

**Thursday
13 December 2018**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 13 December 2018

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

INDEPENDENT BREAST SCREENING REVIEW

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of a Paper, entitled *The Independent Breast Screening Review 2018*, dated 13 December 2018.—(*Gareth Johnson.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

Mobile Phone Coverage

1. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps the Government are taking to improve mobile phone coverage in all parts of the UK. [908171]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): The Government are committed to ensuring that there is high-quality mobile coverage where people live, work and travel. We welcome the opportunity that Ofcom's forthcoming 700 MHz spectrum auction offers to extend coverage across all parts of the UK, and we continue to work across Government with Ofcom and the mobile network operators to support investment and deliver coverage to 95% of the UK's land mass by 2022.

Mr Carmichael: That all sounds very well, but it would appear that we still have some way to go. Recent research from Which? and OpenSignal showed that 4G phone users in Scotland can get a 4G signal only 50.4% of the time on average, compared with 69.7% in London. In Wales, that figure is as low as 35%. What are the Government doing about that?

Jeremy Wright: The right hon. Gentleman is right that there is considerably more progress to be made—I do not need to explain to him the particular geographical difficulties in Scotland—but it is worth recognising that considerable progress has been made. He quoted those figures, but there are slightly different figures when one looks at 4G coverage from at least one mobile network operator. The increase from last year to this year is considerable. In June 2017, about 50% of Scotland was covered by one mobile operator at 4G level; that figure was up to 75% in May 2018. I agree with him entirely that there is more work to do, and we intend to do it.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is good to hear the Secretary of State say that there is more work to do because there really is. My constituency runs along the M4 corridor. Some villages just two or three miles from the M4 simply have no coverage—not just no 3G or 4G. Will the Secretary of State set out what additional investment he will provide to ensure not just that there is 4G, but that there is basic mobile phone coverage for many of the villages in my constituency?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. There is more that we can do in relation to the road network. The aspiration is to get to a point, in 2022, where all major road networks are covered. As he mentioned, there will then be a knock-on benefit to areas near those roads. One way in which we can do that is to make maximum use of the emergency services network that is being rolled out by my colleagues in the Home Office that is producing increases in coverage, but as I said to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael)—I make no bones about it—there is a good deal more work to be done.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): We have some of the worst networks in the advanced world. We heard yesterday that download speeds in Gloucestershire, for example, are 2,000 times slower than they are in Birmingham. Frankly, it adds insult to injury for those struggling to get on to universal credit, which is of course a digital-only benefit. The National Infrastructure Commission and Ofcom think that it is going to cost something like £11 billion to bring our networks into the 21st century, so will the Secretary of State assure the House that that is the full sum that he is seeking from Her Majesty's Treasury?

Jeremy Wright: The right hon. Gentleman has gradually shaded into the subject of broadband from mobile coverage, but it is certainly right to point out that considerable progress has been made on digital connectivity of all kinds—both mobile and broadband—over the last few years. There is a radical difference between the position that we are in now and the position we inherited in 2010 but, as I have said a number of times this morning, there is a good deal more to be done; the right hon. Gentleman is right about that. We will ensure that we are making full use not just of the market roll-outs, but of the extra support that needs to be provided to the parts of the country that will not be covered by a market roll-out. The right hon. Gentleman will have carefully read the future telecoms infrastructure review that we produced in the summer, which deals exactly with how we reach parts of the country that will not be reached by a market roll-out.

Fixed Odds Betting Terminals: Maximum Stake

3. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): When and how his Department identified that the date of the decision by the House on the statutory instrument to reduce the maximum stake on fixed odds betting terminals will affect the amount that GVC Holdings plc has to pay to former Ladbrokes shareholders. [908173]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): We are taking decisive action to ensure that we have a responsible gambling industry that continues to contribute to economic growth while protecting the most vulnerable in our society from gambling-related harm. Such commercial arrangements are a matter for the industry and were not a factor when the Government determined their policy to reduce the stakes on B2 machines.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer and congratulate her on her well-deserved promotion. When the offshore gambling company GVC bought Ladbrokes for £3.9 billion, £700 million was contingent on the date on which statutory instruments were submitted by the Government on reducing the odds on fixed odds betting terminals. Does she think that the shareholders of Ladbrokes, including UK pension companies and employees, should get that £700 million, or should the offshore gambling company GVC pocket it and use it for irresponsible gambling adverts?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for making an important point about being responsible in this industry. We have been very clear that we were going to be acting in this space. As the Secretary of State said during an urgent question on 1 November, when determining policy in this area, it would not be

“proper for Government to take account of such commercial arrangements”.—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2018; Vol. 648, c. 1064.]

Data Security

4. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the security of data for people and companies. [908174]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Government take the protection of data extremely seriously and want the UK to be the safest place to live and work online. The Data Protection Act 2018 makes our data protection framework fit for the digital age, with increased powers and funding for the Information Commissioner. Additionally, we have invested almost £2 billion in our national cyber-security strategy and opened the world-leading National Cyber Security Centre to protect the public and industry.

Mary Robinson: Last month, I held my first ScamSmart event in my constituency, bringing together police, charities and banks to inform residents and discuss with them the dangers of online scamming and the importance of data protection. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that my constituents' data is safe from these unscrupulous companies and that they are informed about how they can protect themselves?

Margot James: I congratulate my hon. Friend on holding that event, which is a very important thing to do. The new legislation strengthens people's rights to access their data, to object to the way it is being processed, and to seek erasure of data where appropriate. For those that break the rules, we have increased the fines to 4% of global turnover—a dramatic increase. We have also substantially increased the resources available to the Information Commissioner to investigate scams like those that she seeks to eradicate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Some years ago, the addresses of my staff in this House were released due to a data breach. The danger to safety posed by these breaches demands that we address this issue, so will the Minister do so in the strongest terms? Will she also outline the funding that has been allocated to cyber-security and to the personal safety and security of people in this House?

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman will be reassured to know that had that breach occurred since the Data Protection Act was put into law, the Information Commissioner's Office would have had substantially increased additional powers to take measures to address it. The Government are investing almost £2 billion in cyber-security, and the National Cyber Security Centre is there to help individuals, Members of Parliament and businesses.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Documents published last week by the Select Committee show that Facebook was offering privileged access to user data to some commercial partners without those users' knowledge, and was cutting off some other companies' access to data altogether. Does the Minister feel that this should be a matter of investigation not only for the Information Commissioner but for the competition authorities?

Margot James: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I congratulate him and his Committee on the work that they have done. His exposure of the information that Facebook engineers have reported the mass harvesting of data since 2014 is certainly worthy of continuing investigation.

Public Libraries

5. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support public libraries. [908175]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Libraries support people, communities and society as a whole by providing access to books and literature, and, increasingly, to modern technology. My Department, DCMS, established and funds the Libraries Taskforce to implement the Libraries Deliver strategy, which helps to support and reinvestigate England's public libraries service.

Alex Burghart: I thank the Minister for that answer. There is considerable concern in Shenfield in my constituency that the local library will close, and residents have already put together 1,000 signatures. What steps is the Department taking to ensure the future of local libraries?

Michael Ellis: Local authorities in England have a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a “comprehensive and efficient” library service. I caution all local authorities that I will challenge them about their proposed library service reductions in each case, before deciding whether a local inquiry is needed, as it may be in some cases.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Will the Minister take a trip up to Matlock, where the county offices are for Derbyshire? The Tory-controlled council there has recently announced the closure of 20 libraries and a reduction in the hours of every librarian in the whole county. Something needs to be done urgently. Get up there to Derbyshire and sort it out.

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his charming invitation to Derbyshire. I am always pleased to visit. It is a beautiful county, and I look forward to my visit. I would say to local authorities of any political party that they have a responsibility under the 1964 Act, which this Department takes seriously and has proven so in the past.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): When the library in Lichfield was too costly to maintain, the Tory-controlled Staffordshire County Council sold it and moved the library to a museum in the centre of Lichfield. It will now be bigger and better than before. Will the Minister congratulate t' Tory-controlled Staffordshire Council?

Michael Ellis: I congratulate my hon. Friend and his council. In fact, councils of all political hues around the country are investing in libraries, building new ones and reinvigorating them. I have opened several myself and visited others that have been renovated. Local authorities are doing that across the country.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I can give the Minister the example of Glasgow City Council, which has a multimillion-pound investment programme in refurbishing libraries, including the 93-year-old Partick library, which has served communities in my constituency for that length of time. Does he agree that that is welcome investment and shows that it is important to protect libraries and reinvent them, so that they can continue serving communities into the 21st century?

Michael Ellis: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and his local authority. I am pleased to say that I have visited Glasgow. The reality is that many libraries need reinvigoration, which needs investment. Local authorities have the resources to do that, and they need to make those choices. We know in this House, across the political divide, that libraries have a high value in our communities and our society, and they should be invested in.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Mobile libraries are a vital lifeline for rural communities. Will the Minister give an assurance that when he is considering whether to push local authorities further in their provision of services, he will consider that the provision of mobile libraries is essential?

Michael Ellis: Yes. Mobile libraries, particularly in rural areas, can be extremely useful. They can visit different villages on different days of the week and be very productive. Many local authorities use mobile libraries, and they are a good thing.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): We know that the roll-out of universal credit and the shutdown of many jobcentres has put a huge amount of pressure on libraries. What discussions has the Minister had with

his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions about the impact on libraries of the UK Government shutting those jobcentres?

Michael Ellis: I understand that the DWP made that decision with regard to jobcentres in order to rationalise, with larger jobcentres rather than smaller ones. Libraries are used by our communities for myriad reasons, and that is a positive thing. We want to encourage multiple uses of libraries. They are important community hubs and centres. It is important that they are for the loan of books but are also used for a multiplicity of reasons.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Northamptonshire County Council previously planned to close most of its libraries but has now announced ambitious plans to maintain county-wide library provision. Will the Minister welcome that development and offer the county council whatever support his Department can provide?

Michael Ellis: Yes, I will. I welcome the county council's position. It has an ambition to save all 32 libraries in the county, which I am pleased with. I appreciate that there are challenges, but it is right that the council saves those libraries. I have recused myself from making a decision under the 1964 Act, for obvious reasons—it is my home county—but the reality is that libraries around the country should be supported.

Broadband: Advertising

6. **Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to protect consumers from misleading broadband advertising. [908176]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Government are working with industry and regulators to ensure that consumers receive clear and accurate information to help them make informed choices about their broadband. The Advertising Standards Authority has recently strengthened its rules on broadband advertising to ensure that speed claims in adverts are not misleading. A new Ofcom code of practice on broadband speeds will come into force next March.

Ian Murray: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but a High Court case has been raised today to try to overturn the Advertising Standards Authority's decision to allow broadband to be advertised as fibre when large parts of it are of copper. Given that Edinburgh, where my constituency is, has just become a fibre city and that the Minister herself has called this advertising "misleading", what can the Government do to ensure that when fibre broadband is advertised, it is indeed fibre end to end and does not have copper?

Margot James: I have great sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's point. As we know, the judicial review of the ASA's decision, brought by CityFibre, is expected imminently, and we will continue to monitor that issue. In the meantime, however, I hope he can take comfort from the new Ofcom code that comes into effect next March, which will considerably strengthen the situation.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Good broadband services are essential for so many businesses throughout Taunton Deane. Sadly, however, owing to the difficulties

with Gigaclear, many are still not getting the services they deserve. While Infracapital has revised the plan for the roll-out, it is going to be much longer and slower. Its success will depend on extending the rate for state aid beyond the March 2020 deadline. If we do not do this, many businesses will be jeopardised and homes affected, so will the Minister meet me to discuss the issue?

Margot James: I am aware of the issues raised by my hon. Friend. Indeed, I will meet her and the companies she is concerned about in the new year to discuss the issues she has raised.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): We call it t'internet in Yorkshire. Broadband suppliers are responsible for the universal service obligation. Will they be required to use wireless technologies where those are the most cost-effective solutions?

Margot James: We are aware that, no matter how successful our full fibre programme—and we have our target, as my hon. Friend will know, of full fibre coverage across the UK by 2033—there will be premises for which fibre will never be the optimum route of connection. We will of course consider and urge others to consider wireless technologies where full fibre is not effective.

Women's Sport: Broadcasting

7. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to support the broadcasting of women's sport. [908177]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Broadcasters have made significant progress in increasing coverage of women's sport in recent years. The events covered include the women's football World cup and Euro championships, the women's rugby world cup, cycling and tennis. With the success of so many of our women's sports teams, we should be looking at how many more events can be broadcast to inspire future generations. I will meet broadcasters in the new year to discuss exactly that.

Deidre Brock: While it is good to hear that UEFA has pledged a 50% increase in funding for women's football from 2020, particularly in view of the terrific news that the English and Scottish women's football teams have made the World cup, that translates to only €50,000 extra for each of the 55 member associations. Will this Government commit to match funding that amount for the UK's associations, with the specific aim of broadening the appeal of women's football to the broadcast networks?

Jeremy Wright: Of course we will consider that. I know the hon. Lady will be just as excited by the fact that, on 9 June, England and Scotland will play each other in that World cup; all of us will be looking forward to that. She makes the good point that we must make sure that the attractiveness of women's sport—and, may I say, of disability sport as well—to broadcasters and to everyone is increased, so that we can inspire those who can then see themselves or people like them playing sport and doing so at a high level. That is exactly what I will discuss with broadcasters in the new year.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Women's Twenty20 cricket is a fantastic spectator and TV sport. May we have it in the Commonwealth games?

Jeremy Wright: We will certainly consider that. I am grateful for my hon. Friend's advocacy for the game. He is right to say that women's cricket is starting to take off, and he will know that recently, viewing figures for women's cricket have increased substantially. It is important that the Commonwealth games showcases in the United Kingdom—and more specifically, he would want me to say, in the west midlands—all such sports in any way we can. He will recognise that decisions on which sports are included are not solely—or indeed at all—a matter for the Government, but I understand his point of view.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My constituent, Amy Tinkler, won an Olympic medal for gymnastics. How can the Secretary of State increase coverage of women's gymnastics to celebrate our success and inspire the next generation of girls?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I congratulate her constituent. It is important that in gymnastics, as in many other sports, we demonstrate to girls and women that they can participate at a high level, and they should be granted equal coverage and respect for what they do. Broadly speaking that happens in the Olympics, the Commonwealth games and elsewhere, but as I have said, I shall ask broadcasters and sports representative bodies what more we can do to increase the prominence of women's sport.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is notable that there are no women's team sports on the list of protected events that must be offered live to free-to-air TV? Should not events such as the women's World cup, which is on the BBC next year, be protected so that the whole nation can watch women's World cups in the future?

Jeremy Wright: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, and as he says, the protected list is designed to ensure that people have access on free-to-air television to these important sporting events. As he pointed out, that is already the case for the next women's World cup, but we must keep such matters under review, and ensure that if there is a risk that big sporting events will not be covered in that way, we do something about it.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), to her place. She has big shoes to fill, but I am sure she will do the job well. I am pleased to hear the Secretary of State's positive comments, but only 7% of sports media coverage is of women's sport, which I am sure he will agree is a disgraceful statistic. Will he meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) to discuss what more can be done to get perhaps 50-50 sports coverage for women's sport by 2020?

Jeremy Wright: I am happy to meet the hon. Lady, and I share that ambition, as do many broadcasters. Let us take the BBC as a good example. She will know that the BBC has committed to broadcasting 500 extra hours of sport next year, 50% of which will be women's sport. It is important to recognise that progress is being made, but there is further to go and I am happy to discuss with her what we can do.

Free Television Licences

8. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the BBC on the future of free TV licences for people over the age of 75. [908178]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I meet the BBC regularly to discuss a range of issues, including the licence fee concession for the over-75s. The BBC has published a consultation that includes a range of options for the public to consider on the future of that concession, and we expect it to make a decision by June next year. I have made it clear that we expect the BBC to continue the concession after 2020.

Diana Johnson: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer, because that popular initiative was introduced by the Labour Government in 2000, in recognition of the fact that that TV is a lifeline for many elderly people, and to give them something back for their contribution to this country. Does the consultation so far indicate that the cost of administering a new system that might include means-testing would far outweigh the savings that the BBC seeks to make?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady makes a fair point about means-testing, and whenever means-testing is proposed, that consideration must be accounted for. The right approach is to allow all those who wish to do so to comment on those consultation options, and for the BBC properly to consider them and decide what to do next. That is now its responsibility. The Government's expectation is clear as, I suspect, is that of many Members across the House.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, this will probably be the only chance I get to wish you, your family and the staff of the House a happy Christmas. We are very grateful for the work you have done for us this year. Thank you. I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), to her new position. I am sure she will fill the big shoes.

The Campaign to End Loneliness found that four in 10 older people say that television is their main company. That is a sad Christmas story indeed. Is the Secretary of State aware of how many older people in his constituency are set to lose their free TV licence if the provision becomes linked to pension credit?

Jeremy Wright: It will not be my last opportunity to wish you a happy Christmas, Mr Speaker. I will get to that later.

I am sure the hon. Gentleman is about to tell me the answer to the question he has just asked, which of course supposes a certain outcome to the consultation and the decision-making process at the BBC. I do not think we should make that supposition. It is right for the BBC to consider its options. It is now its responsibility to decide what to do on this matter. It is right for it to consider its options and then propose what it wishes to do. We will all have the opportunity to contribute to that discussion. I know he will do so, and I will too.

