more on this. His speech focused on why these events matter to young people and why we must have the sites commemorated appropriately, particularly for those who lost their lives at sea.

This Department has given £10 million to deliver events over the past four years. In addition, there has also been a mix of programmes from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Education and the Ministry of Defence, and that is absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) spoke about the hollowing out of communities by the great war, and it is absolutely right that we remember those sacrifices.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) told us about the Weeping Window, an installation in the heart of her constituency showing the bravery of service personnel, who continue to do so much for this country. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) showed a passion for peace making by the Council of Europe. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) gave us some great, positive news about a statue to commemorate Sikh soldiers and spoke about unity, integration and all-important diversity. Creating such a memorial 100 years on is the right thing to do.

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) told us about the shamrock poppy, which is rightly being worn in the House of Commons

to show this is a common cause. My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) talked about a devotion to duty, thanked his loved ones and mentioned the impact of the war on friends and family. The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) spoke about the bravery of the Commonwealth—local heroes from Reading and those from across the world—and mentioned clubs and charities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) reminded us not to forget about our furry friends—the animals who were casualties of war and who were taken by their owners to an unknown fate. He also told us about learning lessons from his grandfather and said that the first step in preventing this from happening again is never to forget. In the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), we heard from a serviceman, who spoke about the new generation, uniformed cadets and young people always willing to serve.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) rightly raised the importance of culture. The 14-18 NOW project has engaged 35 million people, immersing them in cultural integration activities. We heard my right hon. Friend's poetry oration, and he spoke about the horror of war and the sacrifice for rightful freedom.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) talked about the trenches and the sunflowers in Gallipoli, and he told us about emotional sacrifice and terrible stories of the "goodnight kiss". It was a passionate and brave contribution, highlighting that, moments before the Armistice, we still lost our brave men.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) spoke about people coming home from war, including the story that the men left in one town were only enough to fill three pews in the church. He said that the huge effort of valour must always be remembered, and he reminded us that 20,000 men and boys were lost on the first day of the battle of the Somme.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) gave us a precious reflection on the Devonshires and spoke of the emancipation of women that came through the war—the gallantry of our men, and the impact of our women. I thank him for the huge amount of work he has done for this commemoration.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) rightly told us about the bravery of our allies and the impact on Canadians, the US, Australians and people from New Zealand. He spoke of the struggle to return to normality after knowing such pain and of soldiers coming from foreign lands to do their duty.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) mentioned the sacrifice given to continue trade links and the connections between the Welsh and the Irish through Holyhead. He told us of 500 lives lost one night at sea; we will remember them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) spoke about Northumberland's proud work to put together such a huge amount of battalions. There were 52 battalions and the regiment was awarded five VCs. She made a passionate, brave and typically

emotional speech. She also spoke about the submarines, and it was news to me how dangerous serving on submarines could be.

I thank the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for speaking about the importance of local cemeteries and about the Heritage Lottery Fund, which has done so much, contributing £96 million to over 2,000 projects to mark the centenary.

I find it so difficult not to mention everybody, but an important contribution for me was that of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who spoke about his great-grandmother—the foreboding matriarch who paid him 10p to put whisky in her tea. He mentioned the 1.7 million "surplus women" and quoted a headmistress who is said to have told girls, "You must make your way in the world as best you can," after they lost brothers and others lost sons and they could perhaps have become the maiden generation.

I pay tribute to the huge amount of people who have been pivotal in the commemorations that we have been discussing, including the Royal British Legion, which has been at the heart of so much important activity over the last four years. In my constituency, Norman Brown MBE personally raised £1 million over 25 years to give to the Legion. The tireless community work done by people across the UK is incredible, and they are rightly well regarded. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, as we have heard, has sensitively maintained 23,000 sites in over 150 countries across the world.

I thank all hon. Members who have done so much. In particular, we have seen the remarkable contribution from the Prime Minister's special representative for the first world war commemorations, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), whose work over six years in delivering these commemorations has been exceptional, alongside the hon. Member for Barnsley Central. I thank all our important devolved Administrations who, as we heard, do so much across the UK and across the world.

It has been heartening to see this House come together to pay tribute to those who tragically paid the ultimate price. We rightly thank all those who went to serve their country and all those who continue to serve their country, to show them that all they have done is right because it has protected our precious freedom. The parliamentary prayer said that we should unite and knit together, in the spirit of recognition and peace, as we reflect on the centenary of the end of a war that brought so much bloodshed and so much horror. Let us all pledge that the sentiments expressed today over in St Margaret's Church will remain in our thoughts today and over the weekend and in our hearts forever. We will remember them.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Iain Stewart*.)

7.56 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 6 November 2018

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

Synthetic Cannabinoids: Reclassification

9.30 am

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the reclassification of synthetic cannabinoids.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Howarth. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important issue in a debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to do so.

I am continuing my campaign for reclassification of synthetic cannabinoids, known as synthetic cannabis, Mamba or Spice. These drugs are becoming a serious national problem. I want to raise the profile of this issue to make people aware of the devastating impact of the drugs in my constituency of Mansfield and across the entire UK. It is time to take proper action on the drugs and get Mamba and Spice off our streets.

Contrary to the assumption of some in Parliament, I do not believe that reclassification is a silver bullet or a quick-fix answer. In my recent correspondence with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who is responsible for public health and primary care, he stated that

“synthetic cannabinoid use is often part of a complex set of health and social issues; there is no single solution, and short-term approaches can just displace the problem”.

I share that sentiment. We clearly need an holistic approach to deal with these drugs. However, reclassification, although not the only solution, is a step in the right direction to give our police and local services the powers that they need to deal effectively with users and dealers. The current class B classification is limiting the action that local services and the police can take, which is further damaging some of our most deprived areas, where resources are already stretched.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): On the point about giving the police more powers, reclassifying what are termed SCRA—synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists—as class A drugs would not grant any additional enforcement powers to the police.

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I disagree. My local police are adamant that on the street, in the town centre, they have more powers to deal with things such as heroin use than they do to deal with these drugs, and obviously the sentencing powers available through the judicial system are different. At the moment, when the police deal with things such as Mamba and Spice in Mansfield town centre, they do not work on the basis of drugs offences, but use antisocial behaviour and criminal behaviour orders, because they do not have the opportunity, through drugs legislation, to record what we are discussing today as offences.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I would like to reinforce the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. Does not the fact that so many police and crime commissioners are writing to us, calling on us to make the very changes that he suggests, reinforce the point that the police will attach a greater priority to these drugs if they are reclassified as class A drugs?

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention: he is absolutely right. In the wake of an Adjournment debate that I held in July, 20 police and crime commissioners wrote to this Minister about the issue, stressing exactly what I am saying this morning: unless these drugs are taken seriously and prioritised by police forces in the way class A drugs are, the police will continue to struggle to deal with them at local level.

The point of reclassification is not to criminalise vulnerable users, but to prevent those users from being exploited by drug dealers and to get them the help that they need. The health Green Paper, announced only yesterday in an initial policy paper entitled “Prevention is better than cure”, is a welcome development. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said, focusing on the responsibilities of patients is not about penalising people, but about helping them to make better choices.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Before my hon. Friend gets too much into the issue of patients, may I bring him back to the issue of policing? My local police have been doing a phenomenal bit of work cracking down on drug activity, and they made a number of arrests last week. They are concerned that there is not strong enough sentencing for the drug barons at the top, who too often are let off, basically scot-free. Does my hon. Friend agree that reclassification should be coupled with stronger sentencing for those peddling these drugs?

Ben Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention: she is right. The challenge in many cases is that there do not seem to be significant repercussions for dealing in and manufacturing these products. Later I will touch on local examples of people who have gone round and round the judicial system, with a weak sentence for this and eight weeks for that. Not only are the drugs often more available in prison than they are on the streets, but there is no long-term repercussion for continuing to flout the laws, and people just go round and round the system.

Vicky Ford: I visited my local prison last Friday. It, too, is doing great work dealing with the drugs there, but the prison governor asked for stronger sentences for the people who commit crimes, especially violent crimes, in prison and said that those should be additional, not concurrent, sentences. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Ben Bradley: I think that that is a fair point, so I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I for one would like to see drug dealers and manufacturers removed from our streets for as long as possible, so I absolutely concur.

As part of my constituency work, I have focused heavily in the last year or so on homelessness in Mansfield and Warsop. To return to the health funding aspect, I think that we can use this week’s announcement by the

[Ben Bradley]

Health Secretary and the funding that will be available for our NHS in the coming years to explore ways in which we can put in place community and primary care services for homeless and other vulnerable people and, for these drugs, preventive services. The preventive aspect is exactly what is needed from that funding and what could make a big impact. As I said at the outset, reclassification is not a silver bullet—it is not the only answer. It comes with a need for preventive services in our communities. They are two sides of the same coin when it comes to delivering for my constituents on this issue.

Mansfield District Council and the local police have done everything they can under the current framework to help users, and I commend them for their hard work and dedication. Alongside a local charity called Framework, the council and the police have launched a joint operation to tackle antisocial behaviour relating to the use of Mamba. In the town centre alone, one sergeant, six constables and six police community support officers are working closely with the council's neighbourhood wardens and antisocial behaviour officers to deal with the problem; that is in addition to CCTV. That demonstrates the enormity of the issue. There are more police officers working in the town centre than perhaps ever before, but the police are still being stretched by this problem. Some kind of drug-related episode, whether it is someone passing out or causing another kind of issue for residents, is still a daily occurrence.

We should not automatically assume that all homeless people are taking these drugs. Of course they are not, but because of the incredibly low cost, there is a high correlation. To some extent, this has become the drug of choice. A dedicated taskforce is focusing on the root causes of homelessness by giving individuals the support that they need to end the cycle of dependency on drugs and alcohol and helping them to turn their lives around. Three outreach workers, who specialise in homelessness, mental health and substance misuse, are supporting the community in Mansfield and trying to build relationships with users, even when their help is rejected, as it often is.

Mansfield is learning from projects in other areas in order to work on its own best practice when dealing with this issue. More than 50 people shared their experience at a recent Mamba seminar, which will provide further guidance for the local authority. I have met people from the Nottingham Mamba clinic to explore new approaches, hear their experience and try to share their work in my constituency. Interestingly, even the drugs workers on the ground in the Nottingham Mamba clinic agree that reclassification would be an important aspect of managing the problem locally. A police inspector in my constituency, Nick Butler, says that the College of Policing has acknowledged that Mansfield is leading the way in dealing with Mamba users and tackling antisocial behaviour and rough sleeping. That is commendable.

We must accept that, in some cases, it gets to the point where enough is enough. Although we can offer individuals help until we are blue in the face, the fact is that people can refuse help or sometimes, for a variety of complex reasons, are not able to accept help. Instead, they end up in an endless cycle of reoffending. We have reached the point where existing powers to deal with repeat offenders no longer have an impact, and local

police are calling for further support, as we saw in the example of the police and crime commissioners writing to Government.

Following my debate in July about the societal impact of these drugs, I asked the Government for two things. First, I asked for a national strategy to share best practice, seek medical intervention and support local areas in combating the issue and, secondly, I asked the Government to consider reclassifying these drugs from class B, comparable to cannabis, to class A, in line with heroin.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the debate. I hope that we all agree that the point about best practice should be endorsed, but does he agree that we need wider community buy-in, particularly across our urban communities as well as rural communities? Those communities have to buy in to the best practice process. They have to see evidence of outcomes, whether that involves the courts and police action or wider community resistance to this sort of activity.

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention: I agree. Ultimately, we all want to see tangible outcomes on the ground in our communities. We can make legislation here and change the classification, but that has to be bought into; it has to be delivered by local service providers and the police on the ground. My priority, the most important thing for me, is that my constituents in Mansfield town centre feel safer as a result. That is exactly what we are after. In the aftermath of that debate in July, 20 police and crime commissioners wrote to the Government in support of reclassification, which has received cross-party support and is backed by my local police leaders. Nottinghamshire County Council and other county councils have written to the Government on this issue.

Spice was originally sold as a legal high, and synthetic cannabinoids were developed as an alternative to cannabis, which leads to a common misconception that these drugs are not hard drugs. It is understandable that they would initially have been made class B drugs. However, the comparison of synthetic cannabinoids to cannabis is entirely inaccurate and their impacts are very different.

I cannot emphasise enough that reclassifying these drugs has no connection with cannabis or medical marijuana. In my view, there is a great deal of sense in the medicinal use of cannabis in some cases. I do not argue with that; indeed, in this debate I do not seek to suggest anything at all about cannabis, frankly. In fact, I want to make the point that the two—cannabis and synthetic cannabinoids—are not comparable and that these psychoactive drugs are not the same thing at all. We need to stop treating cannabis and synthetic cannabis as if they are the same thing, and we need to reclassify synthetic cannabis.

It does not make sense that, in accordance with the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, synthetic cannabinoids are put in the same class as cannabis regarding relative harmfulness. The physical and psychological impacts of synthetic cannabis are more comparable to those of class A drugs, such as ketamine or heroin, yet that seriousness is not reflected in law. Seizures, heart attacks and chest pains are common physical problems, and synthetic cannabis users can experience frightening visions or hallucinations.

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again, yet again he is making a really important point. I heard a tragic story when I visited my local prison recently. Three prisoners died after taking drugs. All three were also taking epilepsy drugs and there may be an issue there. With these synthetic drugs, we simply do not know what they do or how they interact with common medicines. Is that not another reason for treating this matter more seriously?

Ben Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and I absolutely agree. We have seen the impact of these drugs and not only on users; there have been cases of prison officers having to go home sick, having inhaled fumes exhaled by people taking these drugs. The impact is not only on users themselves but on the broader community, which—absolutely—is another reason why this matter needs to be taken more seriously.

It is not yet necessarily recognised in the literature on this subject, but there can be problems for users as bad as bleeding from the eyes and bleeding from orifices. Similarly, teeth falling out has been described by long-term users as a side effect of these drugs, and such things are not comparable with the outcomes and side effects of other class B drugs. It is ridiculous that these symptoms do not warrant a higher classification for these drugs.

Unlike natural cannabis, synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists, or SCRAs, do not contain cannabidiol, or CBD, a chemical that is sometimes sold in our high-street shops, and which appears to possess antipsychotic properties. The psychotic symptoms that occur relatively frequently following SCRA consumption might be linked to the high potency of the drugs and the absence of CBD. In many cases, however, we do not know what is actually in these drugs. That is partly why it is so difficult to have a clear national treatment plan for users; the drugs are manufactured locally and ingredients vary across different regions. Sometimes, the main ingredient is nail varnish remover, but at other times it is not, and the impact on health and symptoms can vary greatly.

Cases have been reported where users choose to take heroin instead of Mamba, as there is more treatment available for heroin. There is no substitute for Mamba in the way that methadone can be used to help heroin addicts to come off heroin. I have been told by service providers off the record that they would prefer to treat people who take heroin, as their understanding is greater and the pathways to support and help are clearer. The fact that drugs workers say, “Actually, I would rather you take this class A drug than a class B drug”, suggests that we have not got classification right.

I have been told anecdotally that these drugs are far more addictive than heroin or cocaine. An article in *The Economist* emphasised the difficulty faced by outreach workers as they try to help users. Although heroin addicts often have four or five hours of lucidity a day, Mamba is often chain-smoked continuously by users throughout the day. As Members can imagine, that makes having a coherent conversation with a Mamba user a nearly impossible task.

Last weekend, *The Sunday Times* contained a very interesting article by Rosamund Irwin, which included an account from a user about how much worse the outcomes of taking Spice are compared with those of taking any other drug. In the article, Karen from Blackpool said:

“I’ve been on heroin for over 30 years, I’ve tried every drug, and Spice is by far the most horrible. You can function on heroin, but on Spice I thought I was coming off the world.”

In the same article, Karina, who is from the Salvation Army, says that these drugs

“rob people of their personality, it’s very different to heroin in that you can still have a conversation with a heroin user, but when people are on Spice their body is there, but they are not.”

The impact of these drugs is immense and affects towns across the whole of the UK. Not only is the impact on individuals worse than that of many class A drugs, but the impact on others and on public safety is arguably the worst aspect of all.

I want to see heavier penalties for manufacturers and dealers; I want to see work being done to shut down supply chains for the ingredients used in these drugs; and I want to see that increased risk and difficulty make life harder for manufacturers. In the meantime, I want the police to act, in order to keep people safe on our streets.

I have spoken to the staff of many local services in Mansfield and Nottinghamshire who have seen at first hand the impact of these drugs on our town centres. It is clear that the low price of Mamba and Spice is a key problem. At the cost of as little as £5 for four or five hits, synthetic cannabis is one of the cheapest drugs on the market, but it is also one of the strongest. The effects of these drugs can leave users resembling zombies, slumped in a state of semi-consciousness, sometimes foaming at the mouth and sometimes passed out in the street.

It is uncomfortable enough seeing such things as an adult; it is devastating having to explain to your four-year-old child why there are people passed out on the ground in the market square in Mansfield town centre. That situation has clearly had a negative impact on town centres and local economies. It causes anxiety among shoppers and business owners, reduces footfall and discourages families from spending the day in the town centre.

These drugs have put an extra strain on ambulance services around the country. Figures from South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust showed that between August 2016 and July 2017 there were 157 calls related to synthetic cannabis. That jumped up to 960 calls in the following year. Most of the time, the users hop back up after 20 minutes or so; they are absolutely fine and do not need an ambulance, but that time and money has been wasted. This issue not only affects my constituents in Mansfield and Warsop; it impacts on constituencies around the UK and it is getting worse. The Government need to act now to stop things from worsening further.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate him on securing the debate. Having made those points about ambulance services, he might be interested to know that last year in Torquay some users of these drugs were getting two or even three ambulance visits a day because of the very situation that he is describing, namely that most users recover quickly after an incident. Again, that reinforces the fact that these are not class B drugs. They look like class A drugs, they work like class A drugs, and they should be class A drugs.

Ben Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I totally agree with him. I have seen examples of that kind myself. One of the prime spots for using these drugs in Mansfield town centre is next to a statue that is right outside my office. Indeed, one of my members of staff has been outside resuscitating people on a regular basis. The challenge is that not only is an ambulance sent, even though it may not actually be needed, but if that drug user is put into an ambulance and taken to accident and emergency, they often require more resource in A&E than the average punter. So the resource drain from the NHS as a result of this issue is absolutely huge; I agree with my hon. Friend in that regard.

I echo the sentiment of Nottinghamshire County Council that the illegal use of these drugs is a threat to public health and a matter of public concern. As 20 PCCs have outlined, these drugs are causing one of the most severe public health issues we have faced in decades. Quite frankly, enough is enough for me. I want my constituents in Mansfield and Warsop to feel safe, and I want the police and local council to have the powers to ensure that users are dealt with effectively. The localised manufacturing methods of these drugs vary, due to the range of different ingredients that dealers use. This variability means that the drugs vary in strength and quality, and the effects of consuming one hit of Mamba can vary hugely from week to week, from dealer to dealer, and from town to town.

Symptoms are unpredictable, and as a result medical intervention can be challenging. I have contacted NHS England and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, and it is clear that no organisation has yet taken responsibility for providing best practice in dealing with this issue. I do not believe that each clinical commissioning group should individually have to come up with its own guidance. The Government need to be proactive, and they must work on a national strategy to tackle a growing national problem.

These drugs are not only cheap, they are also accessible. I have literally seen bags of Mamba lying in the street outside my office. It is not expensive to replace, and the current laws and penalties for selling Mamba and Spice mean that there is not a real deterrent for dealers. If I can walk down the high street and pick up a bag of it—literally pick it up for free in the street—then it is clear that people do not fear the repercussions of being caught with these drugs.

The raw ingredients to make these drugs can be found freely available online and ordered, and then concocted as Mamba and Spice here in the UK. A recent investigation by *The Sunday Times* proved how easy it is for UK drugs gangs to import dangerous chemicals from China to cook up these drugs in their local areas. An undercover reporter was able to import industrial-grade chemicals, including hydrochloric acid and sulphuric acid, to make Mamba in just 14 days. This method means that gangs are making much bigger profits; £50 of ingredients can make 2 lb of spice, which is worth nearly £10,000.

There need to be stronger judicial consequences, particularly for manufacturing and dealing in these drugs; currently, the profit outweighs the risk. It is only by putting the fear of God into manufacturers and cutting off supply lines that we can hope to make a tangible impact on the ground. Tougher penalties for

dealers and manufacturers would lead to increased prices for users, and more powers for the police to protect local residents.

A recent conversation I had with a local police inspector highlighted the enormity of the task of dealing with Mamba users while the police have very restricted powers. Since April this year, one particular Mamba user in Mansfield has been arrested 12 times and sent to prison twice. While in prison, this repeat offender did not receive any education or rehabilitation, which was a huge missed opportunity in itself and led to an immediate breach of his criminal behaviour order when he entered Mansfield town centre on his release. I was informed only last week that he had been arrested within 24 hours of being released, after serving a 16-week sentence, and has consequently received another eight weeks. There are countless such examples around the country of people going round and round the system with very lenient consequences for their actions, and of their not getting the support they need and not fearing the repercussions—rearrest and reconviction.

Following the advice of my right hon. Friend the Minister, I wrote a cross-party letter to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. I am pleased that the council will consider the classification of psychoactive drugs in a review that is due to begin shortly. More imminently, the Home Office is due to review the operation of the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 this month in accordance with section 58 of the Act, which commits it to doing so within 30 months of implementation. I look forward to the Government's response.

This severe problem does not only affect my constituents in Mansfield and Warsop; it has far-reaching consequences for all areas of society around the country. I praise our local services. They do their best with the available resources to deal with the growing epidemic, but it gets to a point at which there must be national recognition of the problem and a plan to reduce the burden on them. I am calling on the Government to reclassify synthetic cannabinoids, so that local authorities have more power to take action that will get users the help they need and keep them out of the judicial system, and that will mean heavier penalties for dealers and increased risk for manufacturers. Most importantly, from the perspective of the bulk of the public, it will keep people safe, so that they do not feel scared or intimidated when going about their business in our towns and cities. We need to meet a severe problem with severe consequences.

Reclassification would also show a clear distinction between synthetic cannabinoids and cannabis. As I have demonstrated numerous times during my speech, the physical and physiological impact of these drugs requires a class A classification.

I understand absolutely that users need support and that preventing addiction is the desirable course of action, and I welcome the news that the Health Secretary is looking into NHS funding for preventive services. I raise that side of the coin regularly too, particularly with the Department of Health and Social Care; I have written to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on numerous occasions. Reclassification is not the silver bullet. It is far too simplistic to believe that all users will want to accept help and wrong to think that we should not act when users make life hell for innocent people and town centre businesses. My first instinct is to protect my constituents.