Tom Watson: As the Secretary of State does not know the answer I will tell him, because I think he needs to know: 6,060 households in his area could lose their free TV licence if it is means-tested. Many thousands of people in Kenilworth will lose their TV licence despite a Tory manifesto, on which the Minister stood for election, promising that a Tory Government would maintain all pensioner benefits, including free TV licences for everyone over 75. The Government may have devolved welfare cuts to the BBC, but the Secretary of State will not be able to devolve responsibility for this impending policy disaster. Will he now admit, on the record to this House, that the Government have broken a manifesto pledge and he has broken his promise to all those people in his constituency?

Jeremy Wright: No, of course not, because that has not happened. Let me just say again to the right hon. Gentleman that he is posing a hypothetical situation. It has not happened. It is important that the BBC gets the chance to consider the right way forward. All that he says about the importance of television to those who are elderly, particularly those who are lonely, is quite right, but no decision has been made yet. It is right to give the BBC the space in which to make it. That is the right way forward.

Tourism

9. **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support tourism throughout the UK. [908179]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Tourism is an incredibly important part of the UK's economy, generating approximately £68 billion and employing over 1.5 million people. Visit Britain and the GREAT campaign, backed by Government support, continue to successfully promote the UK internationally. The House will know that the Government will now take forward into formal negotiations a tourism sector deal which will benefit tourism across the country. That is the result of a good deal of hard work by people across the tourism sector and, if may I say so, others including my hon. Friend the tourism Minister.

Helen Whately: Some of my constituents have bought park homes only to find that they are actually leisure home owners, with very few rights against their landlords who charge extortionate fees and rent rises. I have heard that the mis-selling of leisure homes and the abuse of tenants is happening across the country. Will my right hon. Friend look into this matter and take action to ensure that leisure home owners are not subject to the whims of rogue landlords?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important matter. It is vital that anyone engaging in such transactions does so in full possession of the information they need and understands the consequences of their decisions. No one should be taken advantage of in this way. She will understand that this is a matter predominantly for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which has policy responsibility in this area, but I will certainly discuss it with colleagues there. We will see what more we can do.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The 2018 Leicestershire Promotions tourism and hospitality awards were held at the end of November. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the almost 800-year-old Loughborough fair, which won the best free event category? Perhaps next November, rather than joining the rollercoaster here, he would like to join the rollercoaster in Loughborough.

Jeremy Wright: That sounds a lot more fun. I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend and congratulate all those involved in the event that she mentions. As she suggests, the importance of what we are doing on tourism, and I hope that this will be reflected in the sector deal, is that tourism can be a hugely successful career—not just a summer job or short-term employment, but a career, and a satisfying one at that. It is important that we make that position clear to all those who seek to enter the workforce, so that we have a high-quality workforce offering a superb tourism product to a large number of people around the world.

Political Coverage: Broadcasting

10. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with broadcasters on the provision of balanced political coverage. [908180]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The regulation of broadcasters' political coverage is a matter for Ofcom, the independent media regulator. Any televised material is subject to the provisions of Ofcom's broadcasting code and Ofcom has strong rules in place to ensure the impartiality and accuracy of political coverage.

John Mc Nally: I thank the Minister for that answer. Many of my Falkirk constituents complained to me that the now doomed Brexit debate would have placed two leaders in a head-to-head format, with no input from any of the devolved Administrations. At a time when politicians often complain that the public are not getting the full, balanced picture, does the Minister really believe that this helps to dispel or remove that belief?

Margot James: The debate that the hon. Gentleman referred to did not happen, but it was going to be just between the two main parties—that is true. With regard to Scotland, the BBC will be launching its Scotland channel next year to improve the coverage of Scottish life and Scottish affairs. As regards impartiality, the code will guarantee impartiality across the United Kingdom.

Topical Questions

T1. [908189] **Gillian Keegan** (Chichester) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): As advertised, Mr Speaker, may I wish you, and indeed, all Members of the House and all the staff of the House, a very merry Christmas and a happy new year?

Last month, we saw a poignant programme of events to commemorate the centenary of the world war one armistice, at the end of four years of moving moments

of remembrance. I thank again all those who were involved in the organisation of that programme, including officials in my Department and several Members of the House, including—if I may single him out—my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), who played a pivotal role.

I am also pleased to announce today that Black Cultural Archives, the UK's largest archives dedicated to the history of black people in Britain, will be given a £200,000 cash boost by my Department to help to secure its immediate future. We are continuing to work with the archives, Lambeth Council and others to ensure that there is a sustainable long-term funding strategy to enable its work to continue.

Finally, on behalf, I am sure, of the whole House, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate David Dimbleby on his last appearance chairing BBC's "Question Time" tonight and on his 24 years of service to the programme, and to offer our best wishes to the incoming chair, Fiona Bruce, who is, of course, the first female chair in the programme's history.

Gillian Keegan: Growers and farmers in Chichester are very high-tech—we have cows wearing collars that upload real-time health data, and computer-controlled hydroponics—but all that requires high-speed connectivity, and many businesses are now taking a hit. A business recently told me that it had invested £16,000 in connectivity improvements. What is my right hon. and learned Friend doing to improve access to superfast broadband for rural businesses?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend raises an important point and a matter of concern to many of us. She will know that in relation to the existing superfast programme, there is further to go, and some of that additional benefit can be delivered in rural areas. She will also know that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has allocated £75 million of grant funding from the rural development programme for England for these purposes. She may also be aware that in relation to further technology, we will seek to test out what can be done in rural areas with a test bed and develop 5G technology, which can deliver further benefits, particularly to agriculture.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I add my congratulations to the new Minister for Sport and welcome her to her place. I look forward to working with her.

Moments of sporting history were made during the London Olympics, with billions of pounds invested in what was meant to be an everlasting legacy. Since 2016, 800 grass pitches have been sold off, 100 swimming pools have been drained, a dozen athletics tracks have been closed, and 350 sports halls have been shut. The Olympic legacy is in tatters and it is fuelling our country's obesity crisis. We need urgent change, so can the new Minister confirm how many new sporting facilities will be opened in 2019?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I very much welcome my welcome to the Dispatch Box. I will have to write to the hon. Lady about her question, but I dispute the premise that London 2012 is not delivering

a legacy. My Eastleigh games has been going since 2012. You can try out boccia and rugby, and get involved in all sorts of different sports. As a local councillor, I set up a staggered marathon, which is still going on and bringing people into running.

Some of the legacy projects, particularly those in the park, will not finish their benefits until 2020, so the inspirational power of London 2012 continues. We also have the stadium. The legacy of 2012 is there in the fact that so many sporting events are coming to our shores. We are leading in this area, and are perhaps looking at having the Ryder cup going forward. I understand the concern around grassroots and we will look at the new sporting strategy next year—we are three years on. It is absolutely right to question London 2012, but its legacy is there in many constituencies.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Minister meant “one” rather than “you”.

T4. [908193] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What importance does the Minister for Digital and Creative Industries attach to ensuring the digital security and integrity of elections by protecting secret ballots from digital or photographic interference?

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): I think I know what has driven my hon. Friend’s question. I should like to take this opportunity if I may to apologise to the chairman of the 1922 committee. He apparently issued a rule about last night’s election, news of which did not reach me. It appears that I may have been in breach. I apologise to my hon. Friend if that is the case.

T2. [908190] **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): Team Scotland, the national dance and cheerleading team, will participate in the 2019 international cheerleading world championships in Florida. More than 100 athletes from across Scotland will travel to Orlando—some travel from as far away as Stornoway to participate in training sessions. A future foundation is being built to participate in the Olympic games, in which the sport has been fully recognised. Will the Secretary of State join me in the fundraising attempt to keep costs minimal and be inclusive? Will he also join me in wishing them and other nations well in next year’s championships?

Jeremy Wright: I will certainly join the hon. Gentleman in wishing the teams well, and congratulate them on reaching this point. The fundraising question was an ingenious budget bid, but not one that I should answer now.

T6. [908195] **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Residents in my constituency who live in Gustard Wood near the village of Wheathampstead have continually complained to me about the lack of mobile and broadband access. What can the Minister say from the Dispatch Box that I can take back to them to let them know that this problem will improve very soon?

Margot James: I assure my hon. Friend that many measures are being taken. The forthcoming universal service obligation should ensure that households that have a speed below 2 megabits per second have the right to request high-speed broadband of at least 10 megabits

per second. That will come into effect in 2020. There is more to be done through Broadband Delivery UK—there are numerous voucher schemes. If my hon. Friend wants further information, I am happy to meet him to discuss the options available to him.

T3. [908191] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Scotland’s land mass is two thirds the size of England’s, and Scotland clearly has many more islands. What needs analysis was carried out that resulted in Scotland’s receiving a fifth of England’s broadband budget?

Margot James: I am not aware of the report to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but I am aware that the UK and Scottish Governments are working together to bring about better speeds and access to superfast broadband, which is already at 93.5% in Scotland.

T7. [908196] **Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): Soft power is one of the golden assets that this country possesses, but it is not nearly well enough co-ordinated; indeed, it is badly co-ordinated. This should be done better. Will my hon. Friend consider what steps his Department could take to ensure that co-ordination is greatly improved?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Britain is rated No. 1 in the world for soft power, and my right hon. Friend is absolutely right about its importance. Our Department works very closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in this regard. We have a large number of bilateral seasons of culture with other countries, we promote UK culture globally through the GREAT campaign, which is an extremely successful marketing campaign—one of the most successful in the world—and, of course, we visit countries on a cultural basis. For instance, I was in Rome recently, and I have also visited the United Arab Emirates. A great deal goes on.

T5. [908194] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): Will the Government give football fans an early Christmas present by announcing their intention to sanction the introduction of safe standing at stadiums next season?

Mims Davies: I have already met representatives of the Sports Ground Safety Authority, and a small analysis is currently under way. This is a hot topic on my desk, and I will make further announcements in January. In respect of sports ground safety more broadly, I have asked the authority to work with those in charge of the Qatar 2022 World cup to ensure that travelling fans also have a safe experience.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked— **Contempt of Court**

1. **Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effectiveness of contempt of court proceedings. [908197]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The institution of court proceedings for contempt is by me in relation to each case on its own merits. I institute proceedings when there is sufficient evidence, and when I, as guardian of the public interest, decide that it is in the public interest to do so.

Lyn Brown: Contempt of court proceedings are very important to ensuring fair trials and the rule of law. Contempt of Parliament proceedings have been crucial in enabling the House to have the information to which it was entitled. Is the Attorney General not ashamed that his Ministers were found to be in contempt?

The Attorney General: It is always a serious matter for any Minister to find himself at odds with the House, particularly over an important question of constitutional principle. On reflection, and the opinion of the House having been tested twice, the Government took the decision to disclose the advice, but I must stress to the hon. Lady that successive Governments have defended that principle robustly. I have a list of very eloquent articulations of it by Opposition Members who have defended it against demands for the disclosure of confidential advice. It is an important principle, and I hope that the House will look again at the procedures relating to the motion for a return.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I perhaps return to the question? [*Interruption.*] Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that there is a real need to revisit the standard directions that judges give to juries in relation to the use of social media? Generally judges are well alert to the issue, but, as we know, there have been instances in which convictions have had to be set aside because juries have, in effect, researched the case outside the jury room using social media.

Mr Speaker: Order. For the avoidance of doubt, the previous exchanges were entirely orderly, and I would have ruled otherwise if they were not. That is the position, which, frankly, the Solicitor General ought to take to heart, and upon which he might usefully reflect. I will be the arbiter of what is orderly, not the hon. and learned Gentleman.

The Attorney General: The impact of social media on the integrity and fairness of the trial process is obviously of considerable importance, and we do need to grapple with it. As my hon. Friend knows, we have a call for evidence on social media, and I am currently studying the responses to it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): On the subject of contempt, the Attorney General was meant to disclose the full and final legal advice on the withdrawal agreement. What was actually disclosed was a letter to the Prime Minister dated 13 November exclusively on the legal effect of the protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland. Is the Attorney General seriously saying he did not advise on the remainder of the withdrawal agreement?

The Attorney General: As the hon. Gentleman knows, his party colleague the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) refined and defined the request, which was for the final and full advice that was given to the Cabinet, and that is what he has had.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The letter refers simply to the legal effect of the protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, but let me then ask the Attorney General this: the Prime Minister said last night on the steps of Downing Street that she is seeking “legal and political changes” to the withdrawal agreement and the backstop,

so as a matter of honour if nothing else, if the Attorney General advises on any changes or additions that the Prime Minister brings back, will he disclose that advice to this House?

The Attorney General: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the principle of the convention applies and must be upheld. Of course the Government will consider very carefully, particularly in the light of the House’s expressed wish for assistance on these matters, what assistance they and I as Attorney General can give.

Legal Advice: Public Disclosure

2. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): When his Department’s policy on public disclosure of legal advice given by Law Officers to the Government was implemented. [908198]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): As noted in “Erskine May”, it is a long-standing convention observed by successive Governments that neither the fact nor the substance of Law Officers’ advice is disclosed outside the Government without their authority. That authority is very rarely sought or given.

Michael Fabricant: Given that recent decisions of the House might mean a return to Tony Blair-style sofa Government, does my right hon. and learned Friend think the Humble Address procedure needs revisiting?

The Attorney General: Of course, the corrosive effect of the disclosure of confidential advice is that in future Attorneys General will not be able, without risking and fearing its publication, to give frank and robust advice to the Cabinet or the Prime Minister when it is needed, with the point and emphasis that might be needed at that particular time. The risk if it is published is that it is taken out of context, parts of it are seized and plucked and dwelt upon, and the particular moment and context of the advice is ignored. I do think we need to look very carefully at the procedures of the House in this regard while paying due respect to the legitimate desire of the House to have all of the information that it requires.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I think we all understand what the Attorney General’s preferences are in this matter. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), he said that the advice in his letter to the Prime Minister was full and final. It is credible that it is the final legal advice, but it is not credible that it is the full legal advice. Is that seriously what the Attorney General wants us to believe?

The Attorney General: The request of the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) was for the final and full advice. As I understand it—I read what he said in *Hansard*—he requested all the final advice. In other words, he requested that it should not be summarised, and it was not. The House had all the final advice given to the Cabinet.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Attorney General further outline when the legal opinion on changes to the withdrawal agreement sought by the Prime Minister will be released, to clarify any change in his legal advice?

The Attorney General: As I have just said, I will of course consider what assistance the House might require. Indeed, I shall listen carefully to the House on any changes that are introduced to the withdrawal agreement and on what the Government should do about publishing legal opinion on it.

Leaving the EU: Human Rights

3. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the protection of human rights. [908200]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The United Kingdom has a long tradition of ensuring that rights and liberties are protected domestically, and of fulfilling its international human rights obligations. The decision to leave the European Union does not change this.

Deidre Brock: I am proud to say that the Scottish Government announced plans this week to introduce a new statutory human rights framework across Scotland. That will help to ensure that Brexit does not lead to an erosion of human rights in Scotland, while enshrining rights already included in the United Nations treaties. Will the Attorney General join me in welcoming this progressive step? Will he also confirm what measures he will be recommending to his own Cabinet colleagues to ensure that human rights are protected in the event of Brexit?

The Attorney General: I am always interested to see the measures that are being introduced in the Scottish legal system, because Scotland has a sophisticated and highly effective administration of justice for which I have the greatest respect. Indeed, we can learn a good deal from Scotland in that regard; the same applies to both traditions on both sides of the border. In England and Wales, we are fully committed to the human rights framework of the European convention on human rights, and we have a proud common law tradition of defending those rights. I would expect that common law tradition to continue to evolve, and I would expect that the courts of this country, freed from the European Union, will start to develop their own jurisprudence, making even more effective the protection of those rights. However, I will look at what the hon. Lady has spoken of today with the greatest interest.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): In the hurly-burly of the Brexit debate, there are a number of things to be concerned about. However, this country is very much the creator, cherisher and nurturer of human rights, and we have a proud record in that area both domestically and in leading on the international stage. Does my right hon. and learned Friend therefore agree that this is one area of public policy that Brexit should not create any anxiety about?

The Attorney General: I quite agree with my hon. Friend. This country was at the forefront of the development of civil liberties and human rights. We have a robust, fiercely independent judiciary, and we have an effective legal profession on which the vindication of those rights often depends. We should be very proud indeed of the tradition that we have inherited.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Human Rights Act 1998 is one of Labour's proudest achievements in government, and we will fight to protect the rights and protections that it affords. I noticed that the Attorney General did not mention that in his answer to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). Will he join us in making a commitment to preserving the Human Rights Act?

The Attorney General: It would be unwise for me to think that any Act of Parliament could not benefit from review and subsequent improvement as time goes on, but I can assure the hon. Lady that this Government—and, I am sure, successive Governments—will be wedded to both the rule of law and human rights in this country.

Article 50: European Court of Justice Decision

4. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What implications the decision by the European Court of Justice on the revocability of article 50 has for his legal advice to the Government. [908202]

9. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What implications the decision by the European Court of Justice on the revocability of article 50 has for his legal advice to the Government. [908207]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The decision of the European Court of Justice clarifies a question of EU law, and it does not in any way change the Government's policy. The Government's firm and long-standing policy is that we will not revoke the article 50 notice. The position has not changed and, as is well known, the case will now revert to the Scottish courts for the final decision.

Martyn Day: Will the Attorney General take this opportunity to confirm that he advised the Prime Minister that the ECJ's ruling means that voting against her deal does not automatically mean a no-deal Brexit, and that revoking the article 50 notice and remaining in the EU under current terms and conditions is a third option?

The Attorney General: The Government's policy is that we do not intend to revoke article 50. We intend to leave the European Union on 29 March, and the fact or otherwise of the irrevocability of article 50 is wholly irrelevant to that question. The truth, however, is that the giving of notice under article 50 would not just be an easy matter of pressing a button and the revocation taking effect.

Alison Thewliss: Does the Attorney General believe that legislation would be required to revoke the article 50 notice, or could it be done by a simple vote in this House?

The Attorney General: That matter is under review. Let me say clearly that the question of what legal route would be required to trigger the process has not been considered at any length because there is no intention of doing so.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Government fought this case tooth and nail through the Scottish courts and in Luxembourg. Will the Attorney

General tell us why the Government were so desperate to prevent Members of Parliament and the public from knowing that article 50 could be unilaterally revoked and that we could stay in the European Union on the same terms and conditions that we currently enjoy? Will he also answer a question that Cabinet Ministers have so far failed to answer? How much taxpayers' money was spent trying to keep this House and the public in the dark?

The Attorney General: As the hon. and learned Lady knows, the Government's position throughout was that the case involved a hypothetical question. It does raise an important matter of constitutional principle as to whether courts should be able to be seized of issues under live debate in Parliament, when Parliament does not ask for an opinion, simply in order to inform debate. The Government took the view that the matter was hypothetical—we still do—but the truth of the matter is that the ECJ has ruled and we are where we are.

Economic Crime

5. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What support he is providing to the (a) Crown Prosecution Service and (b) Serious Fraud Office to tackle economic crime. [908203]

6. **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): What support he is providing to the (a) Crown Prosecution Service and (b) Serious Fraud Office to tackle economic crime. [908204]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Government are committed to tackling economic crime, and we know that that requires a multi-agency response. That is why both the SFO and the CPS play their parts alongside others, including through their support for the new multi-agency National Economic Crime Centre.

Jack Brereton: What assessment has been made of the UK's ability to tackle money laundering?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue, and I was glad to see the recent financial action taskforce report, which reflected substantial progress and referred to the world-leading role that the UK plays in the fight against illicit finance, particularly the risk of money laundering.

Rebecca Pow: Nothing annoys the constituents of Taunton Deane more than people getting away with things they should not, so will my hon. and learned Friend outline some further detail on how we are cracking down on money laundering? It is a priority, and the Government have promised to tackle it.

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend will be glad to note the introduction of unexplained wealth orders following the Criminal Finances Act 2017. That is already sending a clear message to those who seek to use the UK to wash their illegal proceeds that we will track them down, ask the right questions and conduct confiscations. Using Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 powers, the Government have recovered more criminal assets than ever before, with £1.6 billion taken from wrongdoers between April 2010 and March 2018.

Crown Prosecution Service: Performance

7. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What comparative assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the CPS's recent prosecution performance in (a) Northamptonshire and (b) England. [908205]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): CPS performance in Northamptonshire is above the national rate in several areas. The latest figures for the first quarter of 2018-19 show that the conviction rate for Northamptonshire magistrates courts was 85.7%, which is above the national rate of 84.8%. Figures also show lower hearing numbers per guilty plea case than the national rate, which reflects the fact that the CPS is putting cases together efficiently.

Mr Hollobone: I thank the Crown Prosecution Service for its work in Northamptonshire. Which aspects of its work does the Solicitor General think are in most need of improvement?

The Solicitor General: The CPS in Northamptonshire and the east midlands, like in all other regions, acknowledges that it should never rest on any laurels it might gather. I urge my hon. Friend to meet the chief Crown prosecutors and staff to focus on particular areas where he thinks the CPS in Northamptonshire and the east midlands needs to make progress. Recent quarterly and monthly figures show that in many areas, such as burglary, it has been above average, but I am sure it would welcome his constructive input.

Corrosive Substances: Prosecutions

8. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the CPS in prosecuting crimes involving corrosive substances. [908206]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Corrosive substance attacks are unacceptable. There is no place in society for these horrendous crimes. Last month, the CPS successfully secured the conviction of nine men for carrying out a violent attack in which a corrosive substance was squirted at bystanders who tried to stop an assault in the street.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What account is taken of gangs in this context?

The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend is right to raise the sad connection with gang offending. Sadly, corrosive substances are sometimes used as weapons by gangs in retribution and as a means of enforcement. The CPS guidance identifies that phenomenon and encourages prosecutors to apply for criminal behaviour orders to prevent such gang-related offending.

Royal Albert Hall

10. **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): If he will support the Charity Commission's request to refer the Royal Albert Hall to the charity tribunal. [908208]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Earlier this year, the Charity Commission wrote to the former Attorney General requesting consent to refer five questions to the first-tier tribunal concerning the registered charity that runs the Royal Albert Hall. Although the Charity Commission has the power to refer questions to the tribunal, it may only do so with the consent of the Attorney General, as set out in section 325 of the Charities Act 2011.

Mrs Hodgson: The Attorney General promised that he would make a decision on this matter by the end of the autumn. I am sure we are now in winter, so that decision is overdue. The majority of the Royal Albert Hall's ruling body own a quarter of all the seats. Those seats

are valued at up to £25 million, and they are allowed to sell tickets for the seats on the secondary market, making huge profits. Does the Attorney General not consider that a conflict of interest, and will he allow the Charity Commission to refer it to the tribunal?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady has identified the core of the concern in this case. Before assessing whether I or the Attorney General should consent to the Charity Commission's request, we invited both the corporation of the Royal Albert Hall and the Charity Commission to make further representations. We have received those representations, and we are in the process of considering them with a view to issuing a decision in due course.

Business of the House

10.37 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 17 DECEMBER—My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will make a statement, followed by a motion to approve the draft Online Pornography (Commercial Basis) Regulations 2018, followed by a motion to approve the draft guidance on age-verification arrangements 2018, followed by a motion to approve the draft guidance on ancillary service providers 2018.

TUESDAY 18 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 19 DECEMBER—Debate on a motion on disability benefit, followed by debate on a motion on mental health first aid. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

THURSDAY 20 DECEMBER—Debate on a motion on Rohingya. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 21 DECEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Are you sure?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure the House will not be sitting. The House decided.

The whole House will want to join me in thanking the police for their swift action following the incident in New Palace Yard earlier this week. We are enormously grateful for the work our police and security officers do to keep us all safe.

I am pleased to be able to spread some festive cheer to the House this morning, as the new edition of “Erskine May”, which is due to be published in 2019, will be publicly available on Parliament’s website, as well as on Parliament’s intranet and in hard copy, as normal. The first edition was published in the mid-19th century and new editions are published approximately every six or seven years, but this will be the first one publicly available online.

Finally, I encourage all hon. Members to visit the 209 Women exhibition on the first floor of Portcullis House, which begins tomorrow and will run until 14 February. It is being unveiled in time for the centenary of some women voting for the first time. I will be heading to the launch later to see the 209 photographs of female MPs, photographed by female photographers and curated by women. It is a fantastic way to round off the Vote 100 year.

Mr Speaker: It is very useful to have the fact of the prospective publication on the Parliament website of “Erskine May” advertised more widely, but there is nothing by way of news about it; I agreed to it, in consultation with Clerks, several months ago. It is very good that it is happening but there is absolutely nothing new about the fact of it.

Valerie Vaz: I agree with you about “Erskine May”, Mr Speaker; the public will now be able to see what the Government are up to, so that is good. May I also acknowledge that the House has a female photographer, Jessica Taylor, who is absolutely marvellous? She does us all proud, because we all look better in her photographs, for some reason.

I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business for next week. I do not know whether I heard her properly, but has she given us all the business for next week? I did not hear when the debate on the meaningful vote will resume. Obviously, it is not listed for next week, so when will it come back? Each week we stand here and we trust what the Leader of the House says and we trust the agreements we make. How can we continue to trust this Government? Their mantra is, “Nothing is agreed until it is agreed”, but it should now be, “Nothing is agreed ever.” Even now, the Prime Minister, having made an agreement with the EU, is saying that she will go back and find another way. The Government spent money, and Ministers spread out around the country, but the people they had to convince were here in Parliament. What did the Government do? They did not listen to Parliament—in fact, they told Parliament to shut up. The Leader of the House said this was “Parliamentary pantomime”, but it is not. The Opposition have used settled rules of Parliament to hold the Government to account. At each stage of this process, we have had to drag Ministers back to the Dispatch Box to give us financial information and other impact information on what is happening.

The Government have ridden roughshod over the democratic rights of Members. Mr Speaker, you sat through all the contributions and on one of the days we were here until 1.30 am. Hon. Members were here until then. Time limits were applied, showing that hon. Members had to be curtailed in their speeches. One hundred and sixty-four hon. Members were heard, and almost the same amount of other hon. Members had written their speeches and their contributions were stymied. The Leader of the House must say when they will be given the chance to make their case. Will the debate be resuming or will we have a debate on a new deal—which is it? The Prime Minister cannot amend the agreement, so it is, in effect, just an explanatory note, is it not? Can the Leader of the House clarify whether it will be an addendum or an explanatory note?

The Leader of the House said on Monday, and other Ministers have said this, that we will have our meaningful vote “soon”, “shortly” and “before 21 January”. She said five times on Monday that she is Parliament’s voice in government. Parliament spoke with the vote on the emergency debate on the cancellation of the vote—the vote was won by 299 to zero, which is more resounding than 200 to 117. So on Monday will she make a business statement to say when the meaningful vote will come back before Parliament?

We have had a number of statutory instruments given in the business for next week. I note that the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has said that she will look at the draft Universal Credit (Managed Migration) Regulations 2018. Can the Leader of the House confirm that those regulations have now been withdrawn? We will also have the Draft Markets in Financial Instruments (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018 to consider. That statutory instrument is one of a

large volume of items of secondary legislation. It sets up a functioning regulatory framework if the UK leaves the European Union without a deal. The size and scope of that SI are completely different. Because of the volume of potential legislative changes, the Treasury has set out a Keeling schedule, and it spent time and money setting out that schedule. As the Government are going to all that effort, will the Leader of the House please confirm that we will debate those regulations on the Floor of the House?

I note that a written statement on immigration is to be published today. So far, it has been impossible to access it; is it the immigration White Paper?

While the Government have been distracted in Committee Room 14, local councils have been waiting to set their budgets. I know that you get upset by points of order, Mr Speaker—or perhaps you do not; perhaps you like them—but my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) made one yesterday on the local government settlement, so I am pleased that there will be a statement on it later. I am also pleased that there will be a statement on the police settlement. I, too, offer my thanks to the police officers who contained the incident on Tuesday, and who keep us safe every day.

Yesterday, at Prime Minister's Question Time, the Prime Minister said that the Government are establishing a 10-year plan for the sustainability of the NHS. Where is it? The plan was promised in September, then in autumn, and then in early December, but still there is nothing. Will the Leader of the House say when it will be published?

The Government are running away from their responsibilities and leaving the country in a mess—so much so that the Prime Minister has said that she will not be around at the next election to be held accountable for her policies so far. There is something to celebrate, though: the tax on visiting Wales has ended, because the Severn bridge toll will end on Monday.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) for all her charitable work on the carol service—it all seemed to get lost on Tuesday. She has raised an enormous amount of money already, but is encouraging us to organise carol concerts so that we can all contribute and add to her charitable work. We have to hurry, though, because we have only 12 days till Christmas.

Andrea Leadsom: I am certainly grateful to the hon. Lady for mentioning the lovely concert that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) arranged in St Margaret's church. It was really wonderful, and we were treated to the rather amazing singing voice of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince)—who knew? It was a very enjoyable experience and was for a fantastic cause. We heard some extraordinary and heart-wrenching stories about the current plight of Syrians, so it was incredibly important.

The hon. Lady asked when the meaningful vote will come back to the House. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said on Tuesday, the Government will bring the debate and vote back to the House by 21 January at the latest.

The hon. Lady asked about the Prime Minister. She will understand that the Prime Minister came to the House to make a statement to say precisely that it is

because she is listening to the debate in this House that she is going back to the EU, because she recognises that hon. Members require not only reassurances but legally binding reassurance that we cannot be trapped in a backstop permanently. That is what the Prime Minister is seeking. Hon. Members should rest assured that the Prime Minister is very much seeking to address the concerns expressed by the House.

The hon. Lady asked about statutory instruments. She will be aware that it is a matter of parliamentary convention that, if a reasonable request for a debate has been made, time is allowed for that debate. We have demonstrated during this Session that the Government have been willing to provide time, in line with the convention to accede with reasonable Opposition requests. I know that the Opposition would like to debate a number of statutory instruments on the Floor of the House, and we are looking at them carefully.

The hon. Lady asked about the immigration White Paper. I assure her that it will be published next week, before Christmas, shortly followed by the immigration Bill itself.

The hon. Lady asked where the NHS 10-year plan is. It is being drawn up by the NHS itself. The Government have provided the biggest ever investment in our NHS, and we are very proud to be doing that. It will transform services for all patients right across the country.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Will the Leader of the House please arrange for a Minister to make a statement next week on the preparations for leaving the EU without a deal, on World Trade Organisation terms? Perhaps she will arrange for such a statement to be made every week until we leave. No-deal preparedness is vital for the UK. So far, the Government have been shy in setting out what they have been doing.

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend as someone who has worked very hard in Cabinet to make sure that we are doing absolutely everything we need to do to plan for every outcome. I sit on the sub-committee that is looking at day one readiness in all circumstances, and I can assure her that the Government's preparations for no deal are well advanced, and that the Government will come forward with further information as soon as it is necessary to do so. However, to be very clear, the Government do not intend to have no deal with the European Union. We intend to have a withdrawal agreement that this House can support.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week.

Well, it is the morning after the night before, and, as the hangovers start to kick in, they will all be asking themselves, "What on earth did we get up to last night?". As they survey the wreckage of the night of mayhem, we now find that we have a Prime Minister who has the confidence of only 200 Members of this House. She is a lame duck Prime Minister who would give waterfowl with walking sticks a bad name. A third of her party do not want her to lead them. Her credibility is in shatters and her ability to lead gone forever.

The main item of business next week should be a motion of no confidence in this rotten, divided Government. They are there for the taking, divided, wounded and

[Pete Wishart]

unable to govern, and I have no idea what the Labour party is waiting for. We could be shot of them pretty soon, so if Labour is not going to put in a motion of no confidence in this Government, it will be left to the other opposition parties of this House to do so.

History will judge the decision to cancel Tuesday's meaningful vote as probably the single biggest act of political cowardice this House has ever witnessed, particularly when the Leader of the House said to me definitively last week that under no conditions would the vote be withdrawn. If we look at the diary, we can see that there are only two weeks left to have that meaningful vote when we return in the new year, if it is not the Government's intention to bring it forward next week. It cannot be the last week—the week leading up to the 21st—so that leaves the week that we return. I want the Leader of the House to come to that Dispatch Box and say that we will have this vote in that week.

Finally, we need an urgent statement about the decision of the Supreme Court to uphold the Scottish Government's view that the continuity Bill is indeed within devolved powers. This Government are now developing a habit of losing constitutional cases to Scottish interests. Hopefully, this will now mean the end of the power grab and the attacks on the democratic institutions of our democracy in Scotland, but looking at Members on the Government Benches, I very much doubt that.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for setting out the fact that those of us on the Government Benches do have confidence in the Prime Minister. Perhaps I can just set the scene for him: the Prime Minister won 63% of the vote, against 37% who did not support her, which means that she won that vote by a significant majority. In June 2016, this House decided to ask the people whether we should leave the EU or remain within it. A total of 52% said that we should leave, and 48% said that we should remain. That means that leave won, which is why we are leaving the EU—just for his information. He will recall that, in Scotland, there was a vote on whether Scotland should leave the United Kingdom, and 55% voted to stay in, 45% voted to leave. That means that a majority voted to stay in the United Kingdom. I hope that that explains to him what a democratic vote is all about. *[Interruption.]* I say to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), who is shouting from a sedentary position, that he will recall that his no confidence vote in his leader was 81% for no confidence, but the Leader of the Opposition is still there, so the Opposition party also does not understand what democracy is all about; at least we on this side of the House do. I say to all hon. Members, once again, that the Prime Minister did not call the vote on the meaningful vote because she had listened to the very clear concerns of hon. and right hon. Members, and has gone back to the European Union to seek to address those concerns.

The hon. Gentleman asks about a no confidence motion. This House has confidence in the Government. If the official Opposition dispute that the Government have the confidence of the House, it is for them to test it via a motion under the terms of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the stress and anxiety caused by scam telephone calls and emails? Wicked individuals try to extort money from the most vulnerable people in society—the elderly, the frail and the simply too trusting. Surely this House could do something to prevent that from continuing to happen.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important matter about which all Members are very concerned. The Government fully understand that nuisance calls are quite stressful, particularly for vulnerable people, and we have been clear that there is no place for nuisance calls or texts in our society. In March 2017, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport provided a £500,000 grant to the National Trading Standards scams team to run a project that would provide telephone call blocking technology, particularly to vulnerable people. We continue to work closely with industry regulators and consumer groups to try to find effective solutions to this concerning problem.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for telling us the forthcoming business, and for the cordial meeting and welcome mug of tea yesterday afternoon.

After the famine comes the feast. We are blessed with two days of Backbench Business debates next week. I would like to put the mind of the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) at ease; before we knew that we had been awarded time in the Chamber on Thursday, we had already determined that we would hold the three-hour pre-recess debate in Westminster Hall, so that debate will still go ahead in Westminster Hall.