I want Mansfield town centre to be a lively, upbeat place again, somewhere people look forward to visiting and to which they will return time and again. Mansfield is full of fantastic local shops and businesses that already face difficulties of their own. I am keen to help regenerate the town centre, and I know that the Government are working to support that—we can see it in many of the Budget measures from last week—but small retail businesses receiving a cut to their business rates will not attract people to town centres if people feel they are a hostile environment into which they do not want to bring their children. It is not right to let a small minority of people have such a huge impact on entire towns and the lives of thousands by turning our town centres into places where people fear to go. We cannot continue to let our children see this behaviour and think it is normal.

The issue peaked locally, in Mansfield and Warsop, back in July, at which time I was receiving multiple messages every day from constituents complaining about their experience with users in the town centre. The problem has worsened over a short time, and I do not think we have the ability to wait any longer. If dealers and manufacturers do not face harsh repercussions, what state will our town be in this time next year, or in five years' time?

The issue cannot be ignored until it goes away. I urge the Government to consider it closely, to work with the advisory council and to reclassify these drugs so that we can regain control of our town centres.

9.53 am

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this vital debate on an urgent issue for my constituents. I am immensely grateful to those I work with locally who are on the frontline, supporting users and the communities in which they live. Organisations such as Saltbox, Brighter Futures, Voices and Number 11 work tirelessly to deal with the consequences of the new substances. They are on the frontline with our brave public servants—the police, paramedics and A&E professionals—who deal with the consequences day in, day out. The huge spike in the use of synthetic cannabinoids such as Spice and Black Mamba and synthetic psychoactive substances such as Monkey Dust is causing immeasurable harm to my communities and drawing new battle lines in the war on drugs.

I am very proud to represent the people of Stoke-on-Trent. My city truly is a wonderful place to live, and I have a duty to protect it and to fight for my constituents. For too long our city has been at the epicentre of this growing crisis. Synthetic drugs such as Monkey Dust and Black Mamba are too easily available on our streets and can be found for as little as £2 or £3 a hit. The drugs are cheap, powerful and dangerous, and are wreaking havoc on our communities.

On 4 September, it was reported that Staffordshire police had responded to no fewer than 950 Monkey Dust-related incidents in the previous three months alone—an average of 10 calls a day—and the situation is only getting worse. We are in the grip of an epidemic that has devastating consequences, not just for users but for the wider public. Every week I am confronted by a new horror story from one of my constituents, of threatening and intimidating behaviour, of drug users

passed out in alleyways and parks, and of growing violence between rival dealers and gangs. My constituents too often have to tell me about the obstacle course of rubbish and drug paraphernalia they have to traverse on their way to work, and about the fear that prevents them from letting their children leave the house alone. One person wrote to me last week describing their street as something out of a zombie film, and another stopped me while I was out canvassing to tell me that drug users were walking up and down their street at night trying peoples' door handles in an attempt to get into their homes.

The most harrowing story I have heard concerns a young woman who had a drug user jump into her car outside her house and refuse to get out. My constituent's four-year old daughter who was in the car was forced to leap out in terror and she is now terrified. The same individual later forced entry into someone else's house on that street and assaulted them. That is what we are dealing with. That is what my constituents—decent, hard-working people—are forced to endure, and it cannot be allowed to continue.

Our police do incredible work in tackling the problem, but they are stretched to their limit, and with Staffordshire police set to lose a further £6.6 million of funding, our local thin blue line is set to get even thinner. However, this is not just an enforcement issue. The people whose lives are being ruined by the drugs need support, whether treatment for alcohol and substance abuse, mental health support or, as in many cases, support to tackle the homelessness and rough sleeping that all too often leads to people turning to drugs and alcohol as a comfort and an escape—they are clearly self-medicating. All too often, that assistance simply is not there. Deep cuts to drug treatment and recovery support have made it much harder for people to seek help, and have left the police and social services with nowhere to refer users to for treatment.

Worse still, the low classification of these synthetic drugs means that they are frequently designated a low priority. What little support remains is instead directed towards those struggling with opiates and other hard drugs. In Stoke-on-Trent, local support charities have told me that they are supporting people who have started using heroin so that they will be eligible for the rehab support they have been denied when trying to get off Monkey Dust. Such is the desperation of those seeking to get clean that they are resorting to even more dangerous and destructive substances to access the help they need.

Even the provision we have in my great city is under threat. This year, Stoke-on-Trent City Council decided to cut drug and alcohol services by £751,000. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and I recently wrote to Ann James, the leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, urging her to reconsider the cuts and to recognise the need to focus our energies on the new synthetic substances. Our pleas fell on deaf ears, and she should be ashamed.

More than anything, we need the Government to recognise the scale of the problem and to provide the resources we need before the potential of a generation disappears in a puff of smoke. I hope the Minister comes away from the debate with a clearer understanding of the urgency of the situation in towns and cities across the UK.

9.59 am

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my colleague, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth).

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing the debate, and I welcome the opportunity to further my own efforts to counter the blight of drugs in Stoke-on-Trent South. Indeed, I recently met the Minister's colleague, the Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, to discuss the scourge of gangs, particularly those who are pushing and are profiteering from the misery caused by Spice. I also discussed the significant escalation of another synthetic drug in Stoke-on-Trent, Monkey Dust, to which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North referred. I am grateful to Home Office Ministers for their work to address the growing challenges we face.

Stoke-on-Trent has been hit with an unenviable reputation as a centre for Monkey Dust abuse. The human cost of this awful drug and the gangs pushing it is a problem for the city. Shockingly, it is reported that it is possible to purchase Monkey Dust for as little as £2 in Stoke-on-Trent, which is even cheaper than the drugs to which my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield referred. Even more worryingly, it has a highly hallucinogenic reaction, with cases of people jumping off buildings. In grotesque fashion, these miserable substances are also known as "super spice", "herbal smoking" and "designer drugs".

We must tackle the legacy of synthetic drugs, especially cannabinoids. The reactions to these drugs are often unknown, as has been discussed. People have died straight away from taking them. The consequences of the illicit drugs trade hit residents, who live in fear of gang violence, and add to the terrible challenges faced by those already struggling with the vulnerability of homelessness. The communities of Meir and Fenton in my constituency are now witnessing some of the highest levels of antisocial behaviour in the whole of Staffordshire. That is totally unacceptable, and my constituents should not have to put up with being terrorised by those committing offences.

Unfortunately, these dreadful drugs are often a corruption of research into alternatives to more traditional drugs such as cannabis. That research began in response to the legal ban on using cannabis for medicinal purposes. That ban on natural cannabinoids prescribed for medical purposes is rightly being lifted by the Home Secretary. I agree entirely with our police and crime commissioner, Matthew Ellis, that Monkey Dust—or plain Dust, as it is known in Stoke-on-Trent—and other synthetic cannabinoids used for what is laughably called leisure use must be reclassified as class A at the earliest opportunity.

Of course, reclassifying Dust will not in itself solve the problems of gangs—pushers will still promote gang activities and push drugs in our communities—but those who push Dust, which is a brutally dehumanising drug, should be held to greater account for their actions and face greater deterrent sentencing. That is especially important considering the drug's exceptionally low street value, which fuels increased availability to some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

That reclassification needs to be part of a wider push that includes much more action on preventive work to reduce the root causes of drug abuse and addiction. That should involve the police, local authorities, health

services, schools and third-sector organisations working together to address the wider issues in our communities. In addition, there needs to be a wider conversation about how we divert young people from gang culture in the first place and protect the vulnerable, who are targeted by drugs pushers, from being criminally exploited.

We need to bring greater purpose to people's lives and help them to take advantage of the opportunities opening up from our growing economy and record low unemployment. I am continuing to work on that with local partners in Stoke-on-Trent. I was out with Staffordshire police, housing officers from the local council and Stop Loan Sharks only last Friday in the East Fenton area. I was pleased to meet a number of local partners at Ormiston Meridian Academy in Meir recently to see what more can be done to improve things and provide facilities in the community as a distraction to antisocial behaviour, gangs and drugs.

We need to look closely at why people in employment, and even those in fulfilling employment, are attracted to drug abuse—it is not only those in the most disadvantaged communities. Sadly, class A drugs are part of designer lifestyles and have been for many years. Unfortunately, synthetic cannabinoids are just a new manifestation of an old evil. I will finish by mentioning that, should the Minister ever have time in his diary to visit Stoke-on-Trent, Commissioner Matthew Ellis and I would welcome the opportunity to show him some of the issues on the ground.

10.4 am

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this important debate, and I rise to speak in support of the case he made. His constituency is not that far from mine and not that different from mine. Many people see Mansfield as a slightly less good Chesterfield, but suffice it to say they share many similarities. In Chesterfield, we have experienced many of the issues he will have experienced in his town centre.

One reason why the issue is felt so passionately is the scope of its impact, not only on the users, but on people right across the community. These drugs have a huge impact on those who become users. Being able to get hold of them is the only purpose in their lives at times. These people are victims and vulnerable people, but their actions impact on a huge number of other people. Many people are frightened to go into the centre of our towns because of the impact of Mamba and Spice users and the alarming state that people get themselves into on these drugs.

At times over the past couple of years, we have seen the homeless community coming together in Chesterfield. The availability of such a cheap and powerful drug is a big part of the attraction. That has a big impact on not only the town centre, but our businesses and on retailers. Retailers trying to run their businesses in tough times have contacted me, saying they have people under the spell of these drugs in contorted positions in their shop doorways. It is impossible for them to conduct their business. The issue has a big effect on shoppers and tourists.

I pay tribute to the work of Hardyal Dhindsa, our excellent police and crime commissioner for Derbyshire. Along with the force, he has put a huge amount of effort into trying to clamp down on these drugs. He

introduced Operation Chesnee, which led to 70 arrests and a spate of convictions. At least 40 people have now been charged, and convictions are ongoing. Derbyshire police have put significant resource into cracking down on Spice and Mamba, but while they are class B drugs, there is a limit to the resources they can put in and the returns they can get. There is also the impact on the ambulance service. We have seen a sixfold increase in the past year in the number of ambulance call-outs to people who are on synthetic cannabinoids.

At the all-party parliamentary group meeting that the hon. Member for Mansfield held, people were worried that a reclassification would end up criminalising users. My sense is that we have widespread agreement that we want to try to reduce the incentive for dealers. It is not about going after those who are victims or vulnerable. Because of the availability of these drugs in prison, prison is no disincentive. I am very much of the view that it is not about criminalising users; it is all about reducing the incentive for dealers.

If we increase the classification and sentences rise, police tell me that they will no longer be getting people low down the supply chain. Currently, they are willing to take the rap because sentences are relatively short and they and their families will be looked after while they are in prison. Instead, those sentences will go higher up the drug chain to the people at the top, where they really belong. It is up to us as legislators to ensure that our directions for the courts achieve that aim. People may say that changing the classification will criminalise the victims, but it is up to us, when we get into the legislative process following the instruction this debate will give to the Home Secretary, to ensure that the directions to the courts are sufficiently robust for them to understand what we are talking about.

The hon. Member for Mansfield referred to antisocial behaviour, but that phrase understates the scale of the issue and its impact. "Antisocial behaviour" makes me think of children riding around on bikes in their local communities being noisy and knocking on people's doors. The terror that is caused in our communities by behaviour that does not actually hurt people, but certainly frightens them, is much stronger than the phrase "antisocial behaviour" implies.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) talked about the impact on prisons. I recently visited Nottingham prison, which is one of 10 that gets specific direction from the Government on improving standards and reducing suicides. The impact that Spice and Mamba synthetic cannabinoids have on the running of the prison is incredible. People get themselves sent into prison deliberately to bring drugs in. Huge and complicated initiatives are put in place to get drugs into the prison. The prison governor is entirely realistic about the impact that that has and the inability of our Prison Service to address it. When drugs are so rife in prisons, it is absolutely impossible to do any kind of rehabilitation work. The prison governor told me about a video of one of his inmates who was on Spice. He talked to him and showed him what he was like and the guy simply said, "When I'm away on Spice I just don't care about anything else in the world." The drug has a substantial impact on our prisons.

The hon. Member for Mansfield was at pains to point out that reclassification is only one part of the solution. None of us has claimed that it will solve the

issue. It is a social ill that afflicts us, but the chief cost of it and the comparatively low sentencing are important issues for us to tackle. Alongside that, where do we want to take the debate further? We need further resourcing for policing. If we are going to reclassify Spice ask them to and try to solve the problem, we will need to make sure there is additional resource for policing. We need a real attack—it has been inadequate so far—on homelessness. We need to recognise the link between welfare policy and many social ills. We need to ensure that drug prevention services are sufficiently robust and that we have proper support in our health system for people who want to come off drugs. We need to ensure we have targeted policing and sympathetic sentencing. We all recognise that reclassification is only one part of a much broader solution. Just because that does not solve everything does not mean that we should not try to do something. That is why I support the case made by the hon. Member for Mansfield today.

10.12 am

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this morning's debate.

In recent years, Spice has been a growing problem in my constituency, particularly around the town centres, which, as we have heard this morning, is common across the country. The health and wellbeing impact on those taking such substances is a major concern, and there is a wider concern for their families and those in the community who witness the effect on individuals and the social impact on our towns and villages, with many users being in a zombie-like state. Seeing individuals in that state is unnerving and sometimes frightening for members of the public, and some have told me that they feel uneasy walking through our town centres. Again, other Members have highlighted similar experiences this morning. Clearly, the situation has to be tackled.

Residents have raised the matter with me in both Merthyr Tydfil and in Rhymney. I have discussed its impact with both South Wales and Gwent police, who each cover a part of my constituency. It is clear that Spice, like most drugs, destroys lives and has a major and negative impact on our communities. As we know, "Spice" is the common name for what we are discussing this morning: synthetically produced substances, commonly known as synthetic cannabinoids as they were originally thought to mimic the effects of cannabis. However, recent studies on how those substances react with the brain show that they bind to a combination of receptors, making their effects much more unpredictable and dangerous.

I am concerned about how easy it appears to be for individuals to obtain such substances and about the fact that they are seen as a stepping stone to other, harder substances. Although Spice is a class B drug, users describe it as "green crack". Merthyr Tydfil has seen an increase in acquisitive crime, particularly shoplifting, to fund Spice habits. In my constituency, both police forces are doing their best to tackle this growing problem. Over the summer, South Wales police worked proactively in and around Merthyr Tydfil town centre with a range of partner agencies, which had positive results with a marked reduction in cases. I will share some thoughts on what has been done locally.

[Gerald Jones]

A multi-agency approach to dealing with Spice has been developed, predominantly for Merthyr Tydfil town centre. The approach attempts to break the cycle of possession and offending, with education, health, housing and drug and alcohol referral agencies participating in the pilot. The strategy has been twofold: first, support for users and prevention; secondly, disruption and detection of suppliers. The work has involved partner agencies such as Drugaid, Dyfodol, housing associations and various departments in the local authority basing themselves in the centre of Merthyr Tydfil. Users found in possession were taken to the services available to them to meet their acute needs as an alternative to prosecution. It proved extremely effective in identifying a number of individuals who were experiencing differing levels of vulnerability. It was coupled with robust action taken when dealers were identified.

I want to thank and congratulate both South Wales and Gwent police and the other agencies on their work on the pilot scheme. However, clearly, as we all know, police resources are tight. With police numbers much lower than they were just a few years ago, the police's ability to continually mount such operations is limited. In addition, there are financial pressures on local authorities and other public agencies, meaning that they are less able to react and deal with the issues effectively. More therefore needs to be done to support the police and communities in my constituency and across the country to tackle the problem.

A review of the drugs policy would be a good start to finding a way forward to tackle the growing impact of drugs. I hope that today's debate will allow the Government to consider what more can be done. I ask the Minister specifically to consider what action he can take to assist the police, other agencies and the wider community to help tackle this growing problem. We need the Government to be on top of their game in dealing with a problem that blights my community and many others across the country.

10.17 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this debate on a subject very close to our hearts. Many others who would love to be here also support the aims of the hon. Gentleman and other speakers. I will talk about a specific case that the Minister is aware of. It is a success story in that Government policy has helped very much.

Members will know that I am a most sincere advocate for my young constituent, Sophia Gibson, who was prescribed medicinal cannabis. I watched the struggle of my constituents as they fought with every breath to legally get the help that their child needed, and today young Sophia is a different child. I want to put on the record my thanks to the Minister for his endeavours to make sure that that happened. He had the opportunity to meet Sophia Gibson, my parliamentary aide and me to talk about this matter. I know that he industriously, personally and sincerely pushed the matter for Sophia and I thank him for that. I also thank the Government for their help to make that happen. Without that help and intervention, we would not have the Sophia we have

today. Like me and everyone who helped, the Minister has a photograph of that young girl who has now come on greatly.

Sophia needed medicinal cannabis to have any semblance of a life. Her courageous mummy and daddy refused to stop pushing, and refused to give in and accept drugs that had horrific side effects and did not address the severe medical issues that their daughter had. I cannot speak highly enough of Danielle and Darren, the mum and dad who put it all out there to get their daughter the help that she so desperately needed. They did it in the right way. They followed the legal procedure and paved the way for others who need an opportunity to get that help. The path is still not smooth, and the Government are honing the procedure, but because of Alfie Dingley's mother Hannah and because of the Gibsons, it is now a possibility.

I recently saw a picture of Sophia dressed as Princess Anna for her school Hallowe'en party. That might not be noteworthy for everyone, but it was noteworthy for Sophia's family because it was the first party that she had been able to attend at school. That says it all about what medicinal cannabis has done for that young girl and for her mum and dad.

A post on the social media page Help for Sophia's Seizures, which updates people on Sophia's progress, encapsulates why I stood with Danielle and Darren in their battle for help for their child, as the Minister and many in the community did. It reads:

"Nearly 14 weeks on from when Sophia was prescribed medicinal cannabis with THC on the NHS and she has NOT been hospitalised from 10th July, seizure length and frequency are reducing and Sophia is so much brighter, has a lot more energy and her 'wee rascal' personality is shining through. Sophia recently had a cold that lasted 5 weeks and any other year day 2 of a cold and she was hospitalised with back to back seizures but this year it has been so much different and at last for the better. Our little princess is getting bigger, stronger and better each day and we hope this continues looking into the future. This was never to cure Sophia as her syndrome is genetic but about Sophia having a better quality of childhood and that is what she is doing."

I am undoubtedly in the corner of those in the medical profession who know that nothing else is working, but I must say clearly that that is where I draw the line. I believe that honing the process means educating doctors to know the situations that call for the prescription of whole plant cannabis, which has no additional substances added to it. I am not a doctor—far from it—and I am not medically trained, but the fact that whole plant cannabis has been proven to make such a substantial difference to young Sophia's quality of life tells me that more research is needed into whole plant medicine. That will enable medical professionals to have the information that they so need to prescribe whole plant cannabis to others in Sophia's situation, in which the currently available drugs are not working and are even damaging her in the long term.

We must remember the impact that every seizure has, physically and mentally, on a child's capacity. There are people whose lives would massively benefit from whole plant cannabis. Information must be available for medical professionals to understand the medication so that they can prescribe it.

Kevin Foster: I am listening to the hon. Gentleman's speech with great interest. As always, he is a doughty advocate for his constituents. Does he agree that there is

no contradiction in believing that Spice, as a synthetic cannabinoid for recreation use, should be made a class A drug, but that cannabis-based medicine should be allowed for specific purposes? The medicinal use of a drug is a different concept from its abuse for recreational purposes.

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly agree. I want to make sure that we understand the side effects, but the thrust of the hon. Gentleman's intervention brings me back to a point that I have made clear throughout the debate: reclassifying cannabis to allow recreational use is something that I cannot support. Just as we use morphine under very select circumstances and in a controlled manner, but have rightly outlawed the use of heroin, it is right that we have classified cannabis products for medicinal use in select circumstances and in a controlled manner. That is the way I believe it must be.

I do not believe that we should allow recreational use of Spice or Mamba, or that we should advocate such use of any cannabis-derived product. Nor do I believe that legislating for medicinal cannabis means logically that we should legislate to allow recreational use, or to allow for those who believe that they can self-medicate.

We need to ensure that doctors understand the limitations of the change in legislation and can prescribe to someone whose case they know well and who is not responding to other conventional drugs. We need to ensure that people understand that the change in legislation does not give them carte blanche to grow their own plants. Finally, we need to ensure that children like Sophia Gibson who had no quality of life before medicinal cannabis was available can access medication that will enhance their life, as it has clearly done for Sophia, so that they can have a birthday party without ending up in hospital, attend school without having to drop out because they are not well, and have a semblance of normality. That is what I support and will continue to support, and there is a very clear difference between the two.

10.24 am

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) for bringing this topic back to this place. As he correctly points out, we have to raise the profile of the issue because it exists throughout the United Kingdom and beyond. Pushing it away instead of discussing it will never do anybody any good.

It is clear from hon. Members' speeches today that we agree more than we disagree, but it is turning into groundhog day. We have had this conversation before. We agree that there is no silver bullet, that these drugs cause enormous damage, and that there is enormous strain on our local services. Where we disagree is on the effect that reclassifying these drugs will have. I repeat what I said at the start of the debate: reclassifying SCRAAs as a class A drug will not grant the police any additional enforcement powers. It may make it easier for a police force to reprioritise, but it will not give it any extra powers.

Reclassification is all about longer sentences. The proposed solution would send problematic users, some with serious mental health issues, to overcrowded and understaffed prisons that are full of synthetic drugs, as has been pointed out. I do not see how that could possibly end well.

We are told that making synthetic cannabinoids class A drugs is not about trying to prosecute the end user, but about prosecuting higher up the chain. Are we going to leave the end users on the streets? We have heard how unpleasant our society finds that and how intolerant we are to people with mental health issues. If we are not going to arrest those people, why are we doing this? Is it so we can chase people further up the chain? If longer sentences for class A drugs worked, we would have no heroin or cocaine problem. We have tried that for years and it has not worked, yet we are going down the same path again.

I thank Transform, Release and Volteface for the information that they gave me in advance of the debate. Let me quote from a Volteface report:

"Dr Rob Ralphs, a senior lecturer in criminology at Manchester Metropolitan University, has researched Spice in prisons and within the homeless community in the city. He believes that making Spice Class A will make no real difference to its use, but may make the situation worse. While the market for Spice is, at present, relatively stable with four or five different strains of the drug in circulation, he said its potential reclassification could drive innovation, leading to new strains being developed to circumvent it",

as has happened in the past. The report further quotes Dr Ralphs:

"Every time there's been a change in the law, the next generation...has been even stronger... The big thing is why the homeless and prison populations are using it in the first place. It's about putting money into engaging people into treatment services and trying to reduce the market. If you can reduce the market, the demand for it, then you will reduce it."