The Backbench Business Committee had been starting to feel a bit surplus to requirements, and I was reluctantly considering making an application to an employment tribunal for constructive dismissal, but I am glad to say that that is no longer required.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for having a cup of tea with me yesterday, and for clearly setting out the needs and desires of many Backbench Members for particular debates. I am delighted that we have been able to accommodate some of them.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Funeral poverty blights our nation. That some of the poorest Britons cannot afford to give those they have cherished, and now for whom they grieve, a decent final farewell pains them and shames us. The bereavement fund was frozen a long time ago by a previous Government and is no longer fit for purpose, so will the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister to come here and give details as to how that fund can once again be made effective? Perhaps that Minister might also provide a reply to the letter written by me, the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and others, requesting details of when the children's funeral fund that was announced by the Prime Minister will actually begin to have effect. Each day's delay adds fear to the heartbreak already felt by those who have loved and lost.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue in the Chamber. If he would like to send me the details of his inquiry, I would be happy to take the matter up on his behalf.

Mr Speaker: I call Jess Phillips.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

“She’s so cute. So sweet. I can’t wait to beat her.”

“Can she take a beating?”

Those are not my words, but the words of the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) while barraging two of his female constituents with thousands of sexual text messages. Last night, the Leader of the House’s party gave him and the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) the Whip back without any due process. What message does this send about how any process in this place can ever be trusted? I ask the Leader of the House to answer that question and also to tell me what matters more—political power or tackling victims of sexual harassment and abuse?

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I ask the Leader of the House to answer that question, which is an entirely proper question, can I just say to the hon. Lady that I trust that she notified the two Members concerned?

Jess Phillips *indicated assent*.

Mr Speaker: She has done, and that is absolutely proper. Thank you.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will know that I am absolutely committed to changing the culture of this place and to seeing that everybody here is treated with dignity and respect. There has been a process that has been undertaken. It has been a decision by the Chief Whip. It is not something I have been privy to. But I absolutely assure all hon. and right hon. Members that the independent complaints procedure, which is not involved with any party political processes whatever, was established and designed to enable everybody who works in or visits this place to take any complaints that they have to an independent place for proper investigation and proper sanction to be applied.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On 15 March a private Member’s Bill in my name is scheduled; it would create a commission for a general election leaders’ debate. I know that on the first day back a Westminster Hall debate on this will take place because more than 100,000 signatures were provided to the Sky News petition. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Government intend to support my private Member’s Bill on 15 March—and, by the way, could we make it a sitting Friday?

Andrea Leadsom: I am always delighted to take up the requests of my hon. Friend and neighbour in Northamptonshire. He will be aware that I have tabled a motion to provide the House with an additional six sitting days—something that he was keen to see and that the Opposition sought to reduce to five. I do intend and wish to bring that back as soon as I possibly can. As to his request on whether the Government will support his private Member’s Bill, I actually do not know the answer to that yet, but I am very happy to meet him and discuss it.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Not all heroes wear capes—indeed, some of them wear aprons. I want to tell the House about David Jones, who has a butcher’s shop

in Earlsheaton in my constituency, and has offered to provide any families who are struggling at Christmas because of universal credit with some food in order to see them through. He says that what he has seen is cruel and barbaric, because, despite Government assurances, people are going into his shop who have nothing—they have no money and they are forced to rely on food banks. Could we have an urgent debate on this?

Can I also repeat my plea of last year for all Members and staff of this House to include in their “out of office” messages for constituents the numbers for the Samaritans and other helpful organisations? This can be a very, very difficult time of year for many people, who sometimes turn to their MP as a last resort, so can we at least signpost them towards help while we are away.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady makes a really good point. I am sure that most hon. Members have helpful numbers for constituents to call—I certainly do, and also an emergency number to get hold of me as their local MP. I absolutely pay tribute to her for raising that. It is a very good idea.

I would also like to thank David Jones for his efforts, and all those who give so generously to contribute to, or indeed run, food banks. It is a fantastic contribution by our communities to those who are vulnerable. The hon. Lady will appreciate that we are seeking to ensure that nobody has to wait to receive money under universal credit. There is now a new contract with Citizens Advice to deliver universal support to make sure that everybody who is applying for universal credit can do so easily. As the Government have said, we continue to look at this roll-out, which is why we are doing it very slowly, but nevertheless I think we are making progress. It will be a very significant improvement on the legacy benefits system.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): At the last Transport questions, I raised the vexed issue of Crossrail funding and did not get a very satisfactory answer. We have now heard that the Department for Transport is loaning the Mayor of London £1.3 billion, which has to be repaid, in addition to the £300 million provided in the summer. Worse still, this vital infrastructure project for London and the south-east has no opening date. Could we have a statement from the Secretary of State next week on what is happening and what controls will be imposed, so that the Mayor of London gets on and delivers this vital project?

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with my hon. Friend; that is a vital project. We have Transport questions on 10 January, and it would be appropriate to raise that then.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that managed migration to universal credit is due to start in July 2019. The proposed regulations state that if claimants fail to make their claim by the deadline plus an extra month’s grace period, they will lose entitlement to transitional protections, which will put vulnerable people at huge risk. May we have an urgent debate, so that we can further review that aspect of managed migration and ensure that the least well-off and the most vulnerable in society are protected from these changes?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the application process for universal credit is much simpler and it is designed to help people get into work and then keep more of their benefits as they increase their hours. Having listened carefully to views expressed in the House, we have increased advances to up to 100% of the first full monthly payment, scrapped the seven days' waiting, so that everybody can get their money on the same day, should that be necessary, and introduced a two-week overlap with housing benefit payments. Unfortunately, his party voted against those changes.

In the most recent Budget, we increased the amount that someone can earn before their universal credit is reduced, introduced a two-week overlap with various legacy benefits for a smoother transition and gave all self-employed people 12 months to get their business off the ground. That demonstrates a Government who are listening but, at the same time, are committed to rolling out a much better benefit than the ones it replaces.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Leader of the House knows that I voted against the Prime Minister last night, but I accept the result of the vote. The Prime Minister won fair and square, and she is therefore entitled to have my support to continue as leader. She will get my support to continue as leader, as I hope she will from all my right hon. and hon. Friends.

The Prime Minister has said that she is going to the EU to secure significant and supposedly game-changing amendments to the withdrawal agreement. Will the Leader of the House assure us that we will get a full debate when that agreement comes back and will not just continue with the debate as we left it? Given how over-subscribed that debate was, can she assure us that the debate will last longer than five days?

Andrea Leadsom: I thank my hon. Friend; his approach is exactly right. Even if he did not support the Prime Minister, she won by a clear majority, and it is right that he now supports her.

My hon. Friend asks what the guaranteed length of time for debate will be. He will appreciate that that decision depends on what the Prime Minister comes back with. She is seeking significant reassurances, so that she can bring back a withdrawal agreement that the House will support. It is not possible to set out the exact terms of resumption of the debate or, indeed, the terms of an entirely new debate until we see what the Prime Minister is able to bring back. We are certain that the debate and the vote will come back to the House by 21 January, and that time will be given for all Members to make a contribution to it.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents and the country are crying out for certainty. Will the Leader of the House commit to amend our recess time and have the House sit before Christmas and/or from 2 January, if necessary, so that we can rule out a reckless no-deal Brexit? We urgently need to stop the contingency plans for our NHS, other public services and businesses right across the country being triggered, because it will cost our country millions of pounds.

Andrea Leadsom: I fully understand the hon. Lady's concerns. She will understand that the legal position at present is that, in the event that there was no agreement

on our withdrawal and potentially the political declaration between now and the end of March 2019, the UK would leave the EU without a deal. It is right—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady is shouting back at me, but I hope she will hear me out. It is vital that any Government make preparations for all outcomes. That is the right thing to do, in the country's interests. It would be wrong of us to assume that a deal will be forthcoming and therefore to put down our preparations. We will continue to prepare for all outcomes, including no deal.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): MidKent College in my constituency has recently had a good Ofsted report. It has played its part—it is at the heart of the local community—in creating over 20,000 apprenticeships since 2010. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the college? May we have a debate on further education colleges and apprenticeships?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating his further education college. It is absolutely vital that more young people are able to develop the skills they need to get the well-paid jobs of the future. We are transforming technical education through T-levels, and we will be investing an extra £500 million a year once they are up and running. That will build on our apprenticeship programme, which is creating 3 million quality apprenticeships that will change the lives of young people, giving them the skills they need for the future.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): A constituent of mine was convinced to invest her life savings of £150,000—all of it has gone. When she threatened action against the PlusOption Trading company, it simply offered her a bonus payment to invest even more. It has ignored three letters from me. Further to the Leader of the House's answer to the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), may we have a Government statement on, and an investigation by the Financial Conduct Authority into, disgraceful companies such as that?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises what sounds like a very concerning case. I encourage her to write on behalf of her constituent directly to the FCA, which, as she will know, is independent of Government.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): A constituent has pointed out to me that the local government ombudsman will look only at cases that have a direct impact on a particular individual rather than taxpayers in general. He raised an issue about Staffordshire County Council, which I believe is very well run, but we need to have confidence in the decisions made in investigations by councils into their own activities. May we have a debate on setting up an independent arbiter or body that can look at the decisions made by county councils or other councils that are not subject to the local government ombudsman in order to give credibility to the decisions of local government?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue that I am sure many hon. Members will have found concerning broader criticisms of the way in which councils go about their business. I am very sympathetic to him, and

he may well want to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss with a Minister the specifics of Staffordshire's councils.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): This morning, I received a letter from the Minister for Immigration, thanking me for my email correspondence of 5 February about a previous letter of 22 December 2017. May we have a debate about incompetence in the Home Office? I was raising a very serious matter about the delay in granting indefinite leave to remain to Sri Lankans who have sought political asylum and the impact on their ability to contribute to the UK. It is absolutely and woefully inadequate that I have had to wait almost a year to get any kind of response from the Minister of State. Actually, the Minister of State has changed in that time, and the response is still inadequate.

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear of the hon. Lady's experience. She will recognise that correspondence units in each Department have turnaround times. That sounds like a very bad experience, so if she would like to send me the details, I will take it up with the Department on her behalf.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I am sure the Leader of the House will be as pleased as I am that Rugby is delivering new homes at three times the national rate—it currently has 17 sites for homebuyers to choose from—yet the Heart of England Co-op has chosen to push ahead with an application to develop a well-established recreation area at Oakfield, in a part of the town with limited facilities, against the wishes of the local community. May we therefore have a debate about the value of retaining open spaces so that young people can enjoy the great outdoors?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sympathetic to my hon. Friend; as constituency MPs we all have to find a balance between meeting housing needs and protecting the green and outdoor spaces around us. The national planning policy framework was updated in July, and it safeguards existing recreation areas unless there is clear evidence that the loss can be justified. As my hon. Friend knows, the planning system is locally led, so I hope that his planning authority has taken into consideration strongly held views about the recreation area in Oakfield.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Government have faced repeated calls from Labour Members to bring privatised probation services back under public control. Following the shocking news that the largest private provider of probation services, Interserve, needs a bail-out, it continues to be awarded Government contracts, so may we please have an urgent debate about the future of privatised probation services?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady takes a significant interest in this issue, so she will know that Justice questions are next Tuesday, at which she might want to raise the matter. It is vital that offenders are properly supervised, and our reforms mean that up to 40,000 more offenders are being monitored than was previously the case. She raises an important issue, and I encourage her to take it up with Ministers.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Two days ago at the TechFest STEM in the Pipeline schools BP challenge in Aberdeen, students

from schools across north-east Scotland battled it out to develop an ideal oilfield development plan for a fictional North sea oilfield. I am delighted to report, to what I am sure is an eager House, that a team from Westhill Academy in my constituency won the Maximising Economic Recovery accolade. Will my right hon. Friend join me not only in congratulating the staff and pupils involved, but in considering what more the Government can do to encourage more young people to get involved in STEM subjects in an engaging and exciting way?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating students at Westhill Academy. As energy Minister I had the chance to take part in a survival challenge in Scotland, before going out to an offshore oil rig; perhaps my hon. Friend could think about offering such a prize to some of those students. They would get in a pretend helicopter and be dropped from the roof upside down into a swimming pool—it is definitely exciting. He is right to point out the Government's commitment to improving STEM subjects. The Government fund a number of programmes that aim to inspire more young people to study science subjects, such as the STEM Ambassadors programme and the CREST Awards, which encourage students to do STEM-related projects. I congratulate them all on their prizes.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Yesterday, the Conservative party lost any ounce of credibility in leading investigations into sexual harassment and bullying in this place when it restored the Whip to the hon. Members for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and for Burton (Andrew Griffiths). I am afraid it is thoroughly implausible that those investigations just so happened to conclude yesterday. How can we be assured that party politics are taken out of investigations into such allegations, and out of crucial appointments to committees that govern standards and privileges in this House?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that parties across the House combined to develop the independent complaints procedure. It was right that we did that, and one key reason for doing so was to ensure that any future complaints would not have to go down party political routes. That was at the heart of the process, as was confidentiality for the complainant, and the complaints procedure has now been up and running for more than four months. A steady stream of complaints are being brought forward to it, and there are a small number of ongoing investigations. That is the right way for complaints to be brought forward in this House, to give people the assurance that party politics will not get in the way.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent, Marion Finch of Muirkirk, had a lifetime disability living allowance higher rate award, yet when she was reassessed for the personal independence payment she was given only the standard mobility rate. While fighting the system her health deteriorated and, tragically, she died. Her husband is convinced that stress was a contributor to that, and on a point of principle he appealed the decision, which was then overturned. Will the Leader of the House, on behalf of the Government, offer an apology to Mr Finch, and speak to her Cabinet colleagues about the real effects of the Government's welfare policy?

Andrea Leadsom: May I say how sorry we all are to hear of the loss of the hon. Gentleman's constituent? It is always incredibly tragic for somebody whose health is deteriorating to then pass on. Our sympathies go to her widower. The Government seek at all times to improve the lives of people with disabilities. Since 2010, more money has been going into supporting those with disabilities to get into work and improve their lives than ever before. It is vital that we continue to do everything we can to improve people's lives.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Leader of the House has robbed me of the seventh chance to ask her where the immigration Bill is. I thank her for that. Instead, I would like to know when, oh when, are we going to get our meaningful vote?

Andrea Leadsom: I am so sorry to steal the hon. Lady's thunder. I thought she might be pleased with that news, but she has another challenge for me. As I have said, and as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), said: at the very latest by 21 January.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate on Government Department response times? The Child Maintenance Service has been making me wait for an inordinate length of time in relation to the case of my Carmyle constituent, Jamie Cameron. The CMS overestimated his salary by £100,000 and I cannot deal with his case until it responds. When can we have a statement from the Government about the woeful state of the CMS?

Andrea Leadsom: I am obviously not familiar with the specifics of the case the hon. Gentleman mentions. I suggest he seeks an Adjournment debate or asks a parliamentary question of Ministers to try to get information on his particular case.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As the Leader of the House knows, the Committee on Standards published a report this week recommending some quick wins that we could implement on the way to full implementation of the Laura Cox report recommendations, without prejudice to longer-term improvements. Will the Leader make time for a debate on that report and its recommendations, and a vote on the recommendations that we make and that the House will need to endorse?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for the speed with which she and her Committee have come forward with some quick recommendations on how to ensure more independence in the parliamentary scrutiny process. I pay tribute to her Committee for that. I have already seen the report and I will certainly look at finding time for a debate.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): A century ago, Springburn in my constituency was a world centre for locomotive manufacturing. Last night, the heartbreaking news broke that the last locomotive works in Springburn, the St Rollox Locomotive Works which dates from 1856, is to close with the loss of 180 jobs. I am very confident that this could be avoided with a proper effort from Government at all levels. Will

the Leader of the House seek to engage with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, so that we can have a statement or correspondence on what we can do to safeguard this crucial highly sophisticated and highly skilled centre for locomotive repair and overhaul in Scotland?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear about the threatened closure of that plant. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an urgent Adjournment debate, so that he can raise the issue directly with Ministers.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): A UN report and space satellite images show that 1 million Uighur Muslims are in a mass internment camp where they are forced to undergo psychological indoctrination programmes. More recent reports show the widespread use of torture for those who resist. May I ask the Leader of the House to ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement on what action our Government are taking with regard to this matter, or is it going to be business as usual where we do not want to upset powerful countries?

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady's enormous concern for the plight of the Rohingya people. It is absolutely appalling what is—[*Interruption.*]

Yasmin Qureshi: The Uighurs.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry. I apologise to the hon. Lady. I heard Rohingya. I do apologise. Mr Speaker, may I ask the hon. Lady to repeat her question?

Yasmin Qureshi: A UN report and space satellite images show that 1 million Uighur Muslims are in a mass internment camp where they are forced to undergo psychological indoctrination programmes. More recent reports show that those who resist are subjected to widespread torture. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary to come to this House to make a statement on what action our Government are taking in relation to this situation, or is it going to be business as usual where we never want to criticise a powerful country?

Andrea Leadsom: My sincere apologies to the hon. Lady for mishearing her the first time round. She is raising an incredibly important point. We have all been horrified to hear the stories of what is going on. We have International Development questions on Wednesday 9 January—[*Interruption.*] I certainly absolutely agree with the hon. Lady that it is vital that we do all we can in this country, and if she would like to email me, I can take this up directly with the Foreign Office.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Scotland's parliamentarians and Scotland's Government are on a bit of a roll at the moment, with legal victories in Supreme Courts across Europe against the British Government in the midst of the Brexit chaos. This morning, the United Kingdom Supreme Court ruled that the Scottish Parliament had the competence to pass its Brexit continuity Bill at the time that it did, and that Scotland's chief Law Officer, the Lord Advocate, gave the correct advice and that the Presiding Officer of the Holyrood Parliament was wrong in this respect. However, what has happened is that retrospectively,

through House of Lords amendments to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 here, the will of the Scottish Parliament has been thwarted. Can we have a debate about how it is ridiculous to say that Scotland has the most powerful devolved Parliament in the world and about how the only way to protect people in Scotland and the Scottish legal system from the folly of this Tory Government is independence?

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. and learned Lady may have just asked that question of the Attorney General, which would have been the more appropriate place—[*Interruption.*] Okay, well, perhaps she should have asked the Attorney General if she wanted the Law Officers' advice on that. The answer that I would give is simply to remind her that Scotland is a part of the United Kingdom. It voted very recently to remain a part of the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom entered the European Community together and we will be leaving the European Union together.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House obviously does not expect the Prime Minister to get a meaningful concession in Brussels, because otherwise we would have a meaningful vote next week. While the chaos has been happening on the Government's side of the House, will she join me in paying tribute to the outgoing First Minister in Wales, Carwyn Jones, and the new Welsh Labour First Minister, Mark Drakeford? Does she perhaps concede that we need to take some lessons in strong and stable Government from the Welsh Labour Government, who have delivered real changes for my constituents, including new schools, new hospitals, new further education colleges and real differences in public services? That is what happens when we have a Government focused on what matters to people, rather than one who are focused on the chaos on the other side.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in thanking the outgoing First Minister for his service to the people of Wales and congratulate and wish all the best to Mark Drakeford, who is taking over. As to the other points that he raises, I am a huge, huge fan of Wales and all the amazing achievements of Welsh food producers, Welsh creators and Welsh farming communities, as well as the amazing culture and the wonderful walks, but less so of the Welsh Government—he will forgive me for making that point.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Yesterday, I learned that another brilliant live music venue, Gwdihw, in my constituency and other long-standing local businesses are being forced to close to make way for unnecessary commercial development. Can we have a debate on what additional measures are needed across the UK to protect cultural assets against the threat of greedy developers?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope that the hon. Lady took the opportunity to raise that at Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions, which we just had. She will be aware that the Government do everything that we can to support thriving arts and culture right across the UK and that many of our towns are undergoing quite some change, because of the reduced footprint and the way that people are shopping differently, online

and so on. The Government are doing what we can by reducing business rates and by encouraging thriving arts and culture. With regards to the specific issue that she raises, she might want to seek an Adjournment debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Cuba is undergoing a process to adopt a new constitution in February 2019. Unfortunately, freedom of religion and belief protections in the draft constitution have been deliberately weakened, and according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, some church leaders who have been standing up for stronger freedom of religious belief provisions have been threatened by the Cuban Government. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on this very pressing issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman often raises the suppression of religious freedom and is absolutely right to do so. He will be aware that the Government entirely support the rights of all individuals to express their religious preferences. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise the matter with Ministers.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am absolutely delighted about “Erskine May” being online, not least because when I called for that on 2 November 2017, both you, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the House were ever so slightly sniffy about the very idea. I am absolutely delighted that we are united in wanting it online.

It is preposterous for us to delay endlessly the vote on Brexit. If we bump up against 21 January, businesses in this country will be wasting time, energy and money worrying about whether there will be a no-deal situation. We need to get on with it. I say this to the Leader of the House: please ditch all next week's business. Let us get on with the debate and get on with making a decision. That is what Parliament is for—decisions.

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is delighted. I do not think Mr Speaker or I were sniffy.

On the hon. Gentleman's main point on the meaningful vote, when hon. Members look at themselves in the mirror, they know full well that the country needs a decision to support a withdrawal agreement. We were looking at a decision not to support a meaningful vote. That is precisely why the Prime Minister decided that we would not go ahead with the vote—she was concerned that hon. Members would not support the withdrawal agreement. If the hon. Gentleman wants to come forward with a worked-out and negotiable alternative, that would be great, but the reality is that the Opposition have no alternatives to suggest. All they want to do is have a vote so that they can vote no. The Prime Minister, in the interests of the country, is trying to find a withdrawal agreement that the House will support.

Mr Speaker: Naturally I reject the accusation that there was any sniffiness in my attitude. The Leader of the House can answer for herself and has already done so. My recollection is that the House was advised that “Erskine May” was already available to Members online. In so far as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), leading the charge for progressive change, was making the argument that it should be more widely

[Mr Speaker]

available online, I am happy to accept that. If that burnishes the hon. Gentleman's credentials as a champion of progressive change and brings some happiness into his heart, that is a double benefit.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): In my meeting with the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, she stated that Department for Work and Pensions auditors of health assessment reports offer recommendations only, but the independent assessment service told me that the auditor has the authority to overrule report justifications. In my constituent's case, the auditors instructed that changes be made. May we have a debate in Government time to enable Ministers to explain these differences to the House?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that we have DWP questions on the first day back on 7 January, when I am sure Ministers will be able to explain that to her.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): As one of the 164 MPs who were called last week—I was called a little after midnight last Tuesday—I am very concerned by the suspension of the vote, not least because the Brexit Secretary might change again by the time we get to it. I tell the Leader of the House that kicking the can down the road is not a strategy for government, and that waiting for the sword of Damocles to fall on people's homes, businesses and livelihoods, and our NHS, is completely unacceptable. She is deliberately pursuing a policy of running down the clock and spending taxpayers' money in order to blackmail Parliament into supporting her deal. I tell her now that it will not work.

Andrea Leadsom: I ask you, Mr Speaker, whether accusing me of blackmailing the House is parliamentary language.

Mr Speaker: Yes, nothing disorderly has occurred because, if there were a suspicion of disorderly behaviour, I feel sure that I would have been advised thus. I think that the essential point was of a political character. I do not think anybody is making any allegation that would, if you like, detract from the right hon. Lady's honour or be an imputation of dishonesty, because I feel sure that senior Clerks would have advised me. I think the essential charge was a political one, to which I am sure the Leader of the House is capable of responding.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

The hon. Lady will realise that—as I have just said to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—had we gone ahead with the vote, the House would have been very unlikely to support the withdrawal agreement as it stood. She says that in not holding the vote we are running down the clock. The point is that the Prime Minister listened to the views of the House, and has now gone away urgently to seek changes which will mean that the House can support the agreement—in other words, so that she can put to the House something that it will support in the interests of the country. It is not in the interests of the United Kingdom for the House to have a vote on something that the House does not accept. That is what would create the uncertainty about which the hon. Lady is concerned.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is an important point, colleagues, that was raised by the Leader of the House quizzically with me, and I have been confirmed in my sense that it was a metaphorical use of the term, and when I say I have been confirmed in that sense, I mean that I have been confirmed in that sense by professional advice of the highest order. So no impropriety has occurred. I have no objection to being asked whether there was an impropriety, but there was no impropriety at all.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Following the news this week about Interserve, the previous collapse of Carillion and the repeated failures of Capita, will the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister from the Cabinet Office to come and make a statement about the functions of the Crown Representative system, which is meant to be the link between Government and strategic suppliers? When we see these large companies failing to fulfil their contracts, something is clearly not working in the scrutiny process.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised a really important point. After the collapse of Carillion, it was clear that the Government wanted to carry out further reviews to ensure that public service provision and taxpayers' money were protected at all times, and they have taken a number of steps to achieve that. As the hon. Gentleman will know, Cabinet Office questions will take place next Wednesday, and I encourage him to raise the matter with Ministers then.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is welcome that the immigration Bill is finally to be published, but when will we have a chance to debate it? My constituent Robert Makutsa is stuck in interminable legal processes as the Government try to deport him through their hostile environment policy, although his wife is a UK citizen and he makes a valuable contribution to music and sound engineering in Glasgow. Will the Leader of the House ask the Immigration Minister to grant him leave, and when exactly will the Bill be debated so that we can seek to amend and reform this hostile immigration policy?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important constituency issue to which I am extremely sympathetic, and I applaud him for doing so, but I do not accept that the Home Office is employing a hostile environment policy. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is trying hard to change any sense that there is an unwelcoming approach to new migrants or, indeed, to existing migrants who are seeking the right to remain here. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to raise the specific point with me in an email, I can take it up with the Home Office on his behalf.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): We are in an absurd position. The Leader of the House is berating Members for not supporting her Bill, but how can we engage with the Bill in any way, shape or form unless she brings it to the House? The Prime Minister has travelled around Europe this week, she has spoken to numerous leaders of countries, and she is going to the European Council at the weekend. There is nothing that she will know after Christmas that she will not know this weekend. She should bring back the Bill next week. Will the Leader of the House press her to do so? If not, she is the Leader of the House: just bring it back.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for attributing such magical powers to me, but, as he will appreciate, I am not able to do such a thing on my own. He talked about a Bill; he means, of course, the withdrawal agreement, and the meaningful vote.

I am not berating Members in any way. Having listened to the views of the House at great length over many weeks, I fully understand and, indeed, share the House's concerns about, in particular, the prospect of the UK's being stuck permanently in a backstop that we cannot get out of. However, I think that the House should give the Prime Minister an opportunity to seek amendments so that it can then support the agreement.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): The North East England chamber of commerce is telling me that the uncertainty built into the future partnership framework will cost investment and jobs in the north-east of England, and it has asked me to achieve an outcome that leaves the UK in the single market and customs union, so when will I have a chance to end this business uncertainty by voting against the Prime Minister's deal and for a public vote that includes an option to stay in the EU?

Andrea Leadsom: It is not Government policy to allow us to do anything other than leave the EU on 29 March 2019, and it is the Government's policy to do so with a good deal that works for the UK and the EU.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The images of Christmas that are portrayed in advertising and on television are of families coming together, but the reality for many people is that this is a time of great loneliness. Although I appreciate that there is not time for a statement or a debate on the issue of loneliness, may I invite the Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, and all hon. Members to join me at the Samaritans reception on Monday at 4 o'clock in the Thames pavilion where we will be launching a report on loneliness, particularly among young people? Last year 1,660 young people took their own lives, and it is time that we recognised the epidemic that is loneliness in this country.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. She is right to raise this issue. Loneliness is an appalling scourge; whether for a young person at home with a new baby or somebody older who has perhaps been bereaved, it is absolutely appalling. We now have the first ever Minister for loneliness, as she will appreciate, and the Government are committed to a proper strategy for tackling this problem. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising the Samaritans reception next week.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Following on from questions from my hon. Friends, the Prime Minister has been touring Europe this week and will be at the European Council this weekend. The Leader of the House has already announced the business for next week, including that the Prime Minister will make her usual statement after the European Council meeting. So why oh why can we not bring the meaningful vote back next week, since we know that the Prime Minister cannot open up the legal agreement and is merely seeking assurances? Is this not just a scorched earth policy from the Government to bribe Members of this Parliament to vote for a deal that we all know is flawed?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman rightly says that the Prime Minister will make a statement to the House on Monday after the EU Council. He asserts that she will not succeed in her negotiations. The Opposition have asserted all the way through that the Government's negotiations will not succeed, but an agreement has been negotiated and the Prime Minister is seeking to further improve on it to address the concerns expressed by right hon. and hon. Members. The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to ask the Prime Minister how that has gone on Monday.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House organise a debate in Government time on the planning system? My district council of Stroud has a proud record of delivering the numbers required and has met its five-year plan supply, but under the Government's new formula there is a massive hike in the number of houses it is expected to provide. Much as we need houses, there must be some fairness in how that system operates, so will the Leader of the House organise a debate?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, we do need many more houses. We have a very good track record: we have delivered over 217,000 new homes in the latest year, which is the highest level in all but one of the last 30 years. That is good news, but there is more to do, and he is right that there needs to be a balance between the needs of those who already live in a community and the needs of those who want a home. He will be aware that local planning is a matter for local authorities, but I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise his local concerns directly with Ministers.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): So in other news this week, the media have been reporting that Crossrail is about to get a £2 billion bail-out to add to what it has already received—a total of, I think, £17 billion—and that is before we even start with Crossrail 2, which has an earmarked price tag of about £30 billion. The north, meanwhile, is getting nothing like those figures, so may we have a statement from the Transport Secretary on what is going on with the mismanagement and overspending of the Crossrail budget?

Andrea Leadsom: I sympathise with the hon. Lady. She will be aware that we have Transport questions in our first week back, on 10 January, and I encourage her to raise that matter directly with the Secretary of State then.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): As we approach the holiday season, I should like to take this opportunity to wish teachers, staff and pupils a peaceful Christmas. I should also like to give credit to people who will not be with their families over the holiday period because they are helping to keep us safe and secure. May we have a debate in Government time on the role of those volunteers and professionals—people who are just doing their jobs and giving up time for their communities?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this. There are so many people working as volunteers, or doing their duty as police officers, local council workers and so on, who will enable the rest of

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

us to have a lovely relaxing Christmas, and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude. He will be aware that there is a pre-recess Adjournment debate next Thursday, and he might well want to raise the matter again then.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): About a month ago, Royal Mail contacted me to inform me that the Hope Farm Road post office in my constituency would be closing on a temporary basis. It explained the reasons for that and the interim arrangements that would be put in place. Unfortunately, no interim arrangements have materialised and the Post Office appears to have no plan to get it reopened. It is not even replying to my emails now. May we please have a debate on how we can hold this shambolic organisation to account?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman has had such a bad experience with the Post Office, and he is right to raise the matter here. I think he will probably now get an answer to his question in very short order.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Last week I asked the Leader of the House for a debate on child poverty in the UK. She dismissed my request and said that I was making assertions. She stated:

“Just because the hon. Lady makes those assertions, it does not make them true.”—[*Official Report*, 6 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 1069.]

I am going to try again. May we have a debate on child poverty in the UK? If any MP has any evidence that refutes the evidence given by the Institute for Public Policy Research, the Child Poverty Action Group and the United Nations rapporteur, let them bring that evidence to the debate. Let us have a proper debate on this, and let us find out the truth about child poverty in the UK on her Government's watch.

Andrea Leadsom: I never dismiss the requests of right hon. and hon. Members. The hon. Lady did indeed ask for a debate on child poverty, and I merely sought to put right some of her assertions. I would say to her that we

now have more children growing up in a home where they see their parents going to work and providing for their family, with 630,000 fewer children living in workless households. The numbers of people and children in absolute poverty are at record lows, with 1 million fewer people and 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty. Income inequality is also down—it is lower than in any year under the last Labour Government—as the Conservatives have built a fairer and more equal society.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Regarding Europe, is it not now time for those on the two Front Benches to get together, perhaps even with you, Mr Speaker, to offer the House a timetable for the votes that we must have—namely, on the Prime Minister's deal and, if that falls, on a further referendum, on no deal or on a Norway-style option—so that we can see how the land lies while we still have time to do something about it?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said to a number of right hon. and hon. Members, the meaningful vote will be brought back by 21 January at the latest. Members will know that the Government are under a statutory obligation under section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to have the deal approved by a motion in the House, and we will do so just as soon as possible.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): A large number of Scottish sports governing bodies have brought to my attention their growing concern regarding sports governance arrangements across the UK. Scottish sports and athletics are being undermined by the decisions and actions of UK bodies—the recent autocratic actions of UK Athletics are a case in point. The all-party parliamentary group on Scottish sport will be having a look at this soon. May we have a debate on the Floor of the House to enable Ministers to hear what Members have to say on this?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope that the hon. Gentleman took advantage of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions earlier today. I know that sports governing bodies are a matter of huge interest right across this House, and he might well want to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can take part.

Local Government Funding Settlement

11.49 am

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): With permission, I will make a statement on funding for local authorities in England next year. Every day, councils and the many hard-working, dedicated people who work for them do their communities proud, delivering the essential services on which we all depend and making a difference to every life they touch. It is a privilege to be working with and representing those communities. In doing so, I am determined to ensure that they get the resources and support they need to rise to new opportunities and challenges, to grow their economies and to ensure that there is opportunity for all and that no one is left behind. The draft local government finance settlement being published today is an important step towards that. The provisional local authority funding allocations will be subject to further review before final settlements are made in line with my Department's usual processes. This provisional settlement confirms that core spending power is forecast to increase from £45.1 billion in 2018-19 to £46.4 billion in 2019-20—a cash increase of 2.8% and a real-terms increase in the resources available to local authorities.

It has been challenging for councils to drive efficiencies as they have contributed to rebuilding our economy and tackling the deficit that we inherited from Labour. That is why I am delighted that the Budget committed around £1 billion of extra funding for local services, with a strong focus on supporting some of our most vulnerable groups. That includes £650 million for adult and children's social care in 2019-20. Of that, £240 million will go towards easing winter pressures, with the flexibility to use the remaining £410 million for either adult or children's services and, where necessary, to relieve demands on the NHS. That is on top of the £240 million announced in October to address winter pressures this year.