The report continues:

"Professor Harry Sumnall, who specialises in substance use at Liverpool John Moores University's Public Health Institute, also believes reclassification could make the problem of Spice worse.

"When you take a police-oriented approach to a complex health and social issue you can never address the fundamental root causes of why some cities in the UK are experiencing harms with these substances...I don't think the emergence of Spice and the concentration of harms in some users of Spice is down to the fact that the police aren't arresting enough dealers. I don't accept the fact that the police can't arrest people or are unlikely or unwilling to prioritise the pursuit of dealers because it's a Class B. There's nothing to stop police prioritising dealers or users of Spice."

He said the harms associated with heroin and crack cocaine 'haven't been resolved by the fact that they're Class A drugs' and that focusing on targeting dealers with harsher penalties would not lead to users being safer or healthier."

The point about safety is important. When we try to chase these things up the chain, as it has been said that we are planning to do, drug dealers protect their marketplace with incredible violence. If they feel threatened or their users are put under more pressure, that violence will escalate.

Criminologists argue that that makes the market more harmful because of the risk increase—an increase in the price of drugs makes the market more profitable, and the more profit involved, the more the violence is used to protect it. The types of organised crime groups that might then enter the market, because the profits are higher, mean that violence and secondary harm increase.

Professor Sumnall believes calls to make Spice class A are a "symbolic response" to the issue, which "doesn't actually translate into any meaningful public health action unless there's a real commitment to ensure good coverage of high quality services for these individuals"

[Ronnie Cowan]

who use it.

Going back to this letter signed by 20 police and crime commissioners, a line states:

“We would urge that synthetic cannabinoid products are reclassified from class B to class A.”

The letter also states its concern, five times—

“an urgent public health issue...most severe public health issue...As public health and substance misuse services are not currently taking the lead in meeting this growing challenge it is falling to the police...public health, mental health and addiction services...a public health challenge”—

that this is, categorically, a public health issue and that those who should be addressing it are not doing so.

According to Professor Sumnall, it is not being addressed because:

“The broader context of the failings in the criminal justice system, the fact that mental health service provision is in crisis, that local areas are experiencing around about a 30% cut in treatment budgets—those are the fundamental issues that need to be addressed rather than a totemic, symbolic response by making it a Class A”.

The blame lies here, in Parliament. The Select Committee on Science and Technology concluded in its report, “Drug classification: making a hash of it”, that the classification system was “not fit for purpose”. Harms of different drugs often bear little resemblance to their status in the ABC system, which has been distorted by political considerations and doomed attempts to send a message. That report was written in 2006, and we are none the wiser.

What can we do about that? Plenty of options are open to us, with plenty of examples around the world. Last week, I spoke to Nuno Capaz from Portugal. I asked him a straightforward question: is there a synthetic cannabis problem in Portugal? His answer was short, sharp and to the point: no. How can Portugal get this right, but we get it so wrong?

Canada’s example is to legalise and regulate real cannabis. In the Netherlands, because cannabis is legally available, the market for Spice is almost non-existent. People prefer the real thing, so demand never developed, as in Canada, Uruguay and many US states. The subtext to that is what Prime Minister Trudeau said last week about legalising cannabis—they are not doing it because it is good for people’s health, but because we know it is bad for our children’s health. That is a mindset that we have to adopt.

In conclusion, to improve life opportunities for people who use SCRAAs, it is imperative that we properly fund schemes around employment, education and housing. People who use SCRAAs should be diverted away from the criminal justice system. The diversion scheme in Durham, called Checkpoint, diverts people after arrest on the condition that they undertake a four-month programme to address their offending behaviour. As long as they comply, they will not get a criminal record. Initial findings from the pilot found that those who were diverted to Checkpoint had lower reoffending rates than those who were subject to out-of-court disposals such as cautions. Participants in Checkpoint also reported improved outcomes with substance misuse, alcohol misuse, accommodation, relationships, finances and mental health. Is that not what we are trying to achieve? We cannot ostracise a subsection of our citizens, driving them into

more damage by pushing them into the criminal justice system, when we all agree that we are trying to provide better social services—a wraparound service—and the only way in which that will ever happen is if we buy into that concept and it is properly funded by this Government.

10.34 am

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this debate.

Cannabis substitutes, or synthetic cannabinoids, have developed at a staggering rate over recent years, with more than 100 chemical variants, largely imported from the far east. The biggest concern is that many are far more potent and toxic than cannabis itself. Some variants were identified and banned under the Misuse of Drugs Act, but that just led to alternatives being developed. In response, the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 was introduced, completely banning the production, distribution and sale of such substances, and gave police the power to search persons, vehicles and premises and to seize and destroy any products found.

The 2016 Act provided fast and encouraging results, with high street sales almost entirely ceasing within a short space of time. Criminals selling more potent versions, however, took to the market instead, resulting in all synthetic cannabinoids banned as class B drugs and possession being a criminal offence. Those measures heavily diminished the supply of the substances, but we would be naive to think that we are anywhere near solving the problem. The production and distribution of new variants will continue to evolve illegally, meaning many vulnerable people are still at risk.

Those synthetic alternatives to cannabis are cheap, which means that use of and dependency on the drugs among the homeless and those in prison continue to grow. In addition, the drugs are also often seen as a relatively easily accessible self-medication for those suffering from depression as a result of some form of trauma. Worryingly, the potency of the synthetic substances can vary, and the effects that they might have on people vary greatly. Many become dependent quickly and, although some experience few or no side-effects, paranoia and seizures are common. Far too many deaths have been attributed to the use of cannabis substitutes.

Appallingly, there is a prevalence of videos on social media ridiculing those under the influence of those obscene substances. Filming of those desperate souls is neither funny nor respectful, but we have all seen the dreadful condition that people get into after taking those evil drugs. Clearly, the interventions and legal changes made to date have failed completely to deal with the issue of synthetic cannabinoids and the rise in the use of them. If we are seriously to clear our streets, our prisons and our communities from those vile drugs, we need to overhaul our drugs policy completely to make it fit for the 21st century.

Those inflicted with that dreadful obsession should not be subjected to ridicule. They are not amusements for us to view on social media—they are real people who need us to address their addiction, look at treatment, support them, and not just lock them up to move the problem from the streets. The Government need to give

us more guarantees that they are reviewing legislation, monitoring crime statistics and protecting our vulnerable communities from the dangers of those addictive, evil drugs.

10.38 am

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. This is not a debate about medicinal cannabis, but with your leave, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his update on Sophia and the Gibson family. Home Office Ministers are not regularly fed a diet of good news, but I was absolutely delighted to hear that. Perhaps, through him, I might pass my good wishes to the family.

Jim Shannon: After I had finished my speech, the family contacted me to thank the Minister personally—they watched the comments we made just now.

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that, and I send my best to the family, who showed enormous patience and dignity throughout a very difficult situation.

This has been a good debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on bringing the issue back before the House with persistence and tenacity. He is entirely right to do so. He described this as a serious national problem, and I do not think he is wrong about that. Statistics can be misleading. One might be lulled into thinking that synthetic cannabinoids are not a significant national problem by the statistic that less than 0.5% of 16 to 59-year-olds in England and Wales reported using a new psychoactive substance in the past year, which is broadly the same as the year before; it might seem a small number. However, as the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) pointed out, there is another number. There were 24 deaths related to synthetics in England and Wales in 2017. That is a terrible number to put alongside the evidence that has come, loud and clear, from Stoke, Chesterfield, Mansfield, Torbay and Wales, that the issue we are discussing causes real anxiety across the country. It confronts people with the terrible reality of its impact on some of the most vulnerable individuals in our communities, for whom, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) pointed out, £2 buys oblivion and a dehumanised state. We do not yet have that problem in Ruislip, Northwood or Pinner, but I have seen it with my own eyes on the streets of Newcastle, and it is a shocking and unsettling sight, which we do not want in our town centres, for all the reasons that Members of Parliament have powerfully articulated here today. As Members have said, the evolution of generations of such drugs is fast-moving and a major challenge.

I would like to assure the House that we are prioritising the issue, and I will set out some evidence for that. However, I remind the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North in particular that I get the urgency of the issue, and I will close with some remarks taking us forward a bit. We are prioritising the problem—the groundbreaking Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 was a substantial piece of legislation. I confirm, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield, that we shall publish our review of it before the end of November. However,

as I have said in previous debates, there is evidence that the Act has had a powerful effect in removing new psychoactive substances from open sale and ending the game of cat and mouse between Government and backstreet chemists. Significantly, 300 retailers across the UK have closed down and are no longer selling the substances. Suppliers have been arrested, there has been action by the National Crime Agency to remove psychoactive substances and, in 2016, there were 28 convictions in England and Wales, with seven people jailed under the new powers. That rose to 152 convictions in 2017, with 62 people immediately sent to custody. In parallel with that legislation, three separate sets of controls on the progressive generations of synthetic cannabinoids have been introduced, in 2009, 2012 and 2016.

Kevin Foster: The Minister referred to the 2016 Act. I can reassure him that there used to be two head shops in Torquay town centre, but both have closed following that legislation.

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful contribution. I think that we can be clear, subject to what is in the review at the end of the month, that that groundbreaking legislation has had an effect. I can also point out targeted action by the Government, concentrated on areas where we know usage is especially high.

Jack Brereton: Is the Minister aware that potentially up to 90% of cases involving Monkey Dust are in Stoke-on-Trent?

Mr Hurd: The fact that two Stoke-on-Trent MPs are taking part in the debate tells its own story about the sense of urgency and concern in that city. That will be noticed by me and by the House.

Prisons featured in several contributions, and I know that the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) visited Nottingham Prison recently and was shocked by what he saw. There is clearly a significant drug problem in prisons, exacerbated by the emergence of synthetics and psychoactive substances. I can, again, point out a stream of action being taken. A new drugs force is working with law enforcement to restrict supply, reduce demand and build recovery, and is working with 10 of the most challenging prisons; £6 million is being invested to tackle drug supply in those establishments. There is a new national partnership agreement for prison healthcare and a new £9 million joint Ministry of Justice and NHS drug recovery prison pilot at Holme House Prison. I could go on, but I see evidence of a proactive Government approach to drugs in prisons.

A number of colleagues mentioned rough sleeping, and made the relevant links with these drugs. Again, that is an unacceptable feature of too many town centres, high streets and shop entrances. I hope that there is cross-party support for the new rough sleeping strategy. The £100 million package is a step towards achieving the vision of a country where no one needs to sleep rough, by 2027. I could go into the details of that but I think that the House is aware of it.

There was, rightly, substantial comment about the need for effective treatment and prevention. I could not be more supportive of the emphasis that my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield placed on that. If we have learned anything in this place from many years of

[*Mr Hurd*]

evidence on many issues, it is that it is always smarter to invest in the fence at the top of the cliff than in the ambulance at the bottom. That is nowhere more true than in the matter of drugs. I can see from the statistics that people are seeking and receiving treatment from drugs services. Data from the national drug treatment monitoring system show that 1,223 adults presented to treatment for new psychoactive substances in 2017-18 in England, and 703 of those cases were for synthetic cannabinoids. Presentations for synthetic cannabinoids represented 0.6% of all adults who presented to drug and alcohol treatment in 2017-18.

To support those services, there is guidance on treatment for synthetic cannabinoids, including the recently updated drug treatment clinical guidelines, NEPTUNE's "Guidance on the Clinical Management of Acute and Chronic Harms of Club Drugs and Novel Psychoactive Substances", and Public Health England's new psychoactive substance toolkits for the community and prisons. However, as my hon. Friend pointed out, there is also more investment going into the NHS. The Health Secretary has made it clear that prevention is a core pillar of his approach to the brief. He is right about that, and we must see the dividend from more effective prevention work in years to come.

I join others in offering congratulations on some excellent examples of partnership and multi-agency working and police work in Derbyshire, south Wales, Gwent, Staffordshire and Mansfield. There is clearly good leadership on the issue around the country, which is fundamental. The importance of local multi-agency working is clear in our drug strategy and modern crime prevention strategy. This is not just a police issue. We are not going to arrest or sentence our way out of it. The key is such local leadership and such multi-agency partnerships. Having been reading up in preparation for this and previous debates, and having got to understand a bit better the work going on in Mansfield, I join my hon. Friend in commending the work of Mansfield police and their partners. It seems extremely commendable—arguably "best in class" across the system. Part of my responsibility and engagement with the National Police Chiefs Council is to challenge the system, and learn from the rest of the system, about what works and what partnership working is really effective.

I want in my closing remarks to move things on a bit, as I think my hon. Friend is already aware of the things I have talked about so far; we have had such exchanges before. I am persuaded by his previous debates, this debate and correspondence from police and crime commissioners of different political persuasions that we need to go further. I hope he welcomes the major review of drugs that the Home Secretary announced on 2 October, including a focus on the workings of the drugs market and synthetic cannabinoids, which will be in the scope of the review. That is a major piece of work.

I have also asked the National Crime Agency to undertake a threat assessment of synthetic cannabinoids, which will be reported to the Department in spring. It will provide a richer picture of the threat faced by law enforcement. I hope my hon. Friend welcomes that too.

Toby Perkins: I think I welcome what the Minister is saying, but I want to clarify something. By saying that he is persuaded that we need to go further, is he saying

that he will institute a review or that it will become Government policy that synthetic cannabinoids will be reclassified?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman has jumped ahead of my remarks. I am sure he understands the context, because he is a sensible man. In this complex situation, when dealing with something fast-moving, the Government have to take decisions based on good evidence and a good understanding of the risks, the threats, the drivers of the market, the changes in the market and the likely consequences and implications of decisions, including about classification. I am setting out a series of urgent pieces of work that will look at the drugs market in a broader sense, which is a big step in itself, and a specific commissioning of the National Crime Agency to look at the threat assessment of synthetic cannabinoids—for the first time, as I understand it—with a commitment to report back to us in spring.

I am also asking the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, whose advice we rely on for decisions on classification, to advise on refreshing its assessment. We have not done that in the last few months because the honest truth is that it has not been that long since the council last took a view in 2014. In this fast-changing environment, however, and given the representations of real concern made by Members of Parliament and by police and crime commissioners, it is the right moment to ask the council to refresh that assessment of synthetic cannabinoids' harms.

Hon. Members, and not least my hon. Friend for Mansfield, have been clear that reclassification is not a silver bullet—to use that cliché—and that we need to get several other things right. We should also be clear that reclassification would arguably not significantly increase the police's powers to deal with the possession, supply and production of these substances. Instead, it would primarily increase the penalties for possession from a maximum of five years in prison to seven years, and for supply and production from a maximum of 14 years in prison to life. The House will have its own view on whether that change would have a material impact as a deterrent.

The Government rely on advice from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, whose last assessment was in 2014. Even though that does not seem that long ago, based on representations made to me, it is the right time to ask it to refresh its assessment. I give that undertaking to hon. Members. I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend for Mansfield for his tireless passion in pursuing this cause, and other hon. Members for making it clear to the Government that there is no room for complacency.

10.54 am

Ben Bradley: I am grateful to you, Mr Howarth, and other hon. Members for being present. I thank everyone for their contribution. This has been a good opportunity to continue to raise the issue of synthetic cannabinoids and to keep it on the agenda as the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs and the Department considers it. I thank the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) for supporting my application for the debate, which was much appreciated.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his long-term support and his contributions to various debates on the subject. I also thank the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan). As much as we disagree on some of the implications of this, we agree that it is a public health issue—I hope I made that clear in what I said—and that the system currently gets it wrong.

From what the Minister has said, it is clear that the Government are looking at their drugs policy more broadly and how they might take it forward. There is definitely a discussion to be had. This campaign has a long way to go, but I am confident that we will continue to make progress. I welcome the Minister's remarks, and I thank him for laying out what the Government are going to do, with reviews by the Department and the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, the work that is happening in prisons and the potential work in the health service. All that is welcome, and I take from it that the Government are taking the issue seriously.

I welcome with open arms the letter I received from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs last week about its review of reclassification and what that should look like, but I press the Minister on the speed of that review. The council suggests that it will take nine months to deliver its decision, which seems like a long time.

I welcome the Minister's comments about the Government dealing with the issue and taking it seriously. I will continue to prioritise it and raise it during the reviews. I will keep having this conversation with the Minister, and I thank him for his patience on that. I will also keep prioritising the safety of my constituents.

I hope that in the coming months, and through the reviews, we will come to a conclusion about positive action that the Government can take to support local services and to benefit our communities by helping users and by keeping people in our town centres safe—that is the public safety aspect of the issue. In future, there needs to be proactive action and change from the Government to make that happen.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the reclassification of synthetic cannabinoids.

Plymouth Challenge for Schools

10.57 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Plymouth challenge for schools initiative.

It is good to see you back in the Chair, Mr Howarth. Funding good schools is the best investment we can make in our children's future. Teachers, teaching assistants and support staff do a superb job, but Ministers cannot keep asking them to do more and more with less and less. With rising costs, a crisis in recruitment and retention, and the mounting costs of the growing crisis in our young people's mental health, the urgent need for decent school funding is as stark as any warning can be. I will speak about Plymouth, our funding challenge and how, by working with the Minister, we can create an initiative of which he, I and teachers in Plymouth can be truly proud. The Plymouth Challenge is an initiative worthy of the Minister's focus, his Department's energy and the investment of public funds.

Hon. Members will know that I spoke in the debate about school funding last week. I plan to touch on some of the same themes, but the crux of the debate is the specific funding ask for the Minister to back the Plymouth challenge. I am pleased that the Minister has agreed to meet me and a delegation of cross-party councillors, teachers and headteachers from Plymouth next month, but I will not waste another opportunity to pitch this fantastic initiative, thank the teachers and teaching staff who do such a superb job in Plymouth, and call for the urgent funding for children in Plymouth and the far south-west to get our fair share.

The Plymouth challenge is an example of collaborative action by several educational specialists that are working together to improve educational outcomes across Plymouth. The Plymouth challenge has cross-party support from Plymouth City Council's Labour and Conservative leaderships and is backed by headteachers, and the regional schools commissioner's office and the Plymouth Teaching School Alliance. Its focus is on promoting aspiration and leadership in secondary schools and helping to support schools to improve outcomes, especially at the end of key stage 4.

The Plymouth challenge seeks to replicate the success of other challenges across the country, most notably in London, but elsewhere in places such as Manchester and Hull. In each case, standards and teaching quality were driven up by the considerable and focused investment of time, energy and money in our teachers and schools. Focused deep learning enables teachers to improve on their weaknesses, build on their strengths, grow in confidence, share best practice and know that their passion and commitment to the children they teach is matched by a similar commitment to their development by their employers, the Government and their city.

Plymouth is in the bottom 10 of all local authorities for secondary school performance. We have one type of every school thought of by Governments since 1945, so it is not the lack of diversity or competition that is hitting standards. Results at the end of key stage 4 are below the national average, and the percentage of students achieving a strong pass in English and maths is below four in 10. On average, by the end of key stage 4,

[*Luke Pollard*]

students have made less progress than similar students nationally. A shockingly high number of schools are judged inadequate—four out of 18, and five out of 18 before the studio school was closed in the summer, as the Minister knows.

Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and disadvantaged pupils are increasingly likely to be off-rolled or excluded not because of the work of staff and students, but because the support is not there for those pupils to function and succeed in a mainstream environment. Elective home education has nearly tripled in four years, and in some schools fixed-term exclusions have risen by more than 200%.

The contrast is clear when we compare Plymouth with London. In the capital, nine out of 10 children go to a good or outstanding school, and the national average is about eight in 10, but for children in Plymouth it is five out of 10. One in two—50%—of our kids do not go to a good or outstanding school as rated by Ofsted, which needs to change.

The Plymouth challenge has the potential to be a huge success, but at the moment it is a voluntary initiative that hard-pressed teachers must do in addition to a full curriculum—marking homework, preparing lesson plans, filling in paperwork and being surrogate mental health workers, social workers, mentors, leaders and role models. It cannot function simply on a voluntary basis. Plymouth City Council has said that only £900,000 to £1.3 million is required to implement the first phase of the scheme. That would be money well spent, and good value, too. In Plymouth, we have the will and the passion, but we simply lack the funding and time to make it work. Our teachers and teaching assistants need deep learning. That cannot be just one hour swapped out of a classroom for a quick update on skills; it must be deep, intensive learning so they benefit from the latest in teaching quality initiatives. The children who otherwise would have been taught by them must have a high-quality replacement to ensure that their education does not suffer because of their teacher's participation in the scheme.

Training matters, because training and investment in a person's development improves retention and reignites the passion for learning. I have spoken to countless teachers who have either left the profession or are considering leaving because of the pressure, the stress and the seemingly never-ending squeeze on spending and real-terms pay cuts. The Plymouth challenge could help to address that.

School funding has been a growing concern for a number of years, as schools in Plymouth and the far south west as a whole continue to be denied our fair share of resources. The hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) is dealing with an urgent constituency matter, in which he has my full support, but has asked that his support for this call be added to my remarks. If other Conservative Members had been here today, I am certain their concerns about education funding in Devon and Cornwall would also be highlighted. Although it is a particularly dodgy socialist standing in front of the Minister today, many Members not only in my party, but in his, too, share this concern and back this solution.

Two weeks ago, I met headteachers during my one of my regular pastries and politics roundtables in Plymouth, and the seemingly never-ending pressures on finances,

cropped up time and again. As the proud son of a teacher, I know how hard teachers work. Each of them is full of love and passion for their subject, but too often today their spark is being put out. Too many are left frustrated and demoralised by the double-edged sword of a lack of support and an increase in pressure to do more with less.

Schools across my constituency have suffered consistent underfunding since 2010, and a vicious cycle of cuts—particularly cuts that do not sit in the education budget but affect things that local authority budgets previously took care of—has worsened existing conditions. As class sizes have increased, the number of teachers and teaching assistants has decreased, and the vulnerable and poorest students in our communities are increasingly in the most underfunded schools.

Plymouth has one of the lowest education spends per head in the United Kingdom—£415 less per child than London and £300 less per child than the national average. That shortfall has had a damaging impact on students in Plymouth, who continue to fall behind the national average for academic attainment. Funding and attainment are linked.

When the national funding formula is fully implemented in about 2020-21, Coventry will receive £4,806 per pupil, compared with Plymouth's £4,532. That difference of £274 per pupil equates to a loss of funding of £9.4 million for Plymouth. Coventry is a city similar in size, population and demographics to Plymouth, but it has very different education funding. I have no fight with Coventry—except when it comes to football—but I use that example to illustrate that not all children are being valued in the same way across the country.

The Minister will know from my remarks during the previous debate on this subject that I have particular concerns, one of which is the maximum gains cap. I would like the Minister to consider reviewing and removing the 3% maximum gains cap, which is part of the national funding formula. One of the key principles of the national funding formula was that pupils with similar characteristics should attract similar levels of funding, wherever they are in the country. That is a good idea, but the maximum gains cap prevents schools that have been underfunded for many years from receiving their fair share of their current entitlement because their gains are throttled. For example, under the funding formula, Plymouth is due to gain £10.6 million, but the maximum gains cap means that, in practice, schools in Plymouth will receive less than half that amount—£4.7 million in 2018-19 and £8.7 million in 2019-20. The gains cap means that they will get less than they should be getting under the funding formula.

Even with the additional funding formula, Plymouth continues to receive considerably less than the national average. I would be grateful if the Minister could review whether the gains cap is appropriate, and whether it could be flexed or removed to give places such as Plymouth, which have received lower funding deals historically, a chance to catch up more quickly. It seems to me that the schools that have lost out the most will be disadvantaged in their progress towards a fairer position because of that historical underinvestment. It does not seem fair, equitable or justifiable that the Government put in place this policy. To achieve the objectives that the Minister rightly wants and to have a fairer funding formula for all pupils, we need to address the maximum gains cap, which throttles that benefit.

I am certain that many of the teachers watching this debate will be alarmed that Department for Education rules have limited the fairer funding formula. I would be grateful if the Minister looked again at the role of the maximum gains cap, and perhaps lifted the cap for Plymouth. That would provide some of the money that the Plymouth challenge needs. I remember from what the Minister said in the previous debate that, although the figures for the period between now and the end of the fairer funding formula are limited, that important retrospective gap must also be addressed.

Many of the teachers who got in touch with me ahead of this debate raised concerns about mental health funding and the increased pressure that that puts on their role in the classroom. The Government's warm words on mental health are to be welcomed, and I back many of them, but there have been cuts to mental health provision for young people in primaries, especially in the Plymouth excellence cluster—a body that pooled mental health funding for our schools—which lost its funding earlier this year.

The three-year mental health funding deal for secondary schools in Plymouth is due to expire this year, and no replacement funding has been identified. That cannot be right, and I would be grateful if the Minister gave urgent consideration to providing support, especially for young people who are receiving mental health support. If money cannot be found for them from existing school budgets to replace that funding, they will lose it. Our teachers are brilliant, but they cannot also be professional mental health workers. Many of them have raised that concern with me.

Rather than hear it from me, it is more fitting if the Minister hears this from the teachers themselves. When I secure a debate in this place, I often let people know about it on my Facebook and Twitter pages, and even on Instagram. Last week, I asked people to send in their stories and experiences. I am sure many of them will be familiar to the Minister. Flex wrote to me to say:

"I'm a Supply teacher and a product of the 'Troops to Teachers' scheme. Of the 50 teacher trainees that began the course and 2 years into teaching there are 12 of us left nationally. I have worked in many schools in the Plymouth area and many are seriously underfunded. TAs are invaluable supporting SEN or 1-1 children to simply keep a class running. I have worked in schools that have run out of books, paper or have a shortage of IT or Sports equipment. As a Supply, I regularly fund and bring my own resources into certain schools because I know some items will not be available such as pens."

Plymouth City Council and many of Plymouth's teachers wrote to me ahead of this debate to share the key asks. Unlike other challenge programmes around the country such as those in Manchester, London and Hull, there has been no targeted DFE funding, although it has provided official support on staff time. I would be grateful if the Minister committed to investigate what funding pots are available to support the Plymouth challenge and initiatives like it around the UK.

I would also be grateful if the DFE sent a clear message that all Plymouth children should expect to be able to attend a good or outstanding school, and set out a timeframe. At the moment, only half our children attend schools in that bracket. I would be grateful if the Minister set out a framework for working with Plymouth City Council and local schools and academies to support the Plymouth Challenge steering group to achieve that objective.

As part of our funding request, we seek resources to appoint a full-time challenge co-ordinator and for an outstanding headteacher or experienced professional from outside Plymouth to be seconded for at least a year to provide the professional challenge, curiosity and inquiry that is vital to making an initiative such as the Plymouth challenge work. I would be grateful if the Minister and his officials supported us in that endeavour.

The Minister knows that Plymouth has every type of school thought of by every Government since 1945. Diversity of provision is the daily reality in Plymouth, so lack of diversity is not the problem. The problem is the fragmentation to which that leads. I would be grateful if the DFE signalled a commitment to driving collective accountabilities instead of supporting that fragmented system. I recognise that there are challenges with that, but although there seems to be a belief that Plymouth has achieved the perfect level of competition that Ministers seek, it has encountered problems, perhaps earlier than other cities around the country that are progressing towards that.

Finally, given the growing focus on multi-academy trusts, I would be grateful if the Minister told us where there is intentional design of MAT development in the far south-west and Plymouth, and how successful MATs and school leaders can be secured to support the city. No school should lose out from the MAT process.

Let me read testimonies from two teachers who wrote to me ahead of the debate. Tom wrote:

"This is only my fourth year as a teacher and I am close to just about avoiding becoming one of those five year drop-out statistics. On a good day, it can be a hugely inspiring and rewarding job but the immense pressures involved mean that a remarkable number of passionate teachers have left.

I have been involved in one of the key elements of the Plymouth Challenge: the idea that local schools need to more efficiently collaborate with regards to curriculum planning, moderation, CPD etc. It's a project with an admirable goal. However, rather than funding coming from the existing budgets of already struggling schools, the government urgently needs to provide an additional grant for the Plymouth Challenge as it did previously for other major cities."

Nina wrote:

"I've been a teacher and leader for over 13 years and I love my job. I have also had a real terms pay cut again this year and seen amazing teachers leave the profession. I have been involved in Plymouth Challenge since early 2018."

She stated that the main issue is that there is no funding, "yet the expectations being placed on teachers to deliver results are significant. Schools, teaching staff, support staff and school leaders are keenly aware and can't work any harder—but maybe we could work smarter.

Plymouth Challenge was sold to schools as a model by which subject specific hubs could be set up to organise training and develop and share expertise. But there's no money and teachers who volunteered to help run these hubs were told we should think about what we could charge schools to attend and that we could have start up loans".

Nina goes on:

"There is so much goodwill—so much expertise—but the lack of funding means there is a creeping scepticism and frustration. The Plymouth Challenge has immense potential but we can't 'maximise current funding streams' to make it work – those funding streams are already maxed out."

There is huge enthusiasm for the Plymouth challenge among teachers and teaching staff in the city. There is a window of opportunity in the next few months for us to

[Luke Pollard]

secure it by getting to grips with funding it properly and providing wraparound support for teachers. The initiative can work, and it must work if we are to achieve the improvements in grades that we all want.

If austerity really is over, the Government have the opportunity by supporting this campaign to make up for historical underfunding in Plymouth and to improve the lives of children in my city in real terms. I say to the Minister: support teachmeets and online training courses focused on Plymouth priorities, support our young people's mental health services, support our aspirations to empower disadvantaged students, and support co-operative models across Plymouth's schools to look at how we can ensure that every child, regardless of their background, their parents' jobs or their postcode, has a chance to fulfil their potential.

I genuinely look forward to working with the Minister. There is potential for us to work in a cross-party way to ensure that all our kids in Plymouth succeed and achieve their best.

11.14 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing the debate and on the way in which he introduced it. We share a vision for Plymouth of ensuring that every child in the city, regardless of their background or where they live, receives a world-class education that enables them to reach their full potential. That vision is shared by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter), whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). They continually raise education issues with me in the Chamber and the voting Lobbies.

Let me say up front that I support the Plymouth Challenge, which is a school-led initiative supported by Plymouth City Council and the regional schools commissioner, who is appointed by the Secretary of State. The challenge was set up to tackle historical underperformance in a number of secondary schools in the city. It seeks to harness the many strands of school improvement initiatives currently being undertaken in the city and to add to those initiatives capacity, resources and experience from other schools in the area and from outside the area. It was developed by the headteacher strategy group, which is made up of secondary headteachers.

As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport knows, the Plymouth Challenge is organised around three strands: strengthening leadership, raising standards and raising aspirations. On the second of those, systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read. It is hugely important to secure the basics to equip young people with the life skills to decode, read and understand the world around them. The proportion of pupils in Plymouth who meet the required standard in the phonics check rose from 58% in 2012 to 82% in 2018, in line with the national average.

At key stage 2, Plymouth schools and pupils have risen to the challenge of the more rigorous primary school national curriculum that we introduced in 2014.

In 2018, 62% of primary school students in Plymouth reached the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. That represents an eight percentage point improvement on the 54% of pupils in Plymouth who achieved the same result in 2016. Despite that gain, Plymouth's figure is still two percentage points below the national average. It is therefore important that the primary sector continues to deliver improvements and builds on that upward trajectory in reading, writing and maths to get it above the national average.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, outcomes at secondary level are mixed. In 2018, 40.4% of students in Plymouth entered the English baccalaureate, which is a core group of academic GCSEs—English, maths, at least two sciences, a language and a humanity. That figure outstrips the national average of 35.1% and is 1.5 percentage points higher than the figure for Plymouth in 2014.¹ That means more young people in the city are studying and achieving through a core academic curriculum, which I firmly believe provides them with the knowledge and skills for a variety of careers beyond school life. However, we need the proportion of pupils studying the EBacc combination to rise significantly in every secondary school in the city.

On other key stage 4 measures, Plymouth lags behind the rest of the country. Its 2018 Progress 8 score is minus 0.32, which is below the national average. One way of improving standards, particularly at secondary level, is harnessing expertise both within and outside a city. A strong Exeter-based multi-academy trust is already having an impact by driving up expectations. Standards at two Plymouth secondary schools are benefiting from that expertise, and Reach Feltham, the top-performing London academy, provides that partnership with leadership support and challenge. That model is proving very effective.

We need to look outwards and build on great examples across the country, be that Michaela Community School's marriage of high standards, exemplary behaviour and manageable teacher workload, which the hon. Gentleman referred to, Tom Bennett's approach to improving behaviour in schools, or the myriad trusts finding success in the face of challenging circumstances.

There is also a benefit to be realised from more formal structural partnerships in the city. We welcome the increased engagement in Plymouth of high-quality multi-academy trusts outside the immediate region. Reach South Academy Trust is an example of a MAT that has done precisely that, bringing external expertise and experience into the city by creating a cross-phase hub and, as part of that, sponsoring UTC Plymouth.

The hon. Gentleman raised the national funding formula, specifically the maximum gains cap. Nationally, approximately 75% of schools, including those that were historically underfunded, will be on the national funding formula allocation by 2019-20. I reassure him that schools are already benefiting from that. The formula has allocated an increase for every pupil in every school in 2018-19, with increases of up to 3% for underfunded schools and more for the very lowest funded.

Changes to the formula have delivered significant gains in Plymouth, where schools have attracted an extra 3.3% per pupil on average this year. By 2019-20, that will be 5.9% more per pupil compared with 2017-18. That is equivalent to an extra £251 for every pupil, or a total increase of £10.2 million when factoring in rising

1. [Official Report, 15 November 2018, Vol. 649, c. 4MC.]

pupil numbers. Furthermore, 15 Plymouth schools benefit from the formula's minimum per-pupil funding level. These schools will not have their gains capped, so they will attract their full allocation by 2019-20.

The Department has also prioritised additional support for Plymouth through the strategic school improvement fund, with £681,000 approved to support 42 Plymouth schools, including funding projects focused on the teaching of phonics and maths. The high-quality training delivered through the secondary system leadership project has been welcomed. Although the project is in its infancy, I am confident that it will deliver increased capacity and capability in effective school self-review, peer review and school-to-school support and improvement.

Two Plymouth secondary schools have further benefited from £299,000 in emergency school improvement funding to drive longer-term whole-school support. The impact of that funding has been significant. For example, a "Ready to Learn" behaviour approach at All Saints Academy has fostered a culture in which rules matter and is proving to be an enabler of excellent teaching.

Furthermore, we have given strong trusts in Plymouth the opportunity to access additional funding to improve schools and increase social mobility through the MAT development and improvement fund. Four Plymouth trusts have been awarded grants and will access a minimum £298,000 of funding in this financial year. In total, that is more than £1 million in additional funding that the Government are injecting into the Plymouth education system. Funding for Plymouth schools is £149.6 million this year, rising to £153.3 million next year.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the importance of the Plymouth Challenge initiative. I share his vision of a high standard of education for all pupils and a system that enables all—regardless of background—to reach their potential. I have spoken about the collaborative stewardship role that we have taken in working towards transforming education in Plymouth, the impact of the funding streams that we have harnessed and committed to the city's schools and the importance of working with stakeholders and learning from excellence outside the city. I have also spoken of the formal and informal ways in which we are strengthening leadership, raising aspirations and improving standards for the benefit of Plymouth pupils now and in the future.

I am keen to work with the hon. Gentleman and other Plymouth Members, and headteachers from his constituency, to explore how we can support the system, allowing schools to be at the forefront of improvement while continuing to challenge standards. I very much welcome his involvement in seeking to raise standards in Plymouth schools and very much want to be part of that process. Working with him, headteachers and other Plymouth MPs, I am sure that we can achieve a huge amount through the Plymouth Challenge to raise standards in all Plymouth schools.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

Holiday Hunger Schemes

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

3.15 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered holiday hunger schemes.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and a privilege to have the chance to discuss such an important and timely issue.

Last week, children in the Potteries and across the country were home for half term. It would be nice to be able to use the phrase "enjoying their half term", and I am sure that for many that was true, but not for all, because among their number there were children who returned to school yesterday hungry. For them the half term was a week not of theme parks and family outings, but of empty days and empty stomachs. That might sound shocking—indeed, it is—in a country as wealthy and as prosperous as ours, but it is all too common, and it is the awful reality of holiday hunger. I raised the issue in the House in my first question as a new Member in 2015, but neither time nor repetition have lessened the impact of the heartbreaking statistics that drove me to act.

Some 31% of children in my constituency are born into poverty. A third of parents across the country skip meals so that their children can eat during the school holidays. More than 1.3 million children on free school meals during term time find that that genuine lifeline is snatched away from them for 14 weeks of every year, with the summer holidays a potential nightmare. Behind each of those statistics lie the stories of those children: of wasted summers and wanting bodies; of children returning to school malnourished; of weeks spent in hunger and isolation because mum and dad cannot afford time off work or the extra meals that come from six weeks without the security of the classroom. There is no adjustment to the welfare system to compensate for the additional cost of 10 meals per week per child. With the cost of childcare during the school holidays, not to mention new school uniforms and other essentials, too many families are tipped into crisis.

It would be easy to dismiss the need for the schemes, but I have seen and heard the reality, not only from the examples that have been talked about nationally, including by the wonderful Lindsay Graham, but from seeing families who walk for miles to access the schemes in the summer months because they cannot afford the bus fare. I have seen mums queuing for more than an hour before the scheme was due to open so that they would be first in line; children who thought they needed to steal food from the holiday club so that they had something to eat that night; and grandparents at the end of their tether because childcare has fallen on them and they do not know how to stretch their pension to feed their grandchildren, and they do not want to tell their own children that they are struggling financially.

In my constituency, a wonderful scheme was provided by the Salvation Army this summer. We expected 30 children to turn up. The scheme opened at half past eleven. At 10 o'clock there were more than 30 people outside, but there was not enough food. The wonderful Tesco delivered

[*Ruth Smeeth*]

food and its staff came to volunteer. During that one session more than 100 people turned up, which shows the level of demand that we have.

It is not just the heartbreaking stories that should us drive us to act. The impact on the long-term attainment of my wonderful children should be front and centre for the Education Minister. Not only does youth malnutrition impact on long-term health outcomes; it also has a direct impact on young people's attainment, not least the fact that if young people stop using cutlery or writing implements for weeks at a time, they lose dexterity and muscle memory, which affects them on their return to school. Some of them, especially younger children, will not know how to hold a pen. Research suggests that the children who do not receive appropriate nutrition during the school holidays could return in September more than four weeks behind academically than they were in July, making it much harder for them and their families and for the teachers who have to help them catch up.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This is a very good debate. I do not want to stray from the main issue. In my constituency, there are teachers in schools who step up to the plate in the holidays. They put on special subjects, which they are not paid for, in order to arrange for food, meals and exercise for children who are not taken on holiday.

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We are, at the moment, in the hands of those people who volunteer their time, and who give children access to their buildings and schools. If they did not volunteer those facilities, school provision could cost families up to £15 or £20 a day. My constituents cannot afford that, and I am sure that my hon. Friend's cannot either.

Against the backdrop that I have described, in the summer of 2017, my local heroines, and the odd hero, set out to pull together people and organisations from across Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove to launch the first comprehensive pilot programme to tackle holiday hunger and deal with school holiday provision in north Staffordshire. At this point, I should make it clear that we all hate the phrase "holiday hunger". It is misery-inducing and heartbreaking, but it can also be counterproductive, as no parents want to admit, or even accept, that they are struggling to feed their children, so they opt out of programmes. In 2017, therefore, we launched Fit and Fed, our pilot for the extended summer break of 2017, to help to reach low-income families and their children, and provide safe activities, as well as a proper meal, Monday to Friday, for six weeks.

The initiative was driven by the brilliant and formidable Carol Shanahan, whom the Minister has had the pleasure of meeting. My heroine, the managing director of Synectic Solutions, has ensured that we bring together as many people as possible, and she has enlisted the support of charities, volunteers and organisations across my constituency, to turn the pilot into a real project. I am indebted to each and every one of them: Synectic Solutions, the Port Vale Foundation Trust, StreetGames, Swan Bank church, North Staffordshire Allotment Network, Root'n'Fruit, the Salvation Army,

City catering public health, Stoke-on-Trent City Council, YMCA North Staffordshire, Engage Communities, the Stoke City Community Trust, Netbiz, Purple Cow—interesting name—and Stoke-on-Trent Foodbank, which all supported the project. If anything shows the importance of all the voluntary groups coming together, it is the list I just read.

I am also thankful for the financial support of the Greggs Foundation, which donated £5,000, and I am grateful to Warburton, Makro, Freshview Foods, JB Oatcakes and High Lane Oatcakes—I am talking about Stoke-on-Trent, after all—all of which supplied food, as well as, of course, to FareShare. As I said, Tesco has been extraordinary. Special thanks must go to it and its team, led locally by the inspirational Rich Evans. They volunteered their time as well as huge quantities of food at very short notice, to ensure that people were well fed. Most of all, I am grateful to the dozens of volunteers who contributed more than 600 hours of their time so that within the pilot, 4,323 meals were dished up to local children and their families. That was in addition to the thousands of meals provided by other amazing voluntary groups, including the Chell Heath mums and the Big Local. The goal of the pilots was not just to make holiday provision for those that really needed it. It was to pull together hard data to work out what delivery systems are most effective, and to begin to develop best practice that can guide similar projects nationwide.

Mr Sheerman: As soon as my hon. Friend mentioned the word "data" I was reminded of the encouraging statement to the House yesterday by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about public health. The one thing he seemed to back away from was the link between poverty and poor health. Does not what my hon. Friend is talking about today exemplify the link between poverty and poor diet, which the Government seem reluctant to make?

Ruth Smeeth: In fact, the Government of Canada have done research to demonstrate the cost of poor nutrition to the public purse over a lifetime, in lack of attainment and job prospects. Also, it ends up costing the NHS a lot; if someone starts from a low base and does not get the right nutrition, it costs the public purse even more in the end. To me, the individual families are the most important part of the issue, but there is also a question of how much it ends up costing the general public if we do not get things right. My hon. Friend is right, and I hope that the Department of Health and Social Care will view what I am talking about as part of the prevention agenda within public health.

As for data collection, six different methods of tackling child food poverty and holiday provision were tested in my constituency. Some of the methods involved the direct provision of food alongside sport and craft activities in both primary and secondary school settings. Elsewhere, the direct provision of food and activities were maintained, but the programme was taken out of an educational setting. Instead, Wesley Hall, a modern church in the heart of Sneyd Green, was used. The YMCA facilitated community meals. The whole family could turn up at lunchtime and enjoy a hot meal as part of the scheme. That was an extension of its wonderful monthly community lunch programme—once a month, on a Friday; I highly recommend it. There was even a meals-on-wheels-style scheme, where food was delivered directly and discreetly

to the doors of families who could not access any of the schemes easily. Each of the approaches was found to have pros and cons, and it is clear that a broad mix of delivery approaches is necessary to reach as many of the most vulnerable families as possible.

The pilots were to my knowledge the most structured and rigorous attempts to address the challenge of holiday hunger conducted in Staffordshire, certainly—and I suggest, as I am very proud of us, nationwide. However, they were not the only activities taking place in Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove. Across the constituency, local people who had heard what we were trying to achieve got involved and organised their own projects to make sure that the kids in their community were not left behind. My favourite, and the most chaotic, was in Chell Heath in my constituency. Thirteen mums from the local children's centre came together expecting to look after 25 to 30 children a day. They ended up with more than 100, which was not quite what they were prepared for. When you walked in, it was complete and utter chaos—organised chaos—and a delight to visit. It shows the demand out there for proper holiday provision.

All in all, last summer, more than 10,000 meals were dished up across the constituency. I am so proud of the way local people pulled together to deliver such an enormous project. Together, they touched the lives of hundreds of children who without the projects would have faced a summer of hunger and isolation.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend has been doing brilliant work. We had a pilot scheme in Bristol, and what I found particularly interesting about it, and about the national results, was that children really wanted the fresh fruit. They regarded it as something of a luxury. Also, taking the leftover food home at the end of the day was very important. It shows the level of food poverty in which those children exist.

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more. One thing that we must look at is how people cook—there could be cooking classes in some of the activity programmes—and also ensuring that there is enough food at the end of the day for the whole family to have a meal that night, if necessary; it is not just about the children participating in the schemes as a secondary consequence of making sure they get wonderful holiday provision.

Mr Sheerman: Many Members have just come back from the church service to commemorate 100 years since the cessation of the first world war. Does my hon. Friend recall, from learning history, that it was only when we started recruiting soldiers for the first world war that the extent of malnutrition in this country's children as they reached 18 was realised? Nutrition was below the standard of any other country in the Commonwealth. Has my hon. Friend, with her community groups, looked at how good the data is on the effect of poor diet in the holidays on children's overall health? Are GPs and clinical commissioning groups monitoring that?