In addition, the Budget pledged an extra £84 million over the next five years to expand our children's social care programmes to support more councils with high or rising numbers of children in care. That builds on the good work my Department is already doing through the troubled families programme to improve all services for families with complex programmes. The Budget also provided a boost for our high streets via a £1.5 billion package of support, including a business rates discount worth almost £900 million and a £675 million future high streets fund to help them adapt and thrive in changing times. In addition, a further £420 million will go towards repairing and improving our roads this year.

I recognise some of the pressures within social care. I have been working with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to address those pressures, and the Government will soon publish a Green Paper on the future of social care. It is a complex issue, and we are working with local authorities to ensure that we get things right. We have taken that approach across the board, listening carefully to councils of all shapes and sizes across the country and responding. My thanks go to my Ministers, especially the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), for all their work. As a result, I can confirm

that I will increase the rural services delivery grant by £16 million in 2019-20 to maintain it at last year's level, recognising the extra costs of providing services in rural communities.

In addition, I am committing up to £20 million to maintain the new homes bonus baseline at 0.4% in 2019-20, to ensure that we continue to reward councils for delivering the homes we need. There will also be no change to the council tax referendum limits set for local authorities in 2018-19, aside from further flexibility offered on the police precept level. Authorities will have the flexibility to increase their core council tax requirement by up to 3% and can draw as needed on the adult social care precept to meet demand for services, but local residents will continue to be protected and be able to approve or veto any excessive rise in a referendum. Measures that I have agreed with the Home Secretary to allow police and crime commissioners to increase the police precept to £24 will help PCCs tackle the changing demands they face.

I am also conscious that so-called negative revenue support grant remains an issue in certain areas. Having consulted on options for addressing it, I am pleased to announce that we intend to directly eliminate the £152.9 million negative RSG in 2019-20 using forgone business rates. That will prevent any local authority from being subject to a downward adjustment to its business rates tariffs and top-ups, which could act as a disincentive to growth.

We have been listening, and we have been acting on what we hear. Nowhere is that more true than when it comes to answering calls from councils, over many years, for more control over the money they raise. Our plan to increase business rates retention to 75% from 2020 provides that and more, giving local authorities powerful incentives to grow their local economy. Under the current scheme, councils estimate that they will receive around £2.4 billion in business rates growth in 2018-19, a significant revenue stream on top of the core settlement funding I am unveiling today. It is therefore no wonder that councils are queuing up to get involved in the pilots we have been running to test the new approach.

I am delighted to announce that, in 2019-20, 15 new pilots will get under way in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, East Sussex, Hertfordshire, Lancashire, Leicestershire, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, North and West Yorkshire, North of Tyne, Solent combined authority, Somerset, Staffordshire and Stoke, West Sussex and Worcestershire. We will also be piloting 75% rates retention in London and continuing the existing pilots in devolution deal areas.

I am also pleased to announce that every authority in England stands to reap the rewards of increased growth in business rates income, which has generated a surplus in the business rates levy account in 2018-19. We propose to distribute £180 million of levy surplus to all councils, based on need.

I am aware that a few authorities continue to undertake significant borrowing for commercial purposes. I share the concerns of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and others about the risks to which those local authorities are exposing themselves and local taxpayers. We are considering with Her Majesty's Treasury what further interventions may be required.

[James Brokenshire]

We are also launching two further consultations today, on reforms to the business rates retention system and on the new approach to distributing funding through the review of relative needs and resources. There is little doubt that the current funding formula needs fixing and replacing with a robust, straightforward approach in which the link between local circumstances and the allocation of resources is clear. With those consultations, we are making important progress towards that and towards a stronger, more sustainable system of local government.

So 2019 is shaping up to be a big moment for local government, drawing together our plans for a new approach to distributing funding and increasing business rates retention, as well as the upcoming spending review. No one knows their local area like councils, which are at the heart of their communities, and we are supporting them to harness their vast local knowledge and networks—yes, to make the best of available resources and to increase efficiency, but also to innovate and improve the way we deliver services. We are working with local authorities to promote efficiency, and we will use that work to develop a package of support to help councils become more efficient and get better service outcomes. We will launch a continuous improvement tool in spring 2019, and we are championing authorities that are putting communities at the heart of service delivery.

The smarter use of technology is clearly pivotal to this work, and it has the potential to be genuinely transformative, which is why the digital declaration launched by the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks), to share and spread best practice is so important. The declaration is backed by a £7.5 million local digital innovation fund, and I am delighted to say that the first successful bids were announced last week to kick-start projects led by councils to promote service transformation.

There is so much excellent, inspiring work under way in our local communities, and it is right that we get behind it and have faith in the authorities that, day in and day out, always deliver. This settlement and the extra funding announced in the Budget reaffirm that faith, delivering a cash-terms increase of 2.8% and a real-terms increase in spending for local authorities in 2019-20; delivering extra support for the vulnerable, for quality public services, for our high streets and for local economic growth; and paving the way for a fairer, more self-sufficient and more resilient future for local government and a brighter future for the people and places it serves. I commend this settlement to the House.

11.59 am

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): First, let me thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement. But the real thanks have to go to our councillors, of all political persuasions and none, and to the frontline heroes who, despite almost a decade of austerity, have worked hard to keep our local public services going at the same time as demand has increased and funding has fallen through the floor. The under-resourcing of local government—the sector has lost 60p in every £1 of central Government funding, according to the Tory-led Local Government Association

—and the reverse redistribution policies of his Ministry have exacerbated these problems, and he cannot hide from that fact.

Let us bust the myth—this might come as a revelation to the Secretary of State and his Ministers—by pointing out that not all areas are the same. Some areas have greater deprivation and greater poverty, and greater demand for people-based services as a consequence, yet these same areas have fronted the heaviest cuts, and that is continuing—it is not ending. But the Government's approach, as we have heard here again today, is to shift the burden on to council tax. He knows, and it is an inconvenient truth, that areas such as the one I represent and the one my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) represents cannot bring in anything like the resource from council tax that his own council can bring in, and that widens the inequality across England.

So can the Secretary of State confirm how much of the 2.8% that he has announced, with fanfare, is actually being raised through council tax rather than from central Government funding? Can he confirm that he is recommending an inflation-busting council tax rise this year to local government to plug his Department's gaps? How will he therefore address the inequality issue whereby revenue support grant is distributed on a needs-based formula, but council tax revenue is collected and spent locally, meaning that the richest parts of this country will be able to raise significant more than the parts of the country with real deprivation and real demand on public services? Can he confirm that his plans mean a £1.3 billion cut to RSG next year, offsetting the £1.3 billion of spending in his announcement? That really is the reverse redistribution that I talked about.

Does the Secretary of State agree with his official who told the Public Accounts Committee that the sector is sustainable only if it delivers only statutory services? The Secretary of State will know that councils deliver much more than the bare legal minimum—700 or more non-statutory services to be precise. We are talking about Sure Start centres, libraries, parks, museums and investment in youth—all are not included in his assessment of sustainability. So which of those should councils stop providing altogether, if they are to take the advice of his officials? The truth about this statement is that it was actually the worst secret Santa ever, because much of what he has announced today was already announced by the Chancellor in his Budget—there is nothing new here.

On adult social care, we were told by the Tory-led Local Government Association that it needs £1.3 billion next year and £2 billion for children's services, yet the Secretary of State has re-announced £650 million for both—not only that, but it could be shared with the NHS. How is that going to be split between services for adults, children's services and the NHS? Can he clarify that? The Secretary of State says he is working with the Health and Social Care Secretary to soon publish the Green Paper on social care. Given the pressures that councils are facing, and the real heartbreak and misery experienced by service users, can he tell us how soon is "soon"? Or is this like the Brexit meaningful vote, whereby no date is ever given? The fact is that social care is in crisis. The promised Green Paper has now been delayed four times and it is more than a year late.

On public health, we have seen this week that health inequalities are widening, with life expectancy going backwards in the poorest parts of the country. After £700 million of cuts to public health budgets, and more cuts to come next year, all falling disproportionately on the poorest areas, why is the Secretary of State not doing more to protect those budgets from being used for what are clearly non-public health projects?

Two years ago on the steps of Downing Street, and again last night, the Prime Minister promised to build a country that works for everyone. At her conference, she promised to end austerity. But is it not the case that Brokenshire today delivered another broken promise? Food bank use has increased to the highest rate on record. Child homelessness has increased to the highest level in recent years. Yesterday, we were told that for the first time since records began, life expectancy has come to a standstill, and in some areas it is falling.

The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights warned that local authorities have been gutted by a series of Government policies. Although the Secretary of State may wrap up his statement in Christmas paper, when we unwrap the parcel we will still see poorer areas in this country getting poorer. Frankly, that should shame us all.

James Brokenshire: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's comments, but I am disappointed that he has not recognised the increases in spending that were set out in the Budget and that I have underlined, and the fact that I highlighted further spending in today's statement. To take up his theme, one of my colleagues questioned whether the hon. Gentleman might be the Gwynch that stole Christmas. He should recognise that even in his local area there is Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, with an extra £5.6 million in core spending; Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council, with an extra £4.5 million in core spending; and Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council, with an extra £3.6 million increase in core spending.

The hon. Gentleman should recognise the context of the work that the Government have done to clear up the mess that we inherited. *[Interruption.]* No, no—the UK economy has grown for five years, there are 3 million more people in employment since 2010, and manufacturing has grown for its longest period in the past 20 years. I recognise that local government has contributed to the hard work involved in clearing up that mess. We know that the demand on local services has increased. We have recognised that in the statement and will ensure not only that councils have the tools and flexibilities to deliver efficiently and effectively, but that they will have the additional funding that I set out today. We are equipping councils well.

The hon. Gentleman highlighted several points about deprivation. The most deprived authority's core spending power is 23% higher than that of the least deprived. We take council tax into account in funding and when we look into issues of equalisation. He also highlighted the issue of negative RSG. I addressed clearly and firmly in my statement how that will be dealt with.

On social care and the £650 million, the hon. Gentleman questioned the need for strong integration—strong working between our councils and our NHS—to deliver quality services. That is profoundly what needs to happen so that we are looking after the most vulnerable in our communities. I am sorry if those on the Opposition

Front Bench do not acknowledge or accept that. It is a fact that 93% of local authorities recognise that the better care fund has promoted integration and improved joint working in their areas.

This is a statement and settlement that, yes, acknowledges and recognises the pressures on social care, and that there is more work to do in respect of the forthcoming Green Paper and on how we will apply the learning from local government to drive better services. I will continue to be a champion for local government and what it delivers and does in our communities. I am proud to support local government and that positive work within our areas.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Devon has successfully piloted the 100% retention of business rates, and it has injected an additional £20 million into Devon to support local economic growth and public services, but the pilot is due to end in March. Surely the whole point is to continue pilots that are a success. Can the Secretary of State provide any reassurance for Devon as to whether it will be able to continue, because it was not in the list of counties that he mentioned?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the challenges and issues over the business rates retention pilots. Not everyone has been successful in relation to the pilots for 2019-20. We are piloting on the basis of 75%. That is on the basis of the new system that is being introduced in 2020 so that we can properly understand how it will operate in practice. I will certainly highlight to my hon. Friend some of the other issues in relation to, for example, the rural services grant, and how that will be beneficial to her local community, but, obviously, we will look at the representations that are received through this provisional settlement.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

The Government's austerity policies, as we have heard from the Labour Front-Bench spokesman this morning, have been deeply affecting councils in England for many years. I have been in this Chamber listening to debates about the struggles that they have had. Those austerity policies have also hit Scottish finances, but, in contrast, the Scottish National party Government continue to treat local authorities very fairly, despite the fact that the Government have cut the Scottish budget by £2 billion between 2010-11 and 2019-20. There are some warnings from Scotland on match funding and pilots, because this Government also continue to short change local authorities in Scotland directly in other ways by their failure to match the city deal funding from the Scottish Government by £387 million. It is especially critical at this time for Dundee, which faces the prospect of losing 850 Michelin jobs, as the Tay cities deal falls short because the Government have failed to match the Scottish Government's spending by £50 million.

Mitigating Tory costs for local authorities will cost the Scottish Government £435 million next year. On pilots, the extra administration costs of dealing with the hard-hearted and shambolic roll-out of universal credit has meant that Highland Council, a pilot area, has run up costs of more than £2.5 million, which is directly attributable to the costs of universal credit. The council leader and I have written numerous letters to the Secretary

[Drew Hendry]

of State for Work and Pensions, and the matter has been raised with the Minister for Employment on numerous occasions. The questions are: when will the Secretary of State's Government reimburse councils such as Highland Council and their tax payers and when will they live up to their responsibility for city deals and make good on their shortfalls?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I am pleased that he recognises the contribution that city deals have made in Scotland, the contribution that the UK Government are making in Scotland to ensure that that sense of growth and opportunity is felt very firmly, and how we contribute in that way to see that that is felt throughout our United Kingdom. I am sorry that, in some way, he does not fully appreciate and recognise the contribution that we are making. On the point that he makes more broadly in relation to universal credit, obviously, care and attention has been given to this matter by my colleagues, who I am sure will listen to the points that he makes. However, I say to him that the Scottish Government themselves have flexibility over welfare policy and over what they can do to deal with some of the issues and concerns that he has highlighted, and therefore that they have responsibility in that regard.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the change and elimination of negative revenue support grant; that is most important. Will the Secretary of State confirm also that outer London boroughs such as Bromley will in fact profit as a result of the increases that he has announced, but, when the former is revised, will he also bear in mind the need to take into account those authorities that have a track record of historical efficiency and low cost?

James Brokenshire: As my hon. Friend has highlighted, we do intend to directly eliminate the £152.9 million negative revenue support grant using forgone business rates. That will prevent any local authority from being subject to a downward adjustment to its business rates tariffs and top-ups that could act as a disincentive for growth. I am sure that he will look at the detail of this. Obviously, we have the business rates retention pilots of 75% for London and that long-term sustainable funding arrangement for local government.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): At the time of the Budget, the Local Government Association, of which I am pleased to be a vice-president, welcomed the £650 million extra for social care, but contrasted it very clearly with the funding gap in adult and children's services of £2.6 billion. That, it said, would lead to more than 1 million people not getting the care they need and, in the LGA's own words,

"threaten other services our communities rely on"—

such as libraries, street cleaning and parks. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, for the majority of councils, there is no additional funding in this statement over and above the amounts announced in the Budget, which the LGA described as "inadequate", and that, for the next financial year, this will mean further cuts and more austerity still being the order of the day for most local councils?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the work that the Communities and Local Government Committee does in scrutinising and challenging things in the way that it rightly does on behalf of hon. Members. Obviously, the hon. Gentleman will have noted what I said in relation to negative revenue support grant and other matters within the statement on additional funding that is being made available to local government. Yes, the £650 million is important to support adults and children's social care and to deal with some of the pressures. That is why I also highlighted the specific fund to drive innovation to help councils that are struggling with some of those pressures to innovate and to make sure that we are raising standards and responding to the needs, acknowledging also that there is other income from council tax and business rates retention growth, too.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I welcome the help that the Government are providing for local high streets, and may I urge the Secretary of State to make sure that the new Help for High Streets fund is up and running very soon and is providing help to local town centres in my constituency?

James Brokenshire: We will certainly be doing our utmost to ensure that councils are able to bid into the £675 million, knowing that, yes, there are challenges on our high streets; no one can deny that. There is a need for innovation and a need to see investment going in there, as well as a taskforce that will support that activity, learning and recognising very firmly the recommendations from the Timpson review, which has been of great assistance.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I was really disappointed with the announcement, as it really does nothing to address the growing inequalities across our country. One of the biggest problems, of course, is that much of local government funding is now based on council tax, and council tax is so very unfair. When will the Government revalue properties so that dwellings worth £300,000 in one area are no longer in the same council tax band as dwellings worth £100,000 in another area?

James Brokenshire: I am always sorry to disappoint the hon. Lady, but I will have to do so on that point. However, I can highlight the £3.5 million additional funding from 2018-19 to 2019-20 for Bath and North East Somerset unitary authority. Therefore, we do take account of the differentials in council tax and how grant is applied, and that is very firmly recognised and understood within the system.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that my constituents in Northumberland will benefit from the increases in the rural services delivery grant, which is a most welcome recognition of the rurality challenges with which our public services have to deal across my vast and very sparsely populated constituency?

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated, we acknowledge some of the real pressures within rural areas—some of the additional costs that come through from that—through the rural services delivery grant. We also acknowledge those pressures through the business rates retention pilot, which I am sure will be of assistance in my hon. Friend's area.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I welcome the announcement of an increase in core spending power, but I estimate that it will be worth about £2.5 million in Knowsley. Set against that, however, the Secretary of State will be aware that Knowsley, with some of the highest need in the country, has also shamefully had the biggest cut in support from central Government, at £100 million. Is the Secretary of State not ashamed that need is now almost irrelevant to the allocation of local government funding?

James Brokenshire: I simply do not accept the core issue behind the right hon. Gentleman's comments. Indeed, we are undertaking the fair funding review, which will allow further reflection on and recognition of some of the pressures that are felt between councils. Knowsley will see an increase of £2.8 million between 2018-19 and 2019-20, which will mean core spending power per dwelling of £2,282.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): To balance, in 2021 Hampshire will have cut a total of £560 million from its budget. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge the difficulties faced by even the best-run councils?

James Brokenshire: I acknowledge the pressures that councils have been experiencing and the hard choices that so many have had to make to deal with the issues with the public finances to which we have had to respond. I hope that my right hon. Friend will recognise the additional funding announced today. Equally, as we head towards the spending review next year, we will look carefully at further efficiencies and opportunities to ensure that councils are sustainable for the long term.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Liverpool City Council and Knowsley Borough Council cover my constituency of Garston and Halewood. Both have been severely hard hit, with more than 60% of their Government grant removed. Will the Secretary of State explain how his announcement will help Liverpool City Council to meet the enormous gaps that have been created as a result of his Government's policies?

James Brokenshire: The funding and allocations announced today certainly recognise some of the pressures that councils in Liverpool and elsewhere have been facing—for example, with regard to social care issues. It is important that we recognise those pressures and the growth that has been experienced. The additional funding will assist, but long-term reform is needed through the Green Paper and, in relation to the long-term funding situation, through the spending review. That needs to be addressed next year.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Essex County Council and Chelmsford City Council do an excellent job, and the real-terms increase is welcome. However, there are real pressures because the area is growing, with 16,000 new homes due next year. Will the Secretary of State look favourably on our housing infrastructure bid, and will there be another chance for business rates retention projects for those who were not called for this year's pilot?

James Brokenshire: We are moving to a system in which 75% business rates retention will be the norm around the country. In relation to the housing infrastructure fund, we received a large number of bids worth almost

£14 billion to deliver 1.5 million homes back in 2017, and further funding has been committed to that. We are looking carefully at this matter because we want to build the homes that our country needs and get the infrastructure in place to deliver them.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that local authorities are now housing 82,000 homeless families in temporary accommodation? Can he confirm that that has risen by 5% in the last year and by 71% since 2010, and can he tell us how much it actually costs local authorities?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the pressures of homelessness and temporary accommodation, and we have committed £1.2 billion across the board to respond to and deal with the issue. I am committed to dealing with some of the most acute pressures and issues, including rough sleeping. I want us to move towards a situation in which that is eradicated, and we get people into homes and give them the support they need. That is a clear priority for me.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and his excellent Minister for Local Government, who have given East Sussex County Council a great deal of time and support. I welcome East Sussex being added to the pilot for 75% business rates retention. Using this year's figures, that will be worth an extra £3.6 million. Does the Secretary of State agree that projects such as the delivery of a new road and business park in East Sussex will mean more money retained by East Sussex, and more jobs and growth in the local economy for my constituents?

James Brokenshire: I welcome the innovation in East Sussex highlighted by my hon. Friend. That is what I see in local government—the real drive and desire to do the right thing for communities, and to see jobs, growth and prosperity. This Government will continue to support that.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Birmingham is reeling from the biggest cuts in local government history—£690 million, with another £86 million to come. Children's centres are closing, and there have been cuts to school transport for disabled kids and to advice for poor people. The consequences are ever more serious, yet the Secretary of State seems to favour low-need, leafy shires at the expense of the great city of Birmingham. Does he not recognise that this is not a fair deal but a bad deal for the city, and that Birmingham has simply had enough?

James Brokenshire: No, I certainly do not acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's point. Core spending power per dwelling in Birmingham is around 10% higher than the average. I draw his attention to the extra £18.2 million that he will see through today's announcements. We want to see the great city of Birmingham continue to thrive and flourish, which is precisely why we are supporting it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): This year is the last year of the multi-year settlement, so what happens to the 3% of councils that did not sign up to the efficiency savings? How are they treated? More importantly,

[Bob Blackman]

what are the Secretary of State's plans for the future of multi-year settlements, so that councils can plan for the future?

James Brokenshire: I firmly recognise the benefit of multi-year settlements. We have seen this through councils' ability to plan and to drive efficiencies and effectiveness. As my Department prepares submissions for next year's spending review, I will reflect carefully on the matter in order to recognise the ability for councils to plan, while also ensuring that we promote innovation.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State understand that there is a limit to back-office efficiency savings and the new income that councils can get? Since 2010, Lambeth has seen some of the biggest cuts of any council in the country. There is a rising demand in inner-city areas that we can do nothing about. Just how does the Secretary of State think that councils can continue to deal with this rising demand with the level of funding that they are receiving?

James Brokenshire: A lot of that demand is in social care pressures, which is why we have made these announcements. Equally, I recognise that there is a need for long-term reform and sustainability to ensure that we can meet the needs of the future. I am firmly discussing that issue with the Health Secretary as we look at the social care Green Paper. Core spending power in Lambeth is also above average for that class of council, but we will continue to reflect on the issue.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for our recent meeting to discuss a further devolution deal for Greater Lincolnshire. In his statement, he referred to promoting efficiency. Does he agree that more resources for frontline services could be released if we created more unitary authorities, and would he welcome such proposals?

James Brokenshire: I want to drive efficiency and effectiveness, and I recognise some of the incredible work that has already been undertaken. My hon. Friend highlights the issues of unitarisation, which we very much want to be locally driven. I will certainly be setting out my further thoughts on the conditions to be satisfied, knowing that there needs to be a unanimity of view or that we seek proposals from particular areas to make it effective.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): In my previous role, I warned Suffolk County Council that reducing services in children's centres would lead to increased numbers of children being taken into care. Does the Secretary of State accept that increase in demand for children's social care is at least partially caused by cuts in preventive services such as children's centres, and will his Department assess the correlation between children's centre cuts and an increase in the number of children taken into care?

James Brokenshire: We are investing in prevention and ways to promote good standards across local authorities. That is why, at the autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced an additional £84 million over five years to work with a number of local authorities

that are seeing high or rising demand for children's social care to ensure that they improve their practice and decision making in delivering for those families.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement, particularly on the rural services delivery grant. There is no doubt that rural counties such as Suffolk do face specific costs. Will he outline specifically what this will mean financially for Suffolk?

James Brokenshire: The Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks), has been highlighting the additional £400,000 for Suffolk in the rural services delivery grant. We are providing £81 million to the most sparsely populated areas in 2019-20, recognising the pressures that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) has highlighted and just how important that is.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is the season of goodwill, and I indicated to the diligent Parliamentary Private Secretary that I would like a copy of the hand-out questions, but I have had to make up my own.

Last week, I met the nursery heads and children's centre leaders in south Bristol. We know that these centres are the greatest, most efficient driver of social mobility in the country. May I therefore invite the Secretary of State to south Bristol to meet those nursery school heads and children's centre leaders to explain how, if they are not part of his assessment on sustainability for local authorities, they fit into the Government's policies on social mobility and increasing skills for our country?

James Brokenshire: I was in Bristol just a few short weeks ago looking at the issue of homelessness, but I recognise the hon. Lady's bid for me to look at some of the other important services and the work going on that is affecting her community. Yes, there are pressures on children's social care—I recognise that, and it has been recognised in today's announcement. I will continue to work with my colleagues at the Department for Education as we look at the spending review and ensure that we have a sustainable system knowing the pressures that are there.

Mr Speaker: In a similarly festive spirit, I can tell the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) that she has brought back fond memories for me, because in 1992 I fought the Bristol South constituency. Unfortunately for me, and probably for the benefit of the nation, the Bristol South constituency fought back.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): You might have been my neighbour, Mr Speaker.

I very much welcome the increase in core spending for Somerset of 3.7% and, in particular, our inclusion in the 75% business rate retention pilot areas, which I and three colleagues from Somerset have worked hard on. I have just had a text from the leader of Somerset County Council saying, "This is excellent news and thank you." Does this not demonstrate that our Ministers are listening, especially the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), and that they have at last realised that rural areas really do need some special attention?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and, indeed, to all the Somerset MPs who have highlighted to me some of the specific issues that have been engaged in. I welcome the feedback that she has relayed to the House on how we acknowledge some of the particular pressures in rural areas. It is interesting to note, Mr Speaker, that, by the sound of it, you came very close to going into the Bristol area. However, we will continue to focus on all areas around the country as we look at the spending for councils moving forward.

Mr Speaker: Not that close.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Unfortunately, Liverpool City Council is not very happy with today's news. I listened very closely to the Secretary of State, but he did not mention anything about replacing European funds that will be lost if the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement passes—whenever that may be. Liverpool City Council has secured £110 million from Europe for various projects over the next few years that is going to be vital in the face of £440 million of cuts since 2010—a 64% cut in real terms that has seen devastating consequences. Will he today commit to replacing those moneys if it turns out that they will be lost?

James Brokenshire: On EU funds, we will be consulting in due course in relation to the UK shared prosperity fund—the UK-wide arrangements that will replace the structural funds. I am sure that the hon. Lady will have the opportunity to make representations on that. I acknowledge, yes, that some funding is received through the existing funds, but there is now the opportunity for the UK to shape this and also to deal with some of the bureaucracy to ensure that more money goes to the frontline.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that with the home-grown proposals for the unitary councils of Dorset, we have been at the cutting edge of modernisation and delivering value for money and quality services. Will he say a little more in relation to Dorset, specifically, regarding the outcome of his announcement on negative revenue support grant and the very welcome news about the rural services delivery grant?

James Brokenshire: Negative RSG will be eliminated, as I have indicated. My hon. Friend will see in the different schedules that will be published the implications of the rural services delivery grant. He will also notice, in relation to Dorset, the statutory instrument that has been laid in relation to council tax harmonisation, which I am sure will give him all the clarity he will need for his council for the future.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The battering of Birmingham has been remorseless. In the food banks where I work, demand is up by a third on the past year. In the soup kitchen where I worked on Sunday night, demand was up by 50% on the past year. The rough sleepers I helped to count sleeping on our pavements a couple of weeks ago were up by 50% on the past year. Yet our council has been forced to table proposals to cut council tax support for the poorest in our community because the Secretary of State has ruled out access to our reserves. Birmingham MPs wrote to

him on 25 November to ask to discuss this. We have not yet had the courtesy of a reply. When will he meet us to discuss when the battering of Birmingham will stop?

James Brokenshire: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says. I will certainly look into his letter of 25 November and get back to him in relation to the points that he makes. But I would also highlight how we have been supporting the west midlands area in relation to issues such as rough sleeping, which he highlights, with our Housing First programme to ensure that we are getting the help that is needed to the most vulnerable people, getting them off the streets and getting them the support that they require.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council. I thank the Secretary of State for listening to the campaign by local authorities in Northamptonshire and local hon. Members that Northamptonshire be granted a business rates retention pilot. Can he explain in simple terms, for the benefit of my constituents, how this will help local government finance as local councils reorganise in Northamptonshire?

James Brokenshire: I understand that Northamptonshire has estimated that the potential benefit is in the order of £18 million in relation to the business rates retention arrangements, with the growth in business rates. That is the change that we want to see across the system. I recognise the continuing issues and challenges within Northamptonshire. I can certainly commit to my hon. Friend to continue to work with colleagues on this.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council has had to make £170 million of cuts and savings since 2010, yet this year alone we have had a 40% increase in the number of looked-after children, which was unplanned because they have come from the National Crime Agency's historical child sexual exploitation investigation. The £84 million that the Secretary of State cites is actually Department for Education money for innovation, not frontline social work. So exactly how is Rotherham Council meant to look after children on a day-to-day basis?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady is right about the £84 million, which is about driving innovation, and driving good standards and different forms of practice, so that councils can learn from each other in that way. In terms of the core elements of this, I point to the £650 million and the £410 million within it that enables councils to use it for issues such as children's social care, given the issues and pressures that are there. That is why we have responded in this way. Clearly, I acknowledge and recognise the points that she makes. That is why we have made those decisions but, equally, why we will continue to work with councils on this hugely important issue.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): By way of a declaration, I am a member of Medway Council. Conservative-run Medway Council has the lowest council tax in Kent and excellent frontline services, and it has made a real success of the 100% business rates retention scheme. It has now applied for £170 million to build 13,000 houses through the housing infrastructure fund. In the light of its success, will the Secretary of State look at its bid favourably?

James Brokenshire: We are looking at all bids for the housing infrastructure fund. I appreciate the ambition of Medway and other councils to deliver the homes that our country needs. We are scrutinising those bids so that councils can deliver that. I recognise and appreciate the work that Medway is doing and how it is keeping council tax down.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The National Audit Office says that local government funding will be cut by 56% between 2010 and 2020. My local authority's funding has been cut by 63%. Last night, there were 948 households in temporary accommodation in Greenwich, and 21,000 children went to sleep in households in poverty. Is that not the reality of Tory austerity, and are those people not paying the price of the consistent cuts that this Government have made to local government funding?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman highlights one element of the local government settlement. However, that does not take account of council tax, business rates retention or the better care fund. In relation to core spending power, I hope he recognises the additional £44.3 million that Greenwich Council will receive in 2019-20. It is important to look at all the forms of funding that make up the overall finances available to local government to deliver for their areas.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for Local Government for the work they have been doing, and in particular for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire's inclusion in the 15 business rates retention pilots. Does the Secretary of State agree that that will help the Conservatives on the local authority in Stoke-on-Trent to continue their fantastic work to build a stronger economy and more job opportunities?

James Brokenshire: I congratulate Stoke-on-Trent and commend my hon. Friend on all he does to champion his community. The business rates retention pilots will certainly assist the 15 councils selected, but we want to see that benefit being rolled out to all councils. That is why this will be tested further, as we look to 2020 and beyond, so that other communities can see that positive impact.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): By 2022, Newcastle City Council will have had to save £327 million due to slashed Government funding and rising demand. We see that in the increased litter on our streets, the reduced library opening hours, reduced support for the most vulnerable among us and the terrible choices that Newcastle councillors and council officials have to make. The council is currently consulting on yet further cuts. Will the Secretary of State respond to that consultation and explain why slashed services should be further slashed, now that austerity is supposedly over?

James Brokenshire: First, I hope that the hon. Lady's voice gets better quickly in time for Christmas. There will be a 75% business rates retention pilot in Newcastle in 2019-20, which will release additional funds to meet some of the pressures that she highlighted, and core spending power will increase further. We must also look at the devolution deals and all the support and investment

being provided. I hope she sees the positive things in this statement that will address a number of the points that she highlighted.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is very welcome that Leicestershire will see a 4.4% increase in its core spending power next year, and it is extremely welcome that we will get a business rates retention pilot worth £13 million; I thank Ministers for meeting me to discuss that. However, the local government funding formula is opaque and unfair, and Leicestershire is unfairly underfunded. Can the Secretary of State assure me that he will continue to look at a fair funding formula and look closely at the Leicestershire model, for comprehensive reform?

James Brokenshire: I thank my hon. Friend for his active participation in our work on long-term funding and the fair funding review, and I thank Leicestershire for its participation in and support for that. He highlighted some of the announcements today, including the benefit of around £14 million for Leicestershire. He has been a good and active champion. We want people to be engaged in the fair funding review, to ensure that we learn from the evidence, so that we get this right.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): After the Budget statement, 76 council leaders, including the Mayor of Bristol, wrote to the Secretary of State warning that more money was needed to avoid a "catastrophic collapse" in key council services. Does he really think that those 76 council leaders will be reassured by what they have heard today?

James Brokenshire: Those council leaders should recognise the additional funding being allocated to councils up and down the country, but I know that further innovation, support and discussions are required. In terms of the spending review next year and the long-term arrangements, I want to see a sustainable future for our local councils and the delivery of services in the hon. Lady's constituency and elsewhere. I am determined to deliver that.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement, and in particular the funding and clarity provided on two issues for district councils that have an agenda for growth, such as Rugby Borough Council. First, he has retained the threshold on the new homes bonus, which will continue to provide an incentive for councils to grant planning consent for homes. Secondly, he has eliminated the negative revenue support grant, which was a particular concern to many district councils, meaning that councils will continue to have an incentive to provide business growth.

James Brokenshire: I know that my hon. Friend is a champion of district councils, and I commend him for all his work. As I said in my statement, I hope there will be recognition that we have listened on a number of issues, including negative RSG and the new homes bonus. This is a settlement that councils can get behind, so that they can get on and deliver for their local communities.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for allowing Stoke and Staffordshire to be in the business rates pilot. It is late—it should have been last year—but it is welcome.

However, I remain confused. When I wrote to the Conservative leadership at Stoke-on-Trent City Council last February about their increase in revenue support grant, they told me that it was an ineffective measure of their spending ability and that they will still have to make severe cuts in their budget. Who is right—the Conservatives at the council who tell me their budget is still being squeezed, or the Conservatives in Parliament who tell me that spending has never been greater?

James Brokenshire: I would highlight the additional core spending power of £3.9 million that will be delivered for Stoke-on-Trent. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's recognition of the inclusion of those areas in the business rates retention pilots. The point is that councils can look to a number of different funding streams for the delivery of their services, including direct grants, business rates retention and council tax. We look at the funding that councils are delivering for their communities in that overall context.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), the £84 million for children's services is over five years, which means it is only £16 million a year. The £410 million is to be shared between adults, the NHS and children's services, yet in County Durham the number of children looked after has risen by 300 to more than 800, which means an extra £7 million a year. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that his increases are inadequate, and that he needs to go back to the Treasury to ask for more?

James Brokenshire: I certainly recognise the pressures that councils have experienced in relation to children's social care as well as adult social care. That is why there is flexibility for councils to determine how the £410 million is allocated between each of the pressures they are experiencing. Durham unitary authority will see an extra £13.1 million in 2019-20. The £84 million is spread over five years. It is about a sense of innovation and driving up standards. I certainly commit to continuing to work with colleagues in the Department for Education on these issues, and I recognise the pressures and the need for continued innovation in preparation for the spending review.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): The cuts to the public health ring fence—£1 million has been lost in Stockton-on-Tees in the past two years—mean health visitors with unsustainable case loads and sexual health services under increased pressure. What guarantees does this settlement give that there will be increased public health investment in our most disadvantaged communities?