Ruth Smeeth: That is a fascinating point. There have been more than 100 years of free school meals. One of the things that I find extraordinary about free school meal provision is that we did not think about school holidays. That is because there used to be community

provision. Historically, schools were built with the kitchen at the front, so that when they were closed the kitchens were still open. As for the long-term health benefits, one of the great partnerships we had was with the public health team at Stoke-on-Trent City Council. This year and next year, we are working with Keele University, which will help us to assess the long-term impact.

The very best part of the fact that the schemes happened last year is the point that they did not end there. The pilot was not a one-off. Local efforts to tackle holiday provision have grown and grown. This summer, we had 12 holiday clubs operating in my constituency, with many more across the whole of Stoke-on-Trent, under the flag—for those who know Stoke-on-Trent—of Ay Up Duck. I cannot really do the proper accent. The organisation was set up to continue the work of the previous year, to move it on from the stigma that might have been associated with holiday hunger schemes. More than 5,926 meals were dished up by the Ay Up Duck scheme, and 460 parents accessed the food too, which was a significant development on last year. The scheme continued last week with a full programme of activities in half term, and will continue at Christmas, next half term and Easter before we get to next summer. Although Ay Up Duck did not receive direct funding as part of the national pilot, it got support from our local opportunity area. I welcome all support, as the funding provided by the Department for such projects has made a positive impact in supporting civil society to tackle child food poverty in local communities, but I fear it is insufficient, given the scale of the problem.

I have some questions for the Minister—this is his bit. What plans does he have to roll out the funding to every local authority? Our experience suggests that to ensure that schemes are co-ordinated and safe, a central point of contact and support is vital. Can the Minister inform us of his conversations with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about establishing a point of contact with each council? One of the challenges for holiday provision schemes is ensuring that they prioritise the right people for support. What conversations has he had to encourage family support workers to engage in such programmes outside term time? Many schools are struggling to find the additional funding to encourage them to work during the holidays.

We all have a responsibility to ensure that we are sharing best practice and not reinventing the wheel. Can the Minister update the Chamber on what he is doing to disseminate best practice? Specifically, what is he doing to ensure that appropriate support is in place to ensure that safeguarding requirements are met where all the schemes are being run?

The people who have made these projects happen have demonstrated our potential to effect real change in communities. They provided a lifeline to families in desperate financial situations and to others who just needed a little help, and they delivered a summer of fun, food and learning to children who may otherwise have gone without. Their example deserves to be celebrated and I am delighted that we are doing that here, but as we celebrate the work that is taking place in the Potteries and across the country, we must remain focused on the scale of the challenge. Although programmes to tackle holiday hunger are increasing, so are the number of families struggling to get by.

[Ruth Smeeth]

On 15 August, *The Times Educational Supplement* reported a 150% increase in the number of children receiving support from FareShare, the UK's largest redistribution charity, compared with last year. The poverty that stands between our children and their full potential is still with us. The gaping hole in provision during the school holidays too often remains unfilled. For far too many families, the simple dream of a summer holiday of fun and comfort remains just that. These projects have made a real difference to people's lives. It is my privilege to share their stories, and my duty to say that there is much more to be done.

3.32 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on securing this important debate. My constituency is particularly blighted by food poverty. It has four food banks and there are a further six in the rest of the city. My office operates a makeshift food bank, where my staff regularly—in fact, daily—give out food parcels to constituents who have come about another issue such as universal credit, employment and support allowance or working tax credits. Once we start peeling away that onion, we find other issues under the skin, so we regularly give out food parcels.

In summer 2017, I was at a family fun day in my constituency to mark the start of the summer holidays. I received a call from a food bank, which told me that 36 families with children had turned up the day before, so the shelves were completely bare—there was nothing left. It was concerned that that would be a huge problem. I talked to some people, including media people who were at the event, and we put out an appeal, which resulted in a tremendous amount of food being donated to that food bank and others that were experiencing similar.

Reflecting on that, it became evident that the sudden demand for families to visit the food bank had to be due to something, which was obviously the fact that the schools were closed and the children who normally had free school meals could not get them. Families who live hand-to-mouth throughout the year, many of whom work but are on low incomes, become dependent on free school meals to provide their children with at least one hot meal a day.

I have spoken to countless teachers who have said that working families are struggling and that they can tell if the children are hungry. In my experience, I know the children are hungry. If someone has three school-aged children receiving free school meals, they will have to find 90 extra meals over the summer holidays. If the children have free breakfasts too, they will have to find another 90 meals. That is a lot of money and a lot of food to find for parents who are struggling.

For the last two years, my staff and I—they have been absolutely wonderful—have taken it upon ourselves to run our own summer lunch club. In the first year, I begged, stole and borrowed from anyone who cared to give. From bread and cheese to milk, yoghurt and bottles of water, we threw it together. We targeted children who were participating in free activities, such as free swimming or free play schemes, or who were in community centres that were providing free children's activities.

We would start at 7 o'clock in the morning, work through until about 9 o'clock, and then go and open the office. On the first day, I remember thinking that if we could feed 500 children in 10 days, we would have achieved something. By 10 o'clock that morning, after we had made the first delivery, I was getting phone calls from people saying, "Is that the sandwich lady?" I did not disillusion them, but said, "Yes, it is. How many do you want?"—I think I am still known as the sandwich lady.

In that first year, we served nearly 6,500 meals. They were primarily sandwiches, although with the resources we got from asking the food bank for food, we were able to provide a limited hot meal service at three centres. This summer, however, we provided 10,000 meals. We were able to convince the staff at Admiral and at Arvato, which is the shared services centre for the Department for Transport, to help.

Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend will know that, in a previous incarnation, I was a Welsh politician at local council level—my ward abutted your constituency. Such programmes had tremendous support from the massive number of staff at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. The staff were great charity organisers and gave marvellously. Not everyone has a good experience with the DVLA, but the people who worked there were some of the best people helping local charities, and I wonder if that continues.

Carolyn Harris: The DVLA is in my constituency—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members, particularly hon. Members of long standing, to use parliamentary language. If they refer to "you" or "your", it is me. It is a relaxed debate, but this is not the first time.

Carolyn Harris: The DVLA is in my constituency and I have yet to target its generosity on this matter, but my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) should have no fear—it is on my hit list.

Mr Sheerman: That is unparliamentary language!

Carolyn Harris: I apologise, Mr Stringer.

We have had help from organisations such as Bidfood, which is a huge wholesaler; Boss Brewing, which provided us with a kitchen; the Coastal Housing Group, which provided resources and the delivery service; Dignity Funerals, which is connected to my children's funeral fund campaign and has donated a huge amount of money; and Morrisons and Warburtons.

I recently met the Federation of Wholesale Distributors, which represents wholesalers up and down the country. It explained the good work that its members do to help to prevent holiday hunger and to provide children with the food they need during the school holidays. One of its members, Brakes, has been part of the "Meals & More" holiday hunger scheme for many years, and recently pledged £100,000 a year for the next five years to aid the initiative. That is a wonderful example of how businesses in communities are helping those communities. When you see a child grabbing a bag containing a cheese sandwich, a yoghurt, a packet of crisps and a bottle of water with enthusiasm and excitement because

they are hungry, you cannot fail to be moved. It does not just pull at your heartstrings, but makes you think about how we take things for granted. Many kids do not get sufficient nutrition during the summer holiday. Even more importantly, many do not get basic food to fill their stomachs.

Now to the political bit. I was going to talk about the fact that, this Christmas, I am providing more than 100 food hampers to be delivered to those in need in Swansea. That will be done with the help of many people in my constituency who are giving me the money to work with Morrisons to provide a full Christmas dinner, including a joint and everything else that we take for granted, such as chocolate biscuits and mince pies. For people on low incomes, those things are luxuries to which they can only ever aspire.

Last year, the *South Wales Evening Post* launched a scheme called “Everyone Deserves a Christmas”, and collected clothing, food donations and everything else we take for granted. That tells us that there is a community spirit. Day in, day out, in times of austerity, people work hard to ensure that people in our communities, and especially children, are looked after. Surely there is more the Government can do to help them. Surely we can find ways to support people. It should not be done on a charitable basis, although nobody who gives to the work we do, and nobody who receives it, considers it to be charity, because it has become a necessity. I urge the Government to do everything they can to ensure children do not go hungry at any time of the year, and especially not when they do not have access to free school meals.

3.41 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on the absolutely amazing work she is doing to ensure her constituents are fed, although it is incredibly sad and frustrating that we have to do that in our society.

Some fantastic work is being done in my constituency, and I would like to draw hon. Members’ attention to a couple of examples. Organisations in my constituency and right across Glasgow have grasped holiday hunger incredibly well. It is important that the help for families is not just a handout. We want to get the biggest take-up of holiday food provision, so it must be free from stigma. It must be community-focused and provided in an inclusive, welcoming environment.

Dalmarnock Primary School in my constituency took the lead with its “Food, Families, Future” scheme over the summer holidays. More than 80% of the children who attend Dalmarnock Primary are in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation category 1—the lowest category—and 30% have English as an additional language. Many of their parents have no recourse to public funds due to Home Office decisions, so sadly they are also in need of support and food over the summer. The Home Office sometimes does not allow them to work—I am not quite sure where it imagines they will be fed.

The summer project is fantastically well thought out and has had input from partner organisations from all over Glasgow, including Possibilities for Each and Every Kid—PEEK—which is brilliant at doing play work with children and giving them a proper summer to remember. The project did not just provide food for kids, but used the school’s resources to tackle several key poverty-related indicators. It was more of a summer

camp than a food bank. In addition to holiday hunger, it addressed social isolation for parents, who often cannot take their children out to different places, and find being stuck in the house on their own all summer isolating and lonely. Being on a tight budget over the summer holidays means that there is limited scope for play and entertainment. Parents face a long period in which they cannot take up work because they have got caring responsibilities. Working is difficult because they have to pay for childcare.

The Dalmarnock Primary School scheme was about more than just free meals. It gave families the chance to support one another, and for children to take part in sports and other activities in a safe, familiar space—they got to go to their own primary school over the summer. Such projects offer a crucial link for families and communities, and build strong support networks so families are more likely to access help that they need in the future and parents are less likely to feel isolated. They build up peer-group friendships, which they might not otherwise have been able to do.

Glasgow City Council has since allocated £2 million for Glasgow children’s summer food programme, hoping that similar projects can be replicated throughout the city. The fund makes awards available to organisations that can feed children over the holiday period, in ways that support their wellbeing and a healthier relationship with food. The Scottish Government have made Scotland the only UK country to have defined statutory targets for tackling child poverty, through the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. They have allocated £1 million towards the tackling child poverty development plan, which sets out practical assistance for measures to improve food security during the school holidays.

It is important to acknowledge that child poverty cannot be solved by one strategy, one Department or one Government. It is a complex issue and we have to consider the wider context in which any policy is operating.

Kerry McCarthy: The hon. Lady is right to say that this is a cross-departmental issue. The other day, the Environmental Audit Committee quizzed four Ministers from four Departments about the sustainable development goal to end hunger, and asked them where responsibility sits within the Government structure for ending hunger. I was extremely alarmed when they all looked blank. They all looked at each other, and nobody knew the answer. It is important that we have a departmental lead—a Minister with responsibility for fulfilling that sustainable development goal.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree. If no Minister is responsible for it, it is easy to pass the buck, ignore it and say, “It’s not my job.” It has to be somebody’s job, but it is nobody’s job. That is an important point.

A point that is often missed in debates about child poverty, hunger and food banks is the cost of infant formula. A report that the all-party parliamentary group on infant feeding and inequalities will launch soon details that the cost of infant formula has increased, but the wages in people’s pockets and healthy start vouchers have not kept pace, so families have to make the impossible choice between feeding themselves or feeding their infants.

The Chancellor said that austerity is ending soon—perhaps, maybe—but it will be a very long time before families in my constituency feel any change. There is no

[Alison Thewliss]

denying that, over the past 10 years, austerity has been a huge underlying driver of child poverty in Scotland and across the UK. The Scottish Government are doing what they can to mitigate the effects of the cuts, but the actions that can be taken are limited. Their analysis shows that, this year, 130,000 more children in Scotland could be pushed into poverty as a result of the UK Government's welfare cuts. That is approximately the population of Dundee. If the number of children in poverty can fill a whole city, something has gone drastically wrong.

Universal credit has started to be rolled out in my constituency, and will hit the Shettleston jobcentre on 5 December. Somebody applying for universal credit on the very first day of the roll-out at the Shettleston jobcentre will not get any money until 9 January. The Government often say that people can get advances, but they push people below what the Government say they need to live on for a year as they clear that debt. That is absolutely unacceptable. They rob themselves in advance to get an advance on universal credit.

I have always found the idea of independence for Scotland attractive, but I do not want it for its own ends. I want it so we can have a Government that we elect, not a Government that chooses austerity over the future of our children.

3.48 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) for securing this important debate.

In Scotland, there are approximately 170 non-school days a year when children cannot access free school meals, putting a lot of pressure on low-paid families that rely on them. The absence of a free school meal for children can cost families on low incomes between £30 and £40 per week. The Trussell Trust has warned that food bank use spikes not just in the Christmas period but during the summer. As we have heard, in 2017, 593 organisations running holiday clubs across the UK provided more than 190,000 meals to more than 22,000 school-age children.

As we have a bit of time, I have some stats from the Glasgow South West constituency, where activities like those happening in other hon. Members' constituencies are taking place. Southside Housing Association delivered its Southside Summer Connections programme this year in Cardonald in the Glasgow South West constituency. The housing association delivered the programme as lead partner, along with Hillington Park parish church. This year's funding was awarded from the Glasgow children's summer food programme, which is funded by Glasgow City Council. The housing association based the programme on the model it used in the previous two years, providing a breakfast club with free healthy breakfasts and activities on two days a week over the school summer holidays.

The housing association delivered 12 sessions. A total of 311 individuals—112 adults and 199 children—attended or benefited from the programme. Based on attendance figures, the housing association provided a total of 1,182 healthy breakfast meals. There was an average

of 99 participants at each session. The programme cost £4,800 for food and activities, and was backed by 17 volunteers from Hillington Park parish church and the housing association. I thank those 17 volunteers for their remarkable work.

Mr Sheerman: Does the hon. Gentleman think there is a lack of comprehension of what goes on for constituents such as his and mine and those of other hon. Members who have spoken? Is it not the fact that, at the top of our country, there are people from the soft parts of Surrey and from Maidenhead who just do not understand the pressures and the situations that people on low incomes face in the age of austerity?

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman was referred to earlier as a veteran of Parliament. When I arrived here in 2015, the first thing to hit me—it hit me right between the eyes—was the class differential between some of us on the Opposition Benches and those on the Government Benches. I agree that there seems to be a lack of understanding of what happens in the daily lives of far too many of our constituents as they struggle to navigate their way through life and the social security system. I recommend that he looks at the work of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, of which I am a member. That lack of understanding is evident to us.

Southside Housing Association staff told me that they saw the visible signs of poverty and hunger, and believed that its programme helped people. The housing association also had a back-to-school uniform bank. It alarms me that not only do we have food banks but toy banks, baby banks and school uniform banks are starting to emerge. Some 2,000 items were donated by Glasgow South West constituents in that bank. That is just some of the work the Southside Housing Association managed to do in Cardonald in Glasgow South West. It did similar work in Pollokshields in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss).

As others said, we need to look at the punitive social security reform and austerity measures that lead people into poverty. Tackling poverty and inequality must be Parliament's key priority. As my hon. Friend mentioned, the UK Government need to follow where the Scottish Government have led on helping children to access food during school holidays. Early intervention will reduce the need for people to rely on holiday hunger schemes and help to reduce the stigma of using such schemes.

The Scottish Government's tackling child poverty delivery plan helps parents to work more flexibly and increases their incomes by helping them with the cost of uniforms, childcare and the like. The fair food fund aims to ensure that everyone can feed themselves and their families. That fund supports community projects such as Crookston Community Group in my constituency, which offers dignified and sustainable responses to food poverty.

Regularly skipping meals has a massive impact on children's behaviour, concentration and development. The children's charity Cash for Kids was granted £150,000 to help community organisations support children during the school holidays with activities and access to meals. That funding is the first of the £1 million that will be allocated over the next two years to tackle food insecurity outside term time, and it is just part of the £1.5 million

fair food fund, which supports projects to help people move away from emergency food provision and access healthy, nutritious food through community-based activities and support. A number of Scottish local authorities are planning to provide free meals 365 days a year to children from low-income families—a proposal that was welcomed by the Child Poverty Action Group.

However, we need significant social security reform from the Government to ensure that families and children do not go hungry during school holidays. The pressures of child hunger are exacerbated by the benefit freeze and social security reform—decisions on social security have a direct impact on hunger. The overall benefit cap needs to be raised and the benefit freeze ended so that households are not forced into destitution. With the introduction of universal credit, deduction rates for advances, arrears and overpayments, and all other third-party deductions, need to be reduced.

The Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), drafted a Bill, which I supported, that would place a duty on local authorities to ensure that disadvantaged pupils were fed during school breaks. I would like the UK Government to adopt that Bill and that approach, and learn from Scotland and elsewhere.

3.56 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, as it was to serve under your leadership as a young councillor on Manchester City Council. I suspect the love-in will cease there as we approach Manchester derby day on Sunday, given that we support different colours of the city. We will just have to try to get along as best as we can over the next few days.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on her excellent speech and on securing this timely debate. I will be critical of some Members in a moment, but it was really interesting to hear the passion with which all Members spoke about this issue in their constituencies. I will know my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for ever more as the sandwich lady, and the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) know exactly what is going on in their constituencies with respect to hunger. Before I came to the Chamber, my parliamentary assistant sent me my monthly digital bulletin to sign off. In it was an appeal for more food for food banks, which are running desperately low as we approach Christmas. That is a worry for many of us in our constituencies.

Hon. Members will be aware that I am not my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), who should be answering the debate—she cannot be here, for which she apologises. I pay tribute to her and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for their work on the All-party Parliamentary Group on hunger. They do not just walk the walk on this issue—they talk the talk. They set up a charity to tackle it after touring constituencies up and down our land.

Let me return to my Scottish colleagues for a second. After you, Mr Stringer, bid for the Olympic games for Manchester and secured the Commonwealth games, I became a huge friend of Glasgow's. As a director of Manchester velodrome, I supported Glasgow through its

bids to build a velodrome and to host the Commonwealth games. However, having changed hue last May, Glasgow City Council is still being forced to implement millions upon millions of pounds of cuts—£53 million of cuts to services in the constituencies of the hon. Members for Glasgow Central and for Glasgow South West—by the Scottish Government. Last year, it cut more than £5 million from education budgets. We begin to see that it is not just central Government who are to blame for this issue—there are other Governments up and down our land who have not walked the walk or talked the talk. I am sorry to have to raise that, but it is the case, and there is sometimes very little scrutiny in this place of what goes on north of the border.

Alison Thewliss: Does the hon. Gentleman not appreciate that the Scottish Government have a fixed budget, a lot of which comes from this place? Austerity comes from Westminster and is only passed on up the road to the Scottish Government and then to Glasgow City Council.

Mike Kane: I did not realise that we had any Liberal Democrats in the room. That is the old cry of, “This is the problem and they are to blame for it,” without the Scottish National party's taking any responsibility, despite its control over lots of levers of power, which is important.

As has been pointed out, more than 3 million children were at risk of hunger during the school holidays this summer because they were not getting their term-time free school meals. That is shameful. At the heart of the debate is the impact of the Government's eight years of unrelenting and indiscriminate austerity. Universal credit is failing in many of our constituencies, and the urgent question on it the other day was really interesting. There should be preferential options for the poor when we make public policy in our country, and universal credit should have a preferential option for those who are in the poverty of having mental health problems. Its impact on those people causes much stress and tips them over the edge.

More than 4 million children are growing up in poverty. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North made an absolutely fantastic point on inequality, which I see in my constituency and other Members see in theirs. In some schools, 40% of children are not school-ready—they do not know about reciprocity or play or how to hold cutlery or pens, which my hon. Friend mentioned—but in others in my constituency, that figure is up to 80%, and growing, because of the austerity of the last few years.

More than 1 million people now go to food banks, and the situation is predicted to get worse. The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that the number of children living in poverty is likely to soar to a record 5.2 million over the next five years. Government Members should hang their heads in shame that families in that situation cannot afford to feed their children in the school holidays.

It is interesting how, in our city, Mr Stringer, schools compete over which of our two great teams runs their holiday club. Schools generally choose the team that provides the most free school meals, because that is what some of our schools desperately need. The football clubs are having to look at this in their summer holiday provision in our cities.

Ruth Smeeth: My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. There are opportunities in places with Football League clubs. It is wonderful that, in my city,

[Ruth Smeeth]

Port Vale and Stoke City came together to deliver something. My hon. Friend may even get Manchester United and Manchester City to do the same.

Mike Kane: We will certainly look at that. I think that Mr Stringer and I would say that we are excellently served by the community schemes of both great football clubs in our city, as my hon. Friend is in hers.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead and my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields set up Feeding Britain, a charity focused on demonstrating how hunger and its underlying causes can be addressed. The United Nations estimates that more than 8 million people in the UK are food-insecure. At the moment, the Government have no way of measuring that and understanding the scale of the problem. The Food Insecurity Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields, is awaiting its Second Reading. It has a simple ask of the Government, calling on them to provide for official statistics on food insecurity. That is supported by more than 20 national organisations and, so far, more than 150 MPs from across the House. The APPG on hunger, and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee have also advocated the measurement of hunger. Will the Minister commit today to supporting the Bill on Second Reading?

The Bill makes a cost-neutral proposal to bring the living costs and food Survey into the 21st century and to enable the Government to fully understand the challenge of food insecurity, which puts more than 3 million children at risk of going hungry in the school holidays. A Bill promoted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead that sought to enact the recommendations of the APPG's report on countering hunger among children during school holidays sadly did not progress on Second Reading earlier this year.

However, the Minister stated that the Government would provide funding for research and pilots on holiday provision over the summer. Feeding Britain and the APPG provided information to the Department to help inform that research and pilots. Have we had the promised announcement on the outcomes of that research and the national roll-out?

Ruth Smeeth: About four hours ago.

Mike Kane: We had it about four hours in advance of the debate. That is not good enough by any stretch of the imagination, Minister. I am sorry to sound like a schoolteacher, but that is how it is.

When all is said and done, we can launch as many pilots as we want, but the fact is that we live in a society where parents cannot feed their children in the school holidays. Will the Minister commit to ending the sticking-plaster approach and talking to his Cabinet colleagues about a genuine end to austerity and the introduction of a real living wage of £10 an hour, to ensure that every family has enough to make ends meet and that no child will have to go hungry?

4.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member

for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on securing this important debate. I know that she is passionate about this matter and was instrumental in establishing the Fit and Fed pilot scheme in Stoke-on-Trent in 2017. I will embarrass myself by attempting the accent, but hearing about Ay Up Duck was truly inspiring.

I also thank the many colleagues who have spoken. I think the local paper of the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) is already writing the headline, "The Sandwich Lady has DVLA on her hit list". I have to say that for her, her team and her constituents to have delivered 10,000 meals this summer is truly admirable. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) contributed, and I am grateful for her courtesy in sending me a note to explain why she was slightly delayed in joining the debate. There were also many interventions from the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), who is no longer here. I did not agree with all of them, but some were worth noting, including those on his work in local government.

I reiterate the Government's commitment to delivering a country that really does work for everyone. For most children, the school holidays should mean fun experiences and a chance to make memories with friends and family. We want to make sure that those opportunities are available to all children, regardless of their background.

Let me first set out what the Government have done on our key priority of tackling poverty and disadvantage. In 2017, we published the "Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families" strategy, which focused on measures to tackle the root causes of poverty and to improve children's welfare. For most people, work represents the best route out of poverty. Unemployment has not been lower since 1975, and the proportion of workless households is at its lowest since records began.

However, we recognise that there is more to do. One of the Government's guiding principles is to promote social mobility and to ensure equality of opportunity for every child. My Department plays a leading role in ensuring that a package of support for disadvantaged children is in place to help them reach their full potential.

We recognise the benefits of providing healthy food to disadvantaged children. Through our free school meals policy, more than 1.1 million disadvantaged children currently benefit from a free meal at school. In September 2014, we extended that to include disadvantaged further education students—that has not been raised in the debate, but it was clearly an area that we needed to extend to policy to—and to give free school meals to all children in reception and years 1 and 2 in England's state-funded schools.

To get the best out of their time at school, children need a healthy breakfast. We have invested up to £26 million from the soft drinks industry levy to support the national school breakfast programme, delivered by Family Action and Magic Breakfast. Through that programme, we will set up or improve more than 1,700 breakfast clubs in the most disadvantaged areas of our country, focusing on our 12 opportunity areas. Last week, I visited St Mary's Primary School in Battersea, 50% of whose children are on pupil premium, and saw for myself the advantage of a nutritious breakfast and activities, whether we are talking about maths, English or just running around the yard. One bonus, one upside, that the headteacher told me about was that attendance had increased.

I shall now talk about the subject of this debate—the holiday activities and food programme of work that my Department has committed to. I agree with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North that “holiday hunger” is the wrong title, which is why I prefer to talk about holiday activities and food. Earlier this year, in response to the private Member’s Bill mentioned by the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) and promoted by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), I announced work to investigate how to support the most disadvantaged children to access free healthy food and enriching activities during the school holidays. The purpose of that is to allow us to gather more evidence about the scale of the issue, the most effective ways of tackling it, and the costs and burdens associated with doing so. As a result, we will be able to make an evidence-based decision about whether and how we should intervene in the longer term.

As part of our 2018 programme of work, my officials have reviewed the available research evidence and engaged with national and local delivery partners. We have learned that the evidence base for the schemes, although still in its infancy, shows that they can have a positive impact on children and their families. We have learned that the most effective forms of provision seem to be those that deliver consistent and easily accessible activities and involve children and parents in the preparation of healthy food. Throughout that programme of work, we have engaged with those on the ground delivering this type of provision, those building the evidence base and those supporting providers. I am referring to people such as Carol Shanahan—she is absolutely brilliant and truly an inspiration and, alongside the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, set up the Stoke-on-Trent pilot in 2017—Lindsay Graham and Professor Greta Defeyter.

Our stakeholders have told us that providers want to work better with other stakeholders to improve targeting and referrals, and link up with other people who could support them, such as food providers. They told us that they want greater co-ordination across the sector to help to raise awareness of provision and to ensure that provision exists where it is most needed, so it is targeted. Providers need support to improve the quality of provision through the introduction of minimum standards, guidance, training and support. I think you will agree, Mr Stringer, that this is enormously powerful stuff.

In March, I announced a £2 million fund to support organisations to deliver healthy food and activities to children in some of the most disadvantaged parts of the country during the 2018 summer holidays. We awarded funding to seven organisations, which told us that, with that money, they were able to support about 280 clubs—including three in Stoke-on-Trent—reaching about 18,000 children. The information that we have gathered from the projects—from data on attendance reported by the projects, from visits to a small sample of clubs and from conversations with the organisations that we have funded—has helped us enormously in thinking about how we as a Government can add value in our 2019 programme.

We have today published figures evaluating the performance of the clubs. I am aware that there was some confusion about the number of people helped by the programme. Today’s figures relate to the number of children who have been helped by the scheme. They show that thousands of children—approximately 18,000—have benefited from the programme. In July, a figure of 30,000 was used. However, for one supplier, the figure

estimated the number of times that children would be helped by the programme, so it was slightly misleading. I wanted to set the record straight on that.

We will be able to say more about what we have learned from the 2018 projects later this autumn when we announce our plans for the 2019 programme, but for me, the key messages from the projects that we funded this summer have been as follows. First, I want to pay tribute to and thank all the staff and volunteers involved in the clubs for what they achieved with limited time, resources and people. Secondly, there was huge variation in the types of provision on offer. For example, some clubs were open all day, every day over the holidays, but others opened for an hour or two over lunch a couple of days a week; my officials saw clubs in a range of venues that offered a range of activities. Thirdly, we want to preserve that variety and ensure that clubs can operate in a way that responds to the needs of those attending. However, it was clear that there are areas where the sector needs support and where a more strategic and co-ordinated approach could add real value and achieve real efficiencies, and that is what we want to focus on during the 2019 programme.

As an example of where greater support and co-ordination could help, I would like to focus for a while on the food aspect of provision. Many clubs benefited from having the facilities, knowledge, experience and volunteers to be able to prepare and cook delicious, healthy and nutritious food and snacks. Others had arrangements with providers such as Brakes’ Meals & More, which delivered healthy and nutritious food to them, saving them time in the kitchen. However, other clubs were not so lucky. My officials visited clubs with no on-site catering facilities and clubs that relied on food donations through schemes such as FareShare. That meant that it was sometimes harder for them to provide a varied menu of healthy and nutritious meals across the summer holidays. Healthy meals are so important if we are to tackle issues such as childhood obesity, which has been mentioned and which disproportionately affects children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead has just joined us in the Chamber. It is a privilege to have you here, sir. You were namechecked earlier in my remarks.

We intend to do much more next year to support clubs to deliver the healthy and nutritious food that is the key to supporting children’s health and learning, as well as to tackling obesity. Throughout 2018 we have listened and learned and, as a result, for our 2019 programme we are exploring options for establishing a grant fund. I think that this was one of the questions asked by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North. We are looking to establish a grant fund to set up local co-ordinators of free holiday provision for disadvantaged children in a number of local authority areas across the country. Our plans are not yet confirmed, but we envisage that those co-ordinators will fund, support and promote free holiday provision in their area, aiming to ensure that there is enough to meet demand—one of the issues raised by the hon. Lady—to improve its quality, to increase awareness, promotion and targeting and to implement a more efficient and joined-up approach locally.

The hon. Lady also mentioned safeguarding, which I know many groups find challenging. We recognise the importance of safeguarding and are looking at how local co-ordinators can support providers on that, including through the use of minimum standards. We will also

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

look at how we can disseminate best practice after the 2019 programme. As I said, the plans are not yet confirmed and we will look to publish further information about the 2019 programme and invite organisations to bid to become involved later this autumn.

Before concluding, I want to pick up on the point made by the hon. Members for Glasgow Central, for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Wythenshawe and Sale East on universal credit. A strong economy is the best route to raising living standards and giving everyone people the opportunity to make the most of their talents and hard work, no matter who they are or where they live. Since 2010, we have supported nearly 3.4 million more people into work. That is more than 1,000 people a day, every day, producing a record rate of employment and, as I mentioned earlier, the lowest unemployment since the 1970s. The introduction of universal credit will mean an extra 200,000 people moving into work, because work will always pay. It will add £8 billion per year to the economy when fully rolled out. The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East mentioned disabled people. Around 1 million disabled households receive an average of around £110 more per month under universal credit.

In conclusion, I again thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North for securing this debate, highlighting this important issue and speaking with pride about the team in her constituency who have delivered above and beyond. We know that the school holidays can be particular pressure points for some families. I think this afternoon's debate has spanned our approach to tackling disadvantage more generally, as well as some of the specifics about work we have undertaken on support for disadvantaged children during the school holidays.

I am fully committed to taking forward work to explore how we can support disadvantaged children and their families during the school holidays, to complement

the Government's package of support in schools for disadvantaged children. That will ensure that all children have access to healthy food and are engaged and invigorated after the school holidays, so that they are ready for the new term.

I hope that I have left enough time for the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North to wrap up.

4.20 pm

Ruth Smeeth: I thank everyone for their participation today. I am in awe, as ever, of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is obviously "the sandwich lady from Swansea East"; I usually call her the queen, but now I will have to rename her.

We have seen from the varied contributions quite how important this issue is and I thank all my colleagues for their contributions, with a special "honourable mention" to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), without whom we would not have got as far as we have.

I am delighted that the Government are now looking at a more strategic approach for delivery. The one caveat, however, which I raise with the Minister, is that of those families that have an income of £15,000 a year, 30% of them go without a meal in the school holidays to ensure that their children can have one. This is a working poor issue as much as it is an issue for those people who live on benefits, and I hope that will be reflected in future schemes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered holiday hunger schemes.

4.22 pm

Sitting suspended.

Post Offices (North Yorkshire)

[SIR DAVID AMESS *in the Chair*]

4.45 pm

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Post Office provision in North Yorkshire.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. Let me begin by saying up front that I strongly support post offices and want to see them thrive. Everything that I will say about how we can make our post office network more sustainable for the future is to be taken in that positive way.

I sought this debate because of the closure of the Cold Bath Road post office in Harrogate and the proposed relocation of the Crown post office in Harrogate from its location on Cambridge Road to WHSmith. However, it is not just Harrogate in North Yorkshire that is affected. We are seeing the same relocation to WHSmith being proposed for York, Scarborough, Selby, Northallerton and, more widely in Yorkshire, in Beverley and Pontefract. We are seeing it in other parts of our country, too.

This debate has attracted attention from other parts of the UK. We are being followed by sub-postmasters up and down the country. I have had emails from the west country, Wales and much closer to home. They confirm that the underlying points I will raise are of wider concern. That was also clear from the meeting last week of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, which discussed the relocation issue.

Post offices are an important part of our national infrastructure. They provide access points not only for post office services, but for banking and Government services. We are seeing huge growth in the parcels business through internet shopping, and the Post Office has developed very good products. We are seeing increasing use of post offices for their banking services. That is particularly important as the number of high street bank branches has fallen. That point has been highlighted to me by smaller, often independent traders. We are also seeing increasing use of the gov.uk Verify scheme. That service matters, as it helps to tackle the growing issue of identity fraud. The passport and driving services have been highlighted by local residents in Harrogate and Knaresborough as being valuable. The services matter, so post offices matter. The question with the relocations then is about how we ensure that the people of Harrogate can continue to access the services.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech. In York, we too face the challenge of a post office closure. The post office has been there since 1884. It is on the main thoroughfare for tourists and residents coming into the city, and it is due to relocate to an area where footfall is falling massively—it is 15% down in the past two years. Does he agree that we need to look at the business case and the impact on the local community and local businesses when assessments are made of the future viability of a post office?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Lady makes an important point. I entirely agree that as these relocations are considered, the implications for business and the community

must be considered in the round. I am aware of the location of the post office—York is a very near neighbour to Harrogate and Knaresborough—and its importance, and I strongly agree with the point that she has made.

Post offices matter and the services matter. The access point is absolutely critical, and I am not happy with the proposals. I have enormous reservations about the relocation of a Crown post office to a WHSmith. In Harrogate's case, it is moving from Cambridge Road to the Victoria Centre. My key reservations are about access and security. On access, both locations are in our town centre, but parking in the immediate proximity is easier at the existing location. Disabled parking in particular is good at Cambridge Road, whereas for the Victoria Centre it is across the A61, a very busy road.

I did not know how the proposed location in WHSmith would work until I received an email from WH Smith at lunchtime today with significantly more information, followed by a six-page letter from the Post Office a couple of hours ago. Having been in meetings today, I have not had the chance to go through it in detail yet, but I will do so directly after the debate. Clearly it will answer some questions, but I think it will raise even more.

We now know that the proposal is to locate the post office on the first floor of WH Smith. There are lifts, escalators and stairs in the store, and the shopping centre entrance will be flat, but first-floor retailing inevitably has a lower footfall than ground-floor retailing. I spent many years in retail before I came to Parliament, so I know that first-floor and ground-floor locations are very different. I am sure that the email that I received at lunchtime was trying to help, but in reality it has made my fears worse. However, at least the Post Office has confirmed that all the staff in the very good Crown post office team will be TUPE-ed across and have some security, which is reassuring news for everybody.

On products and services, the Post Office has confirmed that all existing services will transfer with the location, but that Home Office passport services will not transfer. That is a loss. It feels as if the Post Office is in retreat, both physically and in its offer, when the opposite should be happening.

I must draw the Minister's attention to the nature of the Post Office consultation. When it first got in touch with me, its email said that

"any proposed changes will be subject to a public consultation".

However, at the all-party group meeting last week, it announced that the franchising decision has already been made and that it is a private commercial matter. I am not sure that those two comments are in any way consistent. We need a proper, wide consultation.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful for the opportunity to intervene again. I, too, was at the APPG meeting. The Post Office made it very clear that its consultation was more about information exchange, rather than being a proper consultation. It said that it had already looked at access issues, but does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that it will not take note of those crucial issues?

Andrew Jones: That was indeed a very disappointing part of the Post Office's response at what was otherwise a very good APPG meeting. I want the consultation to be much more wide-ranging. I want it to consider the

[*Andrew Jones*]

views of the people of Harrogate; I am sure the hon. Lady wants the same for the people of York, and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) wants the same for his constituents. The issue affects locations right across north Yorkshire.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Post office services are always critical, but particularly now. Banks in villages and towns such as Kirkbymoorside and Filey in my constituency are closing, handing over responsibility for banking services to post offices and walking away, yet there is no long-term guarantee of how long those post offices will exist. Does he agree that it is critical that we continue to invest in our post offices so that people have physical access to banking services and to the many other services that post offices provide?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point; I totally agree. From a business perspective, I have no doubt that in some parts of our country, post offices are the last opportunity for local banking. They play a critical role, and the need for their preservation has to be a consideration not just for the Post Office but for the Government when they consider how the financial services structure of our country can thrive in the future.

I learned from the correspondence that I received this afternoon that the consultation will start tomorrow; I do wonder whether I would have received the information with quite the same urgency if the debate had not been scheduled for today. I am sure that there will be a big response to the consultation. My campaign to collect local opinions on the proposal has already had hundreds of responses. A summary of the views submitted is that, overwhelmingly, people value their post office and want a secure future for it without loss of service. Consultations on other branches across the country that have moved have been very shallow, so I hope this consultation will be better, instead of being just a paper exercise. I will make sure that all the responses that I have received will be fed into the considerations.

I am not blind to commercial pressures on the high street. I recognise that the internet is changing business models and that the Post Office, like all companies, must evolve—that is a given. The Post Office is to be commended for returning to profit last year for the first time in 16 years. I can see why it may wish to leave the Cambridge Road location, because it is a very large building—the team showed me round some years ago—and much of it is unused. Leaving space empty is bad business, but has the Post Office considered a new smaller stand-alone location more tailored to its future needs, in which it could continue to offer good access and a complete transfer of services without any erosion? I fully recognise that unnecessary overheads make business unsustainable, but a search could easily reveal a location that would make the post office fit for the future.

I ask the Minister to raise in her discussions with Post Office management a few points for consideration about the relocation programme across North Yorkshire and particularly in Harrogate. Are the consultations genuine and proper or are they a paper exercise? Do they address matters of principle or smaller, peripheral matters?

Will she review with Post Office management the process for reletting sub-post offices and the speed at which they do it?

We need a new sub-postmaster at Cold Bath Road post office, which has closed. It is a popular branch: when it was earmarked for closure by the Labour Government in 2008-9, we held a protest march, which is quite unusual for Harrogate, that attracted significant attention. We marched from the Cold Bath Road post office to the Crown post office, and we changed the Government's mind. The post office stayed open and became a valuable part of our local business network and our thriving community. We want it to open again, but it needs a sub-postmaster to run it. The process needs to be speedy, so I ask the Minister to consider the process and speed of reletting sub-post offices. That issue has been highlighted by hon. Members who are not present for our debate because they do not represent North Yorkshire, but who recognise the same issue in their constituency.

At a time at which the Government are taking action to support high streets and make them viable, through significant Budget measures such as the future high streets fund and the changes to business rates, it feels as if the Post Office is taking steps in the opposite direction. People and businesses need post office services, from parcels to banking, and from passports to savings, but a business does not thrive by making it harder for its customers to find and use it. It should do the opposite. Instead of thinking about a retreat to fewer services, we should think about growth towards more.

Those are the points that I will raise with the Post Office, because I want to see all post offices thrive in Harrogate and beyond. I ask the Minister to raise them in her discussions with the Post Office, because the issue affects many parts of our United Kingdom. Post offices are a valuable part of local communities right across the UK.

4.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Sir David.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) on securing this debate on post office services in North Yorkshire. He has been an energetic and passionate advocate of post office services in his constituency. Post offices play such a vital role at the heart of our local communities, so it is only right that we have opportunities to debate the Post Office and the services it provides locally. The Government recognise and value the economic and social importance of post offices, in particular to communities in North Yorkshire. That is why our manifesto made a commitment to safeguard the post office network and to support the provision of rural services.

I point out that I am the Minister with responsibility for post offices, so it is right for me not only to champion the Post Office but to listen to hon. Members' concerns. I, also offer challenge directly to Post Office Ltd in our role as its Government owner. I will first look at some facts.

Between 2010 and 2018, the Government provided nearly £2 billion to maintain and invest in a national network of at least 11,500 post offices. Ninety per cent.

of the UK population must be within one mile and 99% within three miles of their nearest branch. Government investment has enabled the modernisation of more than 7,000 branches, added more than 200,000 opening hours per week and established the Post Office as the largest network trading on a Sunday.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the Minister give way?

Kelly Tolhurst: I will make some progress first.

Post office banking services enable 99% of personal and 95% of business banking in any one of 11,500 branches, supporting consumers, businesses and local economies in the face of accelerated bank closures. Financial performance has improved, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough outlined, from a loss of £120 million to a trading profit of £35 million in financial year 2017-18, thereby reducing Government funding from £415 million in 2013-14 to £50 million by 2020-21.

I encourage the House to look objectively at those facts. They clearly show that the network is at the most stable it has been in a generation. All that has been achieved notwithstanding increasingly challenging trading conditions in the Post Office's core markets and in the wider retail sector. The Post Office offers a huge range of products and services to the UK public, while ensuring that those services remain at the heart of towns and villages throughout the country. In doing so, it offers great value for money for the taxpayer.

Finally, we recognise that changing consumer behaviour presents a significant challenge for small retailers, including the many postmasters up and down the country. In the Budget last week, therefore, we announced a one-third reduction in small retailers' business rates bills for two years from April 2019. A retailer could save up to about £8,000 per property per year, which will benefit a range of retailers, including post offices.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister look specifically at the case of York's Crown post office? It is in a prime location in our city for both residents and tourists. Will she look at it in the light of it being a profitable post office, so that the whole business case is properly reviewed?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I said before the debate, I am happy to look at York specifically in the future, asking any questions that the hon. Lady might have of Post Office Ltd directly.

I appreciate that the proposed changes to the delivery of post office services can cause much concern to the communities affected. Post office branches, however, are not closing but are being franchised, whether on site or to be relocated to high streets. Franchises typically provide the same range of post office services as those offered at Crown branches.

Working with a retail partner is a sensible response to the challenges faced by our high street retailers, with the benefit of shared overheads across the combined post office and retail business, including property and staff costs. Franchising is a part of the Post Office's strategy to ensure that the network is secure, sustainable and successful in the long term. In fact, more than 90% of post offices throughout the UK are operated successfully by independent businesses and retail partners.

Moving the directly managed Crown offices to retail partners has helped to reduce the losses in part of the network from £46 million as recently as four years ago to break-even today. I must stress that franchising is not about closing branches, but about moving a branch to a lower-cost model while continuing to offer high-quality service, more convenient hours and better locations. I understand that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough has questioned location, and we can look at that, but Citizens Advice found that franchised branches deliver the same or better standards of service to the customer.

Regarding the recent WHSmith announcement, the communities of Harrogate and Knaresborough, as well as other communities in North Yorkshire, are not losing their post offices, which will be relocated to WHSmith branches, making services more accessible to customers.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Minister makes a good point on the Government's support for the post office network. The concern is where, because of the closure of banks, post offices end up being the only physical premises at which someone can bank. If the Government were to withdraw their support, those towns will have no banking service. Can we do more either to stop banks closing the last branch in a town, or to give longer-term support to post offices to ensure that that does not happen?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the role that post offices play in the banking sector. As he knows, the Post Office and the banks have an agreement about the enjoyment of post office facilities for use in offering services traditionally provided by high street banks. The Post Office is in negotiation with the banks to renew that agreement. As the Minister responsible, I have been clear about what I believe: the Post Office needs to benefit; customers need to benefit from a banking framework; and the banks need to accept their responsibility for the role now being played by post offices.

For example, those WHSmith changes will add four and a half hours to the opening time of the Harrogate branch in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough. Rest assured, however, that the existing branches will continue to serve the community until the changes are finalised by the Post Office.

My hon. Friend is right that the Coal Bath Road post office closed on 1 October. Post Office Ltd is committed to delivering a new partner or provider for that branch. There have been commercial issues with regard to provider and post office. Sometimes, unfortunately, contractual matters get in the way, but I absolutely accept that it is something we want to deliver.

With regard to the process, my hon. Friend is right that Post Office Ltd will carry out the consultation from tomorrow. Again, I request that anyone who can put in a response to the Post Office, because it has to look at the consultation to ensure that it answers the questions and deals with the concerns expressed by the community. I will, however, raise the questions of process directly with the Post Office. He is right to challenge me as the Minister responsible to pass that challenge on to the Post Office.

The Post Office runs local consultations to engage local communities and to help shape its plans. That is in line with its code of practice on changes to the network.

[*Kelly Tolhurst*]

Citizens Advice reported that the process is increasingly effective, with improvements agreed or reassurances provided in most cases, demonstrating that the Post Office listens to the community. I know that the Post Office will continue to engage with local communities and to consider all options to ensure provision of sustainable post office services before its plans are finalised.

My hon. Friend wants the Post Office to consult on the concept of franchising before it consults on any new locations. However, these decisions must be commercial ones for the business to take within the parameters set by Government to ensure we protect our valued network. Post offices operate in a competitive environment and we should allow the business to assess how best to respond to the challenges it faces in order to meet our shared ambition of securing post offices for the future.

On the reduction of services that my hon. Friend thinks is taking place, he is correct that the biometric enrolment for UK Visas and Immigration, which is currently available at 99 branches, is not easily transferrable. He is absolutely right that that agreement is directly with the Home office, and it will obviously cause him concern.

I understand my hon. Friend's concerns about first floor access for the disabled to the WH Smith and that post office, and about car parking. We need hon. Members to challenge the Post Office about those directly to ensure that it provides accessible centres within our communities.

Finally, the Government are completely committed to ensuring that we strengthen and support our post office network throughout the UK. To date we have done that effectively and kept branches open, of which I and the Government should be proud. We have seen a reduction, but we should celebrate what we have done.

We want our post offices to remain at the heart of our communities. We want them to provide services that are more accessible for our communities. They have always been at the heart of our communities and I hope they remain so. As the Minister responsible, I assure my hon. Friend that I will do my best to ensure that the Government—the owner of Post Office Ltd—duly represent our constituents regarding any issue he raises about the post office network. I am happy to have further conversations with my hon. Friend over the next few weeks as the consultation progresses. I will happily meet him and any other hon. Member any time to discuss the consultation and any changes.

I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. It has been an opportunity to challenge the new franchise system but also to celebrate what the post office system is doing and the value that post offices bring to our communities. Without them, we would be in a very different place. It is absolutely right that the Government continue to back the Post Office. I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to mention the individuals who work within the post office network, who are integral to ensuring that those services are delivered day in, day out throughout the country.

Question put and agreed to.

Badger Cull

5.14 pm

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the badger cull.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, in a debate on this very important issue, because I know that you take a close interest in it.

I am amazed that five years after the badger cull started we are still debating it. If you will bear with me, Sir David, I remember speaking on this issue on 5 June 2013. I quoted Lord Krebs, who chaired a review team that originated the idea of the randomised badger culling trial. He was interviewed on the “Today” programme on 12 October 2012, and said:

“The scientific case is as clear as it can be: this cull is not the answer to TB in cattle.”

I have found no scientists who are experts in population biology or in the distribution of infectious diseases in wildlife who think that culling is a good idea. People seem to have cherry-picked certain results to try to support their argument.

I also quoted Lord Robert May, a former Government chief scientist and President of the Royal Society, who said:

“It is very clear to me that the government's policy does not make sense...I have no sympathy with the decision. They are transmuting evidence-based policy into policy-based evidence.”

Another former Government chief scientist, Professor Sir John Beddington, also refused to back the cull. More than 30 scientists signed a letter that was published in *The Observer* on 14 October 2012 and states that

“the complexities of TB transmission mean that licensed culling risks increasing cattle TB rather than reducing it”.

The letter ends by saying,

“culling badgers as planned is very unlikely to contribute to TB eradication.”

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It may have been in that letter that the experts concluded that the badger cull was unscientific, ineffective and inhumane. I have seen no evidence since the experts reached that conclusion that it is anything but unscientific, ineffective and inhumane.

Chris Williamson: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, because the last five years have clearly demonstrated the predictions that the scientists made all those years ago, but the Government have proceeded in the teeth of the evidence. One would think that, as legislators, we should seek to embark on evidence-based policy and legislation, rather than taking a punt in the dark, as the Government seem to have done.

The cost of the cull has already exceeded £50 million and is rising, but there has been no breakdown of it since 2015. The irony is that there is a humane, less expensive alternative. It costs about £200 to vaccinate a badger compared with £1,000 to shoot a badger. The Zoological Society of London says that badger vaccination is a viable alternative. The Government initially ruled it out, but I believe they earmarked about £130,000 for the badger edge vaccination scheme. When we compare that with the tens of millions of pounds that they have wasted on this cruel policy in the teeth of scientific evidence, one wonders why they took that line of action.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister. When will the Department carry out a full cost-benefit analysis that compares badger vaccination with badger culling? When will Sir Charles Godfray's review of the Government's TB policy be published? Will it consider the use of vaccination as an alternative to shooting?

Some horrific video footage has been obtained from the badger cull area in Cumbria. A caged badger was shot and took almost a minute to die, writhing in agony. The shooter then flagrantly disregarded the biosecurity guidelines, took the badger out of the cage and failed to bag it up—little wonder that the Government's policy has not been particularly successful in reducing the spread of TB. That is just one small example—I will come on to others in a moment.

The contractors are paid about £30 to £50 for each badger they kill, but of course the shooters have access to thousands of trapped, caged badgers, and a live badger can fetch about £500 on the black market. We know that there are badger baiting and dog fighting gangs, so ruthless individuals would be quite happy to purchase a live badger for their perverted pastime. Given that there is no effective monitoring—the horrific video footage clearly demonstrates that—who is to say that that is not happening? The Government's policy therefore potentially creates more wildlife crime in our country. They need to step up and take a different approach.

We know that the badger population is under threat. Between June and August, we had the highest temperatures on record—we will all remember it, won't we? Experts tell me that it is therefore likely that large numbers of badger cubs and sows died during that very hot weather due to heat exhaustion and lack of food and water. Natural England has not undertaken any detailed or accurate population survey of badgers for more than a decade. It is important that we know what the state of the badger population is at this point in time.

About 50,000 badgers are killed every year on the road, and many die as a result of building development. The combination of the cull and other pressures is leading to the potential collapse of the badger population in certain parts of the country. Let us remember that badgers have inhabited our country since the ice age, so it would be a tragedy if they were eliminated in certain parts of it. I hope the Minister will respond to that point.

The Government claim that the badger cull reduces bovine TB in cattle, but the Zoological Society of London begs to differ. It says that there is no robust evidence at all that the policy is working. Indeed, the proportion of infected herds is about the same as it was in 2013, so the policy has been a spectacular failure. Will the Minister commit to releasing all the cull data held by DEFRA for independent verification? I would be interested to hear his response to that point.

In my opinion, we need better biosecurity, more reliable testing and movement controls. That is the real issue. We know that the TB skin test, which is the primary method of detecting TB in cattle, is not 100% successful. In fact, on average, one in four of the tests failed to detect TB. There are more accurate tests available, but the problem is that farmers are expected to meet the cost. Will the Minister commit the Government to funding the more accurate tests, rather than relying on the pretty inaccurate testing system that is currently

being used, which contributes to the problem? I have already mentioned biosecurity. Slurry, which can contain TB bacteria, continues to be spread widely on farms, with few, if any, biosecurity controls. Millions of cattle continue to be moved across England with insufficient movement controls. New outbreaks of bovine TB were therefore pretty inevitable, and that is what happened in Cumbria and the Isle of Skye relatively recently.

TB fraud is also a major problem. Cattle are moved illegally, ear tags are taken out and cattle passports are altered. The enforcement controls are completely inadequate, so will the Minister explain what the Government are doing to address the inadequate biosecurity? Will he also outline what steps he is taking to address illegal cattle movements?

I was absolutely amazed to see reports in the media that infected carcasses are being sold for human consumption. Several supermarkets have banned such purchases, as have several burger chains. However, *The Daily Telegraph* reported that a spokesperson for DEFRA, which makes £10 million a year from selling infected carcasses, said:

"All meat from cattle slaughtered due to bovine TB must undergo rigorous food safety checks before it can be passed fit for consumption."

I do not think that many people will find that particularly reassuring. I am sure that many people, if they were aware of that, would be incredibly alarmed. Is the Minister happy to continue selling carcasses infected with TB for human consumption?

The Sunday Times recently reported on growing concerns about the sale of raw meat products as pet food, claiming that it could lead to an increase in TB in cats, which, in turn, could infect their owners. DEFRA does not monitor TB in domestic animals. Do the Government have any plans to investigate the scale of TB in domestic pets?

Before this cruel cull started, experts said that the policy does not make sense, that the cull is not the answer to TB in cattle and that culling risks increasing cattle TB. It seems to me that the last five years have proved that the Government's policy is completely wrong-headed. Cicero reputedly said:

"Any man can make mistakes, but only an idiot persists in his error."

I just hope that, when the Minister gets to his feet, he will prove that he is not an idiot.

5.26 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I am surprised to be speaking so early in the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) on securing the debate. He said that he is amazed that we are still debating this issue after five years. I must admit that, as I was preparing my notes, the phrase that sprung to my mind—it is a moot point whether Einstein actually said it—was:

"The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results".

That seems to be what is happening with badger culling. We do not have the scientific evidence to support it, as the hon. Gentleman set out.

The hon. Gentleman correctly highlighted the cost of the cull to date, and the fact that there are cheaper alternatives, such as vaccinations. He also correctly highlighted that the Government have now committed

[Alan Brown]

to carrying out some vaccinations in edge areas. However, I would like the Minister to explain how there will be proper controls on that, how the effectiveness of the vaccinations in each area will be compared with the effectiveness of culling, and how the Government will make sure that there is no cross-contamination so that the different methodologies can actually be compared.

It was quite disturbing to hear about the poor practice in Cumbria. My research has highlighted real concerns about the shooting and inhumane treatment of badgers and the suffering that they undergo as a consequence. We need to hear what the Minister has to say about the monitoring of the rules and compliance with them. I also agree with the call from the hon. Member for Derby North for the Minister to say how we will deal with the possible terminal decline of the badger in certain areas because of the level of culling deemed necessary to allegedly eradicate bovine TB.

The UK Government's initial 10-year randomised badger culling trial was actually terminated, with the independent scientific group that monitored it concluding that it was not effective. There was then a change of Government and the new Government pounced on some of the figures that showed that bovine TB could be reduced and decided to permit the cull. However, the quoted possible reduction of 12% to 16% was over several years, demonstrating that the cull is not effective when measured against the effort required. It seems to me that it was a strange policy choice by the UK Government. It is stranger still that the cull is now a shooting exercise, rather than using a more humane method.

As we heard from the hon. Gentleman, as the years have gone on, the costs have accumulated and cull areas have become more extensive across England and Wales, but the disease still exists. However, proper scientific evidence of the effectiveness of culling does not exist. Culling is being rolled out further, but the evidence, if it exists at all, has not got any stronger. As the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has observed, the fact that culls are being operated so differently from the original trials means there is no way to assess their effectiveness. We do not really have any baseline figures against which to properly gauge them, so they seem a futile exercise.

The independent scientific group set out key parameters that should be followed—having boundaries that are impermeable to badgers to ensure a controlled area, and areas of between 150 and 500 sq km, for example—but those are not being adhered to in the current exercise. Again, independent guidance has not been followed, so we really do not know how effective culling is.

Scientific evidence from Ireland suggests that direct contact between badgers and cattle may not be the mechanism for bovine TB transfer, and that badgers actually tend to avoid areas where cattle are present. That means more work is required on the thesis that it is contaminated environments that allow a lot of the transfer of bovine TB. Clearly, the environment remains contaminated even if badgers are culled. We need to do much more research on that aspects rather than continue the culling exercise.

The UK should be able to assess the cost and success of culling against the cost and success of vaccinations. I appreciate that in recent debates—there have been a

number on this issue—Members have highlighted that there has been a shortage of vaccinations at times, but that does not seem to be the case at the moment. There have also been new developments, such as oral bait for badgers, which seems to be more cost-effective. All that ties in with the hon. Gentleman's call for the Government to conduct transparent cost-benefit assessments and release the data so that we can have confidence and scrutinise what goes on.

Fortunately, the risk of bovine TB in Scotland has historically been very low, and there is no evidence of a wildlife reservoir of bovine TB. In October 2009, Scotland was added to the list of European Union member states and regions that have been declared free of bovine TB. The European Commission attributed that to the success of Scotland's livestock industry working in conjunction with the Government. The Scottish Government recognise the need for confidence on the issue and have introduced a stringent package of measures, including tissue sampling during farm visits, an epidemiological risk assessment, the tracing of cattle, contiguous herd assessments and the need for two consecutive tests with negative results to retain bovine TB-free status.

That aligns with the RSCPA's call for better cattle husbandry, high biosecurity and improved testing to mitigate cattle to cattle transmission. Its point on cattle husbandry ties in with what the hon. Gentleman said about the need for strict enforcement of controls on the movement of cattle to ensure that they are not moved illegally, that proper source to source tracing is carried out and that people cannot change cattle tags or falsify records. That is clearly important for stopping cattle to cattle transfer.

I hope the Minister will explain how scientific information will be collated, co-ordinated, assessed and interpreted in a completely neutral manner—neutrality is important—and how relevant expert opinion will be taken where required. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

5.33 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) on securing the debate and making such a powerful case.

Last year, almost 20,000 badgers were killed across England as part of the largest destruction of a protected British species in living memory. That policy is cruel and inhumane, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said. We need more action and a more ambitious animal welfare agenda to stop this senseless suffering.

Hon. Members will be aware that Labour is the party of animal welfare. We legislated with the landmark Hunting Act 2004 and the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Animal welfare has been placed highly on our party's agenda, and that is still true today. We want to ensure that animal cruelty is consigned to the past. If animals suffer, we all suffer.

The Opposition's position is clear: we are opposed to the culling of badgers to control bovine TB and would immediately end the ineffective and cruel badger cull. A Labour Government would instead focus on an evidence-based approach driven by science, not ideology. Every badger matters, but badgers do not have a voice. They do not have a say in politics unless we give them one. The Government are pursuing a cruel and uncaring policy towards badgers, and worst of all, it does not work.

While Ministers seek the headlines, the real hard work often goes undone. Why are Ministers not strengthening the foxhunting ban or bringing forward a Bill to increase sentences for animal welfare cruelty? We need action, not just words. Tackling bovine TB is important, especially to those in our rural communities, so we need something that actually works, unlike the badger cull. As long as Ministers cling to the ideological slaughter of British badgers, actions that genuinely tackle the spread of bovine TB are being overlooked. The badger cull is spreading, as we have heard. In Devon, the county I come from, we now have 12 culling sites—more than any other county. Thankfully, there is no badger culling yet in Plymouth, the city I represent, but I would not predict that it will not happen in the future.

A little over a month ago, *The Observer* published secret film taken in Cumbria, which showed a badger that took almost a minute to die after being shot in a cage, as my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North mentioned. In fact, recent reports say that up to 22% of badgers can take more than five minutes to die in the cull, which is needless animal suffering. Over the summer the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), brought to the Government's attention the horrific way in which badgers were being left to die in the extreme heat. Caged badgers spent hours on end trapped in the sun with no water, suffering from heat stress and eventually dying of dehydration. Despite that coming to light, little action was taken. That cruelty serves no purpose, and is another example of why the Opposition believe the badger cull to be cruel.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North mentioned, there is no scientific basis for the policy. The science does not support a badger cull, the evidence does not support a badger cull, and the Opposition do not support a badger cull. Why are the Government pursuing a policy that does not work? Why do they want to look like they are doing something? They need to look busy because if they U-turned, it would make them look weaker than they already do. We need something that works, not just a policy that is stuck to. We need animal welfare policies that are based on science, not ideology.

The Environment Secretary may be tired of experts, but this is what the experts are telling us about the cull: a study commissioned by the Government into bovine TB transmission from badgers to cattle, which took place from 1996 to 2006, concluded that “badger culling can make no meaningful contribution to cattle TB control in Britain.”

According to the Badger Trust, an excellent organisation that does superb work, only 5.7% of all bovine TB outbreaks involve possible transmission from badgers to cattle. That means that 94% of all bovine TB outbreaks must come from other sources. The Zoological Society of London says that most herds acquire the disease from other cattle. Ministers need to consider ensuring high levels of biosecurity, tracking movements between herds, and looking at the movement of other animals, such as foxhounds, across agricultural land.

The Minister must not sit on the report that we know his Department has received. When did the Department receive the Godfray review on the Government's bovine TB strategy? When will it be published? Will he commit to publishing it in its original form? Can he confirm whether he has asked for any edits to the report's

recommendations or alterations to its findings? I would be grateful if he could answer those questions and address the concerns expressed by farmers, especially to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), that the Department is telling them that their herds are TB-free when they know they are not. That is a serious issue that undermines the essential confidence between farmers and the Department.

Bovine TB is a cattle problem that needs a cattle-focused solution. A start would be to improve the current skin tests, which expose an infection in the herd but not the individual cow, which makes it very difficult to narrow down.

The badger cull is a phenomenal waste of money that could be better spent, as my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North mentioned. The Badger Trust estimates that when everything has been added up, killing a badger costs about £1,000 per animal. The trust considers that more than £100 million could be spent on killing badgers by 2020. Just think how much better that money could be spent in rural communities. That £100 million could go an enormous way in dealing with rural poverty and the actual concerns of rural communities. Does the Minister not agree that the best way to save money in the fight against bovine TB would be to stop spending Government resources on an ideological policy that has no scientific evidence of reducing bovine TB?

Research shows that vaccinating badgers is not only a better and more humane way to eradicate TB, but is much cheaper. I recently had the opportunity to meet Dr Brian May with my hon. Friends the Members for Workington and for Stroud. I was a little star-struck. As well as being the legendary guitarist from Queen, he has been pioneering badger vaccinations on his farm and has demonstrated their effectiveness and suitability as an alternative to the cruel badger cull. The Badger Trust estimates that vaccinating badgers costs less than £200 an animal, as compared with £1,000 for killing it—what a saving.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): When the hon. Gentleman mentions a cost of £200 a badger, is that a lifetime sum or an annual sum? Vaccinations are an annual requirement, rather than a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Luke Pollard: That is a good point, and I am glad the hon. Gentleman has raised it. When compared with the cost of killing a badger, vaccinating a badger is cheaper.

Simon Hart: If it is £200 for a vaccination and that has to be done annually, it soon gets to £1,000. We should also bear in mind that the vaccination will be completely pointless if the badger already has TB, as it is not a cure, and therefore the money is being wasted whatever the cost.

Luke Pollard: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for pursuing me on that point, which he has rightly spotted. However, I point him to the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North raised about the cost-benefit analysis of culling versus vaccination. Clearly decent testing needs to be part of the mix. It is about the combination.

Chris Williamson: I am interested in the point that the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) made about vaccination.

[Chris Williamson]

I am not an expert, but my understanding is that when someone is vaccinated, they are vaccinated once and that protects them. I do not know whether badger physiology is different in some way, but as my hon. Friend the shadow Minister has pointed out, it would be useful to get that cost-benefit analysis. If the Government would come clean, we would all be in the picture as to the reality of the situation.

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I agree with his points.

I will conclude, as the Minister has an awful lot to respond to and I would like him to get to his feet in a moment. As my hon. Friend said, there is no logical reason for the badger cull to continue, or even exist, other than an ideological one: to make the Government look busy when they are failing farmers and rural communities on bovine TB. There are less cruel ways to eradicate bovine TB than killing badgers on a massive scale. Whether it is more accurate and frequent testing of cattle, badger and cattle vaccinations or more rigid control on cattle movements, the solution should be focused on cattle, not innocent badgers. DEFRA's priority should be to look at the other ways in which bovine TB is transmitted, rather than scapegoating badgers and perpetuating unnecessary animal cruelty. I would be grateful if the Minister could answer the points about the Godfray review in particular. An awful lot of people are waiting for the evidence base. DEFRA sitting on the report for as long as it has creates the impression that there is something in it that it wishes to hide.

5.43 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) on securing it. I am aware that this issue is contentious. The badger is an iconic species. It is a protected species in our countryside. I completely understand that many people have strong feelings about the policy and the approach we are taking. As I and the Secretary of State have said before, none of us wants to cull badgers for any longer than is necessary. However, to answer his question, the reason why we still have these debates is that the Government are of the clear view that it is necessary to have a badger cull as part of a coherent strategy to eradicate TB. We believe that that is firmly underpinned by the evidence—I will return to that because the hon. Gentleman and others raised questions about the science.

The badger cull is just one part of our wider strategy to eradicate TB. The absolute heart of our strategy has always been regular cattle testing and removal. In the high-risk area, we currently have annual testing; we have four-yearly testing in the low-risk area; we have pre-movement testing; we introduced compulsory post-movement testing; we have radial testing in the low-risk area, where we get a breakdown; and we have contiguous testing in the high-risk area on the farms surrounding a breakdown. All of these measures mean that we are regularly testing our herds and regularly removing reactors to that testing.

Diagnostics, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, are important. We recognise that TB is a difficult disease to fight. It is difficult to detect because it is a slow-moving,

insidious disease, and none of the diagnostic tests is perfect. However, one thing we have done is make greater use of the interferon gamma test—the blood test—to remove infection from herds when it is picked up. We are also deploying that test more proactively in areas where the cull has taken place so that we can bear down on infection in cattle. We have also introduced a more severe interpretation on inconclusive reactors to the skin test. Diagnostics are important and part of our strategy is to improve testing. We are supporting a number of initiatives to improve testing, but at the moment we are using the more sensitive blood test in conjunction with the skin test to improve our detection rates.

A number of hon. Members mentioned biosecurity, which is important—biosecurity is a key part of our strategy to eradicate TB. A few years ago, I introduced a new accreditation scheme—the cattle health certification standards scheme, or CHeCS. We encouraged farmers to sign up and to take steps to manage risk to their herd, both in terms of risk-based trading for the cattle that they bring on to their holding and in terms of protecting the herd and their farmyard from badger incursion, for instance using fencing. We recently changed the compensation regime to incentivise farmers to sign up to the biosecurity scheme, meaning that if they do not sign up to it they face receiving lower compensation for cattle reactors that they bring into their herd.

We have always been clear that vaccination, which a number of hon. Members mentioned, could have a role, particularly in the edge area, and possibly as a way of getting an exit strategy from the cull once we have borne down on the population. We have been supporting vaccination pilots in the edge area—the so-called badger edge vaccination scheme, or BEVS, which we restarted this year once vaccines became available again.

The difficulty with vaccination, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) pointed out, is that we have to catch badgers regularly to top up the vaccination. It is not the case that we can inject them just once. Vaccination does not cure badgers that have the disease, so the scheme has limitations, but we have always maintained that it could have a role to assist in an exit strategy. That is why we continue, for instance, to fund work to try and get an oral bait vaccine that we could deploy in the badger population.

Alan Brown: How do we measure the vaccination in the edge areas as opposed to culling, which has already been happening? The Government must ensure that they correctly compare two different methodologies and that there is not cross-contamination, as it were, given the movement of badgers.

George Eustice: That is a very good point and precisely why we have focused our vaccination efforts in the edge area, where we are not culling badgers. The culls are being rolled out predominantly in the high-risk area where we know the reservoir of the disease in the wildlife population is a persistent problem, and are using vaccination in the edge area to ensure that we are not vaccinating badgers only to cull them.

We are also looking at cattle vaccination. We have been developing work to do a so-called DIVA test, which can differentiate TB-infected from vaccinated animals so that it would not affect our trade. Cattle vaccination

deployed in the hot spots could help to give immunity to our herds, and clearly cattle vaccination is easier to deploy than badger vaccination, because a herd of cattle can be run through a crush and vaccinated—we do not have to capture wildlife to do it.

Our strategy is incredibly broad. No one single intervention will give us the magic solution to tackling this terrible disease. It is a difficult disease to fight, so we need to use a range of interventions. The badger cull is just one part of our strategy, but there are no examples anywhere in the world of a country that has successfully eradicated TB without also addressing the reservoir, the disease and the wildlife population.

TB was first isolated in badgers as long ago as 1971. In 1974, a trial was conducted to remove badgers from a severely infected farm, with the result that there was no breakdown on that farm for five years afterwards. Between 1975 and 1978, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food funded extensive work that demonstrated conclusively transmission between badgers and cattle in both directions. Subsequent work in Ireland reaffirmed that finding. In the Krebs review, which hon. Members cited, it was observed that between 1975 and 1979 TB incidence in the south-west fell from 1.65% to 0.4% after the cull—a 75% reduction.

Subsequently, therefore, in the late '70s and early '80s, more extensive work was done in three exercises. One was in Thornbury, where the TB incidence fell from 5.6% in the 10 years before culling to 0.45% in the 15 years after culling, which was a reduction of 90%. In Steeple Lees, there were no breakdowns for seven years after badgers had been cleared. In Hartland, the incidence dropped from 15% in 1984 to just 4% in 1985, which was a reduction of more than two thirds.

Chris Williamson: I am interested in the Minister's comments. Will he comment on why the weight of scientific evidence before the Government embarked on the latest cull, including from people involved in the randomised badger culling exercise, suggested that it would not work? No credible scientific evidence supported the Government, yet they ploughed on regardless. Indeed, the number of herds infected with TB has not diminished either. If anything, the situation has got worse, because we now have TB in Cumbria and the Isle of Skye. Surely controls on movements and better biosecurity would be far better than continuing with this cruel cull.

George Eustice: I do not agree, for reasons I will come to.

There were claims that those trials in the '70s lacked a control or a comparison, which was a fair point. That is why the randomised badger culling trial took place. Despite the challenge of a foot and mouth crisis right in the middle of it, the RBCT concluded that, in the four years after culling, there was a significant reduction in the incidence of TB. The RBCT supported what the previous trials had shown. In fact, 18 months after the culling ended in the RBCT, there was a 54% reduction in the incidence of the disease. People say that there is no scientific evidence, but I can give them all the evidence they want.

On the current trials, we now have some peer-reviewed evidence conducted on the first two cull areas. It compares the cull areas with control areas where there was no cull. That detailed analysis of the first two cull areas, over

the first two years only, was published by Dr Brunton and her colleagues in 2017. It showed a 58% reduction in the disease in cattle in the Gloucestershire badger control area, and a 21% reduction in Somerset after two years of badger control, compared with the uncultured areas. As I said, that is a peer-reviewed piece of work. The Animal and Plant Health Agency published raw data, as we do every year, in September 2018, showing that there has been a drop in TB incidence in the first two cull areas, where the number of new confirmed breakdowns has decreased by about 50% in both areas. In Gloucestershire, the incidence rate has dropped from 10.4% before culling began to 5.6% in the 12 months following the fourth cull. In Somerset, it has dropped from 24% to 12%. Dr Brunton and her colleagues carried out further detailed analysis into the third year of the cull in the first two areas, and it will be published shortly.

A wealth of consistent evidence, from the 1970s onwards, shows that badgers are a reservoir for the disease, that there is transmission of the disease between badgers and cattle, and that a cull of badgers in infected areas where the presence of the disease in the wildlife is known to contribute to that can lead to substantial reductions of between 20% and 50% in incidence. That picture has been consistent for at least 40 years.

Chris Williamson: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again, but he did not really answer my question. The body of scientific opinion before the Government embarked on the cull was opposed to it and said that it would not work or, if anything, would make matters worse. I do not think that he has addressed that point.

George Eustice: A number of scientists said that it was not logistically possible to sustain a cull over a large area and to remove the number of badgers necessary. We have demonstrated that that is possible. It is a difficult and contentious policy, but it is possible to do that. No credible scientist has said that badgers are not implicated in the spread of the disease. Sometimes scientists debate the extent to which badgers have a role, but no one doubts that—the evidence shows this clearly—a cull of badgers in infected areas leads to a reduction in the incidence of the disease. Arguments tend to be about the logistical possibilities of delivering such a policy but, as I said, we have been able to demonstrate that that can be done, difficult though it is.

Let me deal with some of the hon. Gentleman's other points. One was about vaccination and, as I said, that is part of our plan, and we envisage doing more of it in future, potentially as an exit strategy once we have seen a reduction in the badger population. That brings me to his claim about the possibility of a collapse in that population. It will never happen because we have always had provision in the licensing for an absolute maximum that must never be exceeded in any given cull year. Everything we do is absolutely compliant with the Berne convention. Furthermore, we are doing this only in high-risk areas, so we never aim to remove the entire badger population or to cause a collapse in it; we simply aim to suppress numbers while we get to grips with that difficult disease.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned cull data. That is published each and every year. Usually in or around December, we give the House a written ministerial

[George Eustice]

statement and an update on all the figures from the previous year's cull. We shall do so again this year, in the normal way, as we have done in all previous years.

Kerry McCarthy: If my recollection is correct, it is common for the figures to be released on the very last day of the parliamentary term before we adjourn for Christmas. Will the Minister give us an assurance that they will be published a little earlier this year, so that we have time to reflect on them before we disappear for our Christmas holiday?

George Eustice: I cannot give any undertakings about when exactly that will take place but, typically, we do it in December, once we have collated all the data. The hon. Lady will have to be patient and wait for the data to come out. However, we publish that every year and we are absolutely transparent about it. Every year, we also publish details about incidence and prevalence of the disease—I know that there has been an argument about whether incidence or prevalence is the right figure to use, but incidence is the correct one for measuring the role of wildlife in the introduction of the disease to cattle herds.

On costs, again we publish the figures every year. The 2018 costs will be published shortly, but those for previous years have already been published. Last year, the total cost of the cull was about £4 million, which covers policing, licensing and all the monitoring work done by Natural England.¹ I do not recognise the figure given by the hon. Member for Derby North of £1,000 or £2,000 a badger; it is probably in the region of a couple of hundred pounds. The costs have reduced substantially, as policing costs have come down as we have rolled out the cull but, in reality, cost per badger is the wrong way to look at it; we have to view it in the context of the fact that the disease already costs us £100 million a year—if costs are what worry us—and that if we want to get it under control, we have to use all the tools in the box.

Finally, I confirm that we received the Godfray review on 2 October and, as the Secretary of State said at DEFRA questions a couple of weeks ago, it will be published shortly. "Shortly" means what it says, which is that Members probably do not have long to wait. I can confirm that it will be published in its entirety and that we have not requested any edits or alterations. It is an independent review, led by Sir Charles Godfray, who will publish it shortly, along with his conclusions.

I should point out that Sir Charles Godfray's review is of our strategy, so it looks at every component, including the role of badger culling, vaccination, diagnostics and whether they can be improved, biosecurity, compensation and behavioural change. It reviews every feature in our original strategy and gives some pointers about other areas that we could advance in future. I think it is a good report, and I am sure that hon. Members look forward to reading it.

Chris Williamson: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way for what will perhaps be the final time. My conclusion from what he says is that it is pretty clear

that the only way in which the badger cull will be brought to an end is with the election of a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour Government.

George Eustice: All I can say is that I have explained why we think the badger cull is critical. I know that it is contentious, but it is the right thing to do, and sometimes Governments have to the right and responsible thing. We have this mess today because the last Labour Government put their heads in the sand, meaning that we had 15 years of total inaction during the early part of this century. The disease got out of hand, and we are now trying to get a grip of it and to roll it back.

Chris Williamson: Will the Minister give way?

George Eustice: No, I have given way to the hon. Gentleman, and I have finished.

6.1 pm

Chris Williamson: I am disappointed that the Minister did not give way at the end. I think it is very unfair to characterise the situation as being the fault of the previous Labour Government. Let us remember that it was the previous Labour Government who—rather controversially—actually backed the randomised badger cull tests from which the conclusion was drawn that the way to tackle bovine TB was not through a badger cull.

I repeat that the body of evidence from the scientists involved in the randomised badger cull tests showed that carrying on with the badger cull could have made matters worse. We have seen over the last five years of this horrific cull, which continues, that, even putting the appalling cruelty to one side, it is simply not working. It is all very well for the Minister to get up and say that various peer-reviewed reports have implied that it has worked, but the evidence speaks for itself. How can the Minister stand there and say that it has worked when the proportion of TB in cattle herds is virtually the same as at the start of the cull, and when it has even spread to other areas?

The Government are looking in the wrong direction. I heard what the Minister said, but I implore him to go back and look again at pursuing a different route, at the cattle movements, at the fraud that takes place, at biosecurity and at doing proper testing and supporting farmers in doing so, rather than expecting them to stump up for the bill. This is an appalling state of affairs. I repeat that there is no scientific evidence to support the Government's position. Public opinion is overwhelmingly opposed to the badger cull, which does not serve the farming community in any way, shape or form and certainly does not serve the interests of wildlife in our country. I hope that the Minister will reflect on the comments made and adopt a more sensible and humane approach to the bovine TB situation in this country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the badger cull.

6.3 pm

Sitting adjourned.

1. [Official Report, 12 November 2018, Vol. 649, c. 1MC.]

Written Statements

Tuesday 6 November 2018

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):

A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 6 November 2018. The UK will be represented by Mark Bowman (Director-General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council will discuss the following:

European Free Trade Association (EFTA) dialogue

EU Finance Ministers will be joined by representatives of the EFTA countries to exchange views on the opportunities and challenges of FinTech to the financial sector and economic growth.

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 5 November meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU. The Council will also exchange views on the annual report of the European Fiscal Board.

Digital services tax

The Council will exchange views regarding the state of play of the negotiations on the digital services tax directive.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Austrian presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

European Court of Auditors' annual report

The president of the Court of Auditors will present the auditors' report on the implementation of the budget of the European Union for the 2017 financial year.

EU statistical package

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on the autumn EU statistical package and to review progress achieved, providing guidance for further work in this area.

Conclusions on climate finance

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on climate finance as part of the annual process in the run up to the United Nations framework convention on climate change (UNFCCC) conference of parties (COP) in Poland on 2 to 14 Dec.

Follow-up to the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF annual meetings in Indonesia

The Austrian presidency and the Commission will present the main outcomes of the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF annual meetings between 11 and 12 October in Bali, Indonesia

[HCWS1074]

Double Taxation Convention: Austria

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):

A double taxation convention with Austria was signed on 23 October 2018. The text of the convention is available on HM Revenue and Customs' pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The text will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS1073]

DEFENCE

Royal Navy Police Inspection

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence

(Mr Tobias Ellwood): I wish to inform the House and that I am laying before the House today the second report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services (HMICFRS) inspection of the Royal Navy Police (RNP).

The Armed Forces Act 2011 places a duty on HMICFRS to inspect and report to the Ministry of Defence on the independence and effectiveness of investigations carried out by each service police force, and this is HMICFRS second statutory inspection report on the RNP.

I consider this report to be a very positive endorsement of the RNP providing assurance from an independent civilian authority that the RNP's police performance inspections (PPI) provide the assurance required that the activity of RNP units meet legal and professional standards. No recommendations were made and only four areas for improvement were identified. The Royal Navy accepts the report's findings and through the implementation of a revised PPI process, it is considered that all four areas of improvement have now been addressed.

[HCWS1072]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council: November 2018

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I will attend the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 12 November 2018 to represent the UK. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member.

The provisional agenda includes:

Multiannual financial framework 2021-27

Ministers will discuss progress on the multiannual financial framework proposals with the presidency.

Preparation of the European Council on 13 and 14 December 2018

The Council will discuss the draft agenda for the December European Council.

European Semester 2019—road map

The Austrian presidency and the incoming Romanian presidency will present the timetable for the 2019 European semester, which will provide a framework for the co-ordination of economic policies across the EU.

Legislative programming—Commission's work programme 2019

The Commission will set out the legislative and other initiatives that it intends to present to the Council and European Parliament during 2019.

Subsidiarity package

The Commission will present its subsidiarity package which was published on 23 October. In those areas which do not form part of the EU's exclusive competence, the principle of subsidiarity means that action should only be taken at EU level when the desired objectives cannot be effectively achieved by action taken at national or regional level.

Annual rule of law dialogue

An annual rule of law dialogue has formed part of the GAC agenda since 2014. The presidency has invited Ministers to consider the topic of 'trust in public institutions' for this year's dialogue.

Rule of law in Poland—article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

The Commission will provide Ministers with an update on the rule of law in Poland.

Values of the Union—Hungary/article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

Ministers will discuss the article 7(1) procedure in relation to Hungary.

[HCWS1068]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**Health and Social Care Provider Update**

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinanage): Yesterday, in line with duties set out in the Care Act 2014 the Care Quality Commission notified 84 local authorities that they were issuing a stage 6 notification for the homecare provider, Allied Healthcare.

I would like to update the House on why the Care Quality Commission has taken this action now, and steps being taken to assure people with care and support needs being met by Allied Healthcare that they should not suffer a gap in their care service—even if their care is funded privately.

A stage 6 notification is intended to be an early warning to local authorities that CQC consider that the business failure of a provider in their area is likely and this could lead to services ceasing for people who receive care from that provider.

The Care Quality Commission has not taken this decision lightly. They have continued to monitor the financial sustainability of Allied Healthcare since it secured a company voluntary arrangement in May. It has been speaking with Allied Healthcare's senior management team on a regular basis to seek assurances about the company's performance and the sustainability of its future finances. The company has not been able to provide the necessary assurances beyond 30 November 2018 and the Care Quality Commission has taken this prudent action in order to give local authorities the time to prepare their contingency plans to ensure continuity of care, in the event that it is required.

Allied Healthcare can take action to reassure the Care Quality Commission of its financial position beyond 30 November 2018, in which case the Care Quality Commission would revise its position accordingly. The Care Quality Commission is clear that there is no current service disruption. Allied Healthcare remain responsible for these services and their staff.

The law was changed in 2014 giving the Care Quality Commission a new responsibility to monitor the financial sustainability of the largest and most difficult to replace care providers across the country. It means the CQC

can notify local authorities of the likelihood of service disruption caused by service failure earlier so that they have more time to prepare their plans to protect individuals.

Local authorities have a statutory duty under their section 48(2) of the Care Act to meet the needs of individuals temporarily if their care provider is no longer able to carry on. Business failure is a normal part of a functioning market and local authorities have appropriate plans in place to minimise disruption of services. The Care Quality Commission has provided local authorities with time to begin their preparations. This will include working with Allied Healthcare to ensure the local authority is given an up to date list of all people the company is providing care for, whether this is state or privately funded. Local authorities will be reviewing contingency plans and speaking to other providers to ensure continuity of care.

The Care Quality Commission and my Department are closely monitoring the situation. They are also working closely with the Local Government Association, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services and NHS England to ensure that local authorities are supported in their contingency planning to ensure individuals' care and support needs continue to be met.

[HCWS1071]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**Bellwin Scheme: Leicester**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): On 25 February 2018, there was a major explosion and fire in Hinckley Road, Leicester which resulted in the tragic loss of five lives. I am satisfied that financial assistance under the Bellwin scheme is justified to cover eligible costs incurred by Leicestershire fire and rescue authority in dealing with this emergency.

A scheme will therefore be established under section 155 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Grant will be paid to the Leicestershire fire and rescue authority to cover 100% of their eligible costs incurred above a threshold.

[HCWS1070]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE**Pre-Council: EU Foreign Affairs Council**

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The EU Trade Foreign Affairs Council will take place in Brussels on 9 November 2018. I will represent the UK.

The substantive items on 9 November will be:

Legislative items: information from the presidency about the regulation on foreign direct investment screening; information from the presidency about the regulation on implementing horizontal bilateral safeguards in certain agreements.

Non-legislative items: the state of play of World Trade Organisation modernisation, and an update on the state of play of the ongoing EU trade negotiations. The Commission will also present a report on the implementation of free trade agreements.

[HCWS1067]

TRANSPORT

EU Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I attended the informal meeting of members of the Transport and Environment Councils in Graz, Austria on 29 and 30 October.

The programme for the informal meetings included separate sessions for transport and environment Ministers and a joint session for both Ministers entitled “Starting a new Era: clean, safe and affordable mobility for Europe”.

On 29 October, Transport Ministers were invited to discuss the Commission’s proposal on “Discontinuing seasonal changes of time (summer time)”. My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Lord Henley, represented the UK at this session and explained that the UK Government do not support the proposed directive. He also noted the Commission had fallen short on the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality as has been highlighted by the decision of the House of Lords to issue a reasoned opinion. (The House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee has subsequently recommended that the House of Commons also issue a reasoned opinion on this matter.)

There was broad consensus in Council that the timetable proposed by the Commission was too short and thus there was widespread support for the presidency’s intention to provide for an extension. A small minority of member states were notably critical of the proposal while the majority welcomed the initiative, albeit noting its deficiencies. Several member states advocated the need to co-ordinate across borders in order to know the final time zone arrangements before taking the decision to abolish daylight saving.

Environment Ministers were then invited to discuss “The future of European environmental policy”. The Secretary of State for the Environment was represented by officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Ministers broadly agreed on the need for an eighth environment action programme (EAP) with a consensus that it should take full account of climate change given the report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on global warming of 1.5 °C published last month.

At the joint session for Transport and Environment Ministers on 30 October, interventions were wide-ranging with common themes being the need to move towards zero emissions vehicles and enabling people to choose sustainable ways to travel. These themes were reflected in the presidency’s “Graz declaration” published after the meeting. For the UK, I stressed the importance of ambition to accelerate the development and introduction of zero emission vehicles, recalling that the Prime Minister had hosted the world’s first zero emission vehicle summit in Birmingham recently.

The subject for the afternoon session was road safety. Transport Ministers shared experiences with progress to date in reducing casualties and their perception of the challenges in making more progress. In my intervention I noted that human error was a factor in over 85% of road accidents, and that connected and automated vehicles offered opportunities to make our roads safer.

In the margins I met with a number of EU Transport Ministers to discuss current EU transport business and how relationships will evolve as the UK leaves the EU.

[HCWS1069]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Collective Defined Contribution Pension Schemes

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Today the Government are publishing the consultation paper on collective defined contribution schemes. This sets out our vision for this new form of occupational pension scheme. We will be seeking stakeholder views on how we can best implement such schemes. CDC schemes will offer a new option for employers looking to help their employees save for retirement. A copy of this document will be placed in the Library of the House.

The UK has a world-class occupational pension system—but there are always opportunities for further innovation where this can benefit savers and businesses alike. The Work and Pensions Select Committee recently published a report calling for the adoption of CDC schemes in the UK: the Government welcomed this report and are grateful to the Committee for its support and advice. It is important to be clear that CDC schemes are not a panacea, and that members could see their pension incomes fluctuate. However, as the Work and Pensions Select Committee so clearly recognised, a robustly designed and appropriately regulated CDC regime can offer positive outcomes for both employers and pension savers. The Royal Mail and the Communication Workers’ Union are already working closely together to establish a CDC scheme, which the Government see as an encouraging sign of the consensus in this area.

Saving for retirement is an extremely important part of people’s financial planning, representing their hopes for the future. Throughout the last decade, the Government have therefore worked closely with the pensions, financial services and consumer community to strengthen the UK’s pension savings culture. Together we have transformed the pensions landscape, delivering social change on an unprecedented scale. The establishment of CDC pension schemes is a key strand of this work.

[HCWS1075]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 6 November 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	1353	TREASURY—continued	
Infrastructure: South-West.....	1367	School Funding	1353
Leaving the EU: No Deal.....	1359	Skills and Training Funding.....	1365
Leaving the EU: Tax Revenues.....	1355	SMEs: Tax	1370
Multinational Digital Businesses: Tax.....	1361	Support for Businesses and Entrepreneurs.....	1363
One Yorkshire Devolution Deal.....	1368	Support for the High Street.....	1362
Productivity	1360	Tax Avoidance and Evasion	1369
Public Finances.....	1366	Topical Questions	1370
Renewable Energy	1368	Universal Credit: Household Income.....	1357

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 6 November 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DEFENCE	50WS	INTERNATIONAL TRADE	52WS
Royal Navy Police Inspection.....	50WS	Pre-Council: EU Foreign Affairs Council	52WS
EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION	50WS	TRANSPORT	53WS
General Affairs Council: November 2018	50WS	EU Transport Council	53WS
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	51WS	TREASURY	49WS
Health and Social Care Provider Update	51WS	Double Taxation Convention: Austria	50WS
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	52WS	ECOFIN.....	49WS
Bellwin Scheme: Leicester	52WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	54WS
		Collective Defined Contribution Pension Schemes.....	54WS

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 6 November 2018

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1353] [see index inside back page]
Chancellor of the Exchequer

Police Pension Liabilities [Col. 1377]
Answer to urgent question—(Mr Hurd)

Assessment and Treatment Units: Vulnerable People [Col. 1389]
Answer to urgent question—(Caroline Dinéage)

Child Maintenance [Col. 1396]
*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Marion Fellows)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time*

Centenary of the Armistice [Col. 1400]
General debate

Westminster Hall
Synthetic Cannabinoids: Reclassification [Col. 459WH]
Plymouth Challenge for Schools [Col. 484WH]
Holiday Hunger Schemes [Col. 492WH]
Post Offices (North Yorkshire) [Col. 511WH]
Badger Cull [Col. 518WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 49WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