James Brokenshire: Within the social care element, there is obviously a focus on taking pressure off the NHS—how social care in the NHS goes hand in hand. I am a profound advocate for the prevention agenda that my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary has advanced. I certainly commit to continuing to work with him to ensure that we focus on the delivery of the prevention agenda in local communities. That obviously involves public health, and we are therefore seeing fewer people going into hospital. We are delivering the sort of system that actually makes sense and ensures we take pressure off our NHS.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Rochdale Council has had to make £178 million of cuts since 2010 due to cuts in central Government funding. The latest cuts are to the grants for our community centres. Does the Secretary of State think it is an efficient use of council funds to cut these much-needed community centres?

James Brokenshire: Clearly, it is for individual councils to make their decisions. I gently remind the hon. Lady again that these changes have had to be made to deal with pressures in the public finances, and that councils have had to make hard decisions because of the bigger macro issues we have had to deal with. However, I hope that she will recognise the increase in core spending power that Rochdale will see from the announcement I have made today. I encourage councils to do all that they can through local decision making, knowing that, yes, changes have had to be made, and that is a consequence of some of the implications we have had to pick up as a Government.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Over the past eight years, Coventry City Council has lost well over £100 million in resources from the Government. It faces pressures on children's services, youth services and social care—and it is about time we had the Green Paper on social care. It would have been more welcome if we had been able to look at the overall picture and could ask questions now about the police precept, so that we could make a judgment about the 2.8% increase in cash terms. We would then have got a better judgment because, under the guise of local democracy, the Government are shoving their responsibilities for funding local services on to local authorities. Local authorities will then get discredited, and in three or four years' time the Secretary of State will come along and talk about capping profligate local authorities. He needs to get real for a change.

James Brokenshire: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that he will have an opportunity during the statement to follow to raise any questions about policing—or about what I have said today about flexibility on the police precept—with the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, who has just joined me on the Front Bench. I am sure my hon. Friend listened very carefully to what the hon. Gentleman said. This is about providing our police with additional funding to meet their needs and those of local communities, and such flexibility is one of the means of doing so.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the point raised by the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers)—my hon. Friend in this respect—will the Secretary of State, given the reputed back-office and other savings produced by the move to unitary authorities, look at setting up a fund to encourage the remaining parts of the country at least to consider doing so as the way forward in really making local government work in those areas?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the approach he has outlined. Certainly, as we look to the spending review and to different ways in which we can drive further innovation, we will consider how unitarisation has brought benefits to some parts of the

[James Brokenshire]

country in producing savings on back-office and other arrangements. We do want that to be locally driven and for there to be such support for it, but he makes an interesting suggestion and I will certainly reflect on it further.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In the Secretary of State's statement, he said that he has been

"listening carefully to councils of all shapes and sizes across the country and responding."

May I therefore ask him how exactly the £650 million for adult and children's services, and apparently for the NHS as well, will deal with the national funding crisis now—I repeat, now—in adult social care and children's services, which is currently estimated to be about £3 billion?

James Brokenshire: With the additional funding announced in the Budget, the Government will have given councils access to £10 billion of dedicated funding that can be used for adult social care in the three-year period to 2019-20. I know that longer-term reforms are obviously required to put the system on a sustainable basis. That is why we have now gained the £650 million to support councils in dealing with a number of these pressures. Again, I highlight how we deliver care and support better by having stronger linkages between our NHS and our council services, which this will help drive.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): For two weeks running, I have asked the Prime Minister about the devastating funding challenges that the Tyne and Wear fire and rescue service is facing. I know she has been a bit busy, so she may not have had time to have a word with the Secretary of State. In the light of the fact that funding local services such as social care, fire services and the police through the council tax precept just does not work in areas such as mine, as he well knows, and that the reserves have already been allocated, how does he propose to fill these drastic funding gaps?

James Brokenshire: I would be pleased to discuss this further with the hon. Lady. I would highlight that, overall, fire and rescue services will receive about £2.3 billion in 2019-20. She talked about the reserves. Certainly, the financial reserves held by single-purpose fire and rescue authorities increased by over 80%—to £545 million—

between 31 March 2011 and 31 March 2018, which is equivalent to 42% of their core spending power. However, I will certainly reflect further on the points the hon. Lady has made, and I look forward to discussing them with her.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): For the past eight years, the Government have in effect outsourced the hardest decisions on the most severe cuts to the most deprived local authorities. It is just not fair on a city such as Manchester, where, in the eight years to 2020, we will see a £600 per household cut in funding. Is it not true that austerity will never be over until we have not only the sticking plaster that the Government are implementing in relation to these cuts, but some proper funding restored to the most deprived authorities in this country?

James Brokenshire: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that this has been about the empowerment of Manchester. It is about Manchester getting more of the benefits and more of the decision making, with devolution arrangements worth about £7 billion, which my hon. Friends on the Front Bench have highlighted. As I hope the hon. Gentleman will see from the details of the information published on the settlement, there is an extra £11.8 million for Manchester in 2019-20—an extra amount of that sum—to support services in that great city.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The modus operandi of this Government—whether we are talking about the police, fire services or, as today, local government—is to smash financial support for public authorities and, when they are unable to deliver services, to attack them for such an inability; or, if they are forced to increase the council tax to make up the shortfall, to attack them politically for increasing the council tax. Since most of the additional spending power the Secretary of State is announcing today will come from the local authorities themselves, does he plan to use the same tactic in this funding round?

James Brokenshire: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that I am a proud champion of local government. I celebrate the incredible work that our councils do up and down the country, and the local government officers and staff who work tirelessly for the benefit of our communities. As we look to the future, I will continue to underline that message about the positive things councils do in transforming communities and the life chances that they deliver. Rather than knocking that, I will be supporting and celebrating it.

Police Funding Settlement

12.59 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to propose to the House a provisional police funding settlement for 2019-20. I do so at a time of real pressure on our police system, with demand rising and becoming increasingly complex and resource intensive. Across the country, police officers and staff are working exceptionally hard in demanding and often risky conditions. They have the respect and thanks of this House, but they need more than that—they need additional support to help them do their job.

Last year, Parliament approved a funding settlement that resulted in £460 million of additional public investment in policing, including £50 million more for counter-terrorism and £280 million more for local forces from the precept. That meant that every force's funding was protected in real terms this year, and overall public investment in policing this year is more than £1 billion higher than three years ago. As a result of last year's settlement, most police and crime commissioners set out plans to either protect or enhance frontline policing. I also indicated last year that our intention was to provide a similar settlement in 2019-20, subject to improved efficiency, productivity and financial transparency. I am pleased to confirm that the police have met those conditions, and there is an agreed plan to deliver £120 million in commercial and back-office savings by 2020-21. Forces are developing digital plans, including deploying mobile technology more ambitiously to use police time more productively, and every police and crime commissioner has published a financial reserves strategy.

However, the Government recognise that two things have changed since I stood at the Dispatch Box one year ago. First, cost pressures have risen, public sector inflation has increased and the police are facing challenges in meeting new costs such as in forensics and increased employer contributions to safeguard public pensions. More significantly, demand pressures have risen. There has been a major increase in the reporting of high-harm, previously hidden crimes such as child sexual exploitation. The challenge from serious and organised crime networks is growing. Through the serious violence strategy we are bearing down on the worst spike in serious violence and knife crime that we have seen in this country in a decade. Digitally enabled and online crime remains a major challenge for our police, and meanwhile, as we are all aware, the threat from terrorism has escalated and evolved.

The first role of Government is to protect the public, and as crime changes, so must the police. We are determined to ensure that the police have the powers and resources they need to respond to changing demand. Therefore, the Home Secretary and I would like to go further than I indicated last year. As the Home Secretary has signalled over the course of the year, police funding is his No. 1 priority, and he and I have been working closely with our colleagues across Government to agree a comprehensive settlement. Today we are proposing a settlement that could see public investment in policing rise by up to £970 million in 2019-20, depending on the actions of police and crime commissioners.

Let me break that very large number down for the House. First, instead of the flat cash grant that I indicated last year, we want to increase Government grants to police and crime commissioners by £161 million. Every police and crime commissioner will have their Government grant funding protected in real terms, and the package includes £14 million to recognise the specific extra costs and financial challenges of policing London. On top of that, we will allocate additional grant funding of more than £150 million specifically to help the police manage what, since the 2016 Budget, have been unexpected increases in their contribution to public sector pensions.

We have also listened to requests from police and crime commissioners for more flexibility around levels of police precept. This settlement empowers police and crime commissioners to raise council tax contributions for local policing by £2 a month for a typical household, which is £24 a year. If that flexibility is fully utilised, the result will be just over £500 million of additional local investment in local policing. We do not take that decision lightly, because we know money is tight for many people. The decision to raise local tax will be up to locally elected police and crime commissioners, and they will have to make a case to their electorate and be accountable for delivery of a return on that public investment.

On top of the proposed increase in core grant and a doubling of local precept flexibility, we propose investing more in the fight to protect our constituents against terrorism and serious organised crime. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced at the Budget, funding for counter-terrorism policing will increase by £59 million next year to £816 million, which is £160 million more than we planned at the last spending review. We also intend to match the new serious and organised crime strategy with £90 million of much-needed resources to tackle threats including economic crime, child sexual exploitation, fraud and cyber-crime.

This settlement combines increased central funding with increased local contributions to local policing. It enables the biggest investment in frontline policing since 2010, and the start of the journey to get this country back to living within our means. It will allow PCCs to manage their costs while maintaining their plans to recruit and fill capability gaps, not least when it comes to detectives. It will strengthen our capabilities in the fight against serious and organised crime and terrorism.

Alongside that increased investment in the frontline against crime, we will also maintain our existing level of public investment in building national police capabilities and upgrading police technology for the benefit of local forces. We will invest £175 million in the police transformation fund next year. A major priority for us is supporting the police to make the most of the digital opportunity to improve contact with the public and manage police time more effectively. We are also developing the first national programme to support the wellbeing of stretched frontline officers. We support Police Now, which is attracting fresh talent into neighbourhood policing and supporting the role of detectives.

Alongside the police transformation fund we will invest £495 million in technology programmes that will upgrade critical infrastructure such as police databases and the emergency service communications network. Taking everything together, the settlement means that as a country we will be investing up to £14 billion in our police system next year, if all police and crime

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commissioners use full precept flexibility. That would represent increased public investment of £2 billion compared with 2015-16.

With increased public investment comes an increased responsibility to improve efficiency and effectiveness, and to show the public what difference their investment is making in terms of greater deterrence for criminals, better outcomes for victims and safer communities. To make the most of the new investment we are announcing today, we will work with the police on ensuring the delivery of the efficiency savings we have identified. We want greater ambition in the use of digital mobile working to improve productivity. We also want to ensure that the major capability gaps that the independent inspectorate identified, on detectives and investigations, are filled, and that there is greater co-ordination of important work to tackle serious and organised crime.

Of course, support for our police is not all about spending taxpayers' money, and we are also supporting them through new powers. We are working on a cross-party basis to strengthen legislation on offensive weapons, just as we worked on a cross-party basis to strengthen protections for emergency services workers. Let me be clear: our commitment to supporting the police to deliver for the public is for the long term. Come the forthcoming comprehensive spending review, the Government will be prepared to invest appropriately in police capacity, capability and professional confidence, but that must come with greater local accountability of directly elected police and crime commissioners, and a commitment to accelerate the pace of change to ensure that British policing remains the best in the world.

As we have indicated, this settlement is the last before the next spending review, which will set long-term police budgets and address how resources are allocated fairly across police forces—I know that is of great interest to many Members across the House. This Government's priority is the safety of the public. We understand that our police face increased demands, and we are determined to respond to the threats from terrorism, organised crime and serious violence. We are today announcing a major investment in the capabilities that the police need to respond, and we are rightly challenging them to spend that money well and continue on the path of reform and modernisation. I conclude by expressing my gratitude and that of the Government to police forces around the country for their exceptional attitude, hard work and bravery, and I commend this statement to the House.

1.10 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance notice of his statement and for his recognition of the demand facing our police forces. Once again, however, we are faced with the Government's complete refusal to acknowledge their own part in creating that demand.

It is important that we set today's statement in the context it deserves. The Conservative party has created a crisis in public safety. There is simply no precedent in post-war history for a Government to have undermined the police in the way that this Government have. No Government in post-war history have ever slashed the

resources available to the police by as much as 30% and cut officers in every year they have been in office. Never, since records began, has violent crime been as high as it is today. Never has knife crime been as high as it is today. Arrests have halved in a decade. Unsolved crimes stand at over 2 million cases, and 93% of domestic violence offences go unprosecuted. Today's settlement has to stand in that context.

If we are honest—if we are not to mislead the public, as the Office for National Statistics has asked the Government not to do on police funding—today's settlement represents a ninth consecutive year of real-terms central Government cuts to the police. In September, the Government announced that changes to the police pension valuation would mean an additional £165 million cost to forces in 2019-20, increasing to £417 million in 2021. Why, then, does today's settlement cover only £150 million of that cost, and why does it provide no certainty for the following year? That cost was dropped on forces at the last minute. Some police and crime commissioners had already started drafting emergency budgets. It was a completely inappropriate way to handle an event that must take place every four years. The Government need to get real. They cannot keep expecting forces to wait until the last minute, with disaster at the door, for the Government to get their act together. Will the Minister commit today to funding the complete pension bill for 2019-20 and 2020-21?

Funding for counter-terrorism and serious organised crime, although welcome, is not seen by local forces, and the funding to tackle fraud and cyber-crime is significantly below the amount requested by police last year.

The Government are once again confirming today their intention to pass the vast majority of the increase in the police funding settlement on to local ratepayers. That is perverse. It will not meet need and is fundamentally unfair. Despite the fact that every band D household or above will be asked to pay the exact same amount in additional tax, different force areas will be able to raise hugely different amounts. The forces that have already been cut the most will be able to raise the least. Can the Minister confirm that today's settlement will mean that Surrey can raise 44% of the cash it has lost since 2010, whereas the west midlands will be able to raise just 11% of what it has lost; and that Suffolk can raise 30% while Northumbria can raise only 12%? How can the Minister possibly justify a postcode lottery that means the communities that are already seeing higher crime, to which reserves have been allocated, will receive so much less funding?

Can the Minister further confirm that the National Police Chiefs' Council has calculated the cost of inflation at £435 million this year, wiping out the grant from central Government and almost wiping out the amount the precept will raise, forcing council tax payers to pay the price for their local service to stand still? The simple truth is that because the Home Secretary cannot make the case within the Government for extra resources for the police, he is passing his own political failure on to local ratepayers. He knows that this perverse way of raising income for the police will not and cannot meet the needs of local communities. Instead of a calculation based on demand, rising crime, population and vulnerability, the only determination this is based on is local house prices. Once again, the Minister is at the Dispatch Box

announcing cuts from central Government funding and trying to dress them up as good news. I am afraid no one is falling for it.

Mr Hurd: I have been a shadow Minister and I know that that sometimes requires one to push the boundaries of reasonableness, but I am afraid the hon. Lady has lost all sense of proportion. She talks about the Government creating demand on the police system. I do not know what she means by that. Perhaps she means the pressure we put on the police to improve their recording of crime. Perhaps she means the pressure the current Prime Minister put on the police to improve their support for the most vulnerable people in our communities, which means that more victims of domestic violence and rape are coming forward to the police. If that is what she means, I can see her point.

The hon. Lady tries to claim that the Government are cutting funding to the police in real terms, but I stated very clearly that in this settlement we have moved from flat-cash Home Office grant to police forces to the first real increase in the grant since 2010. That is the reality.

The hon. Lady talks about pension costs, which have been a very real issue. The Treasury has done exactly what it said it would do. I am very clear that through a combination of the special pension grant, the increase in the Home Office grant, the room for efficiencies and the levels of reserves, every single police and crime commissioner should be able to go to their public and talk about local taxes for their local police service.

Finally, for the Labour party to present itself as the champion of the council tax payer, when it doubled council tax when it was in power, is hypocrisy of the worst order. The hon. Lady talks about the council tax payer being weighed down by this, but in reality the average amount of funding that comes from the precept has moved from 32% to 34% across the police system. The reality is that most of the funding for our police system comes from the taxpayer through central funding.

My challenge to the shadow Minister is this. She and her boss led their colleagues through the No Lobby this time last year, so the Labour party effectively voted against a police settlement that put an additional £460 million into our police. This settlement has the potential to put an additional £970 million into our police system so that we as taxpayers are investing over £2 billion more than we were in 2015-16. This might, therefore, be the moment to put tribal politics and games aside and recognise the fundamental truth that Members on both sides of the House recognise the pressure on the police and want to see increased resources for policing. That is exactly what this settlement delivers.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I very much welcome the Minister's statement, particularly his recognition of the pressures that the police are under both in demand and in the resources they have to do their job. I pay tribute to the Wandsworth police, who work tirelessly to keep our local community safe.

In my area we have significant extra housing and population arriving, both in the form of the Battersea power station development and because of demand related to the new US and Dutch embassies. Will the Minister set out briefly how we can ensure that additional demands do not squeeze funding for the broader community in Wandsworth?

Mr Hurd: I thank my right hon. Friend and former boss for that question. As a fellow London MP, I am delighted that the Met could receive an additional £172 million next year if the Mayor raises precept flexibility by the full £24. He has indicated that he will. That comes on to top of an additional £100 million of public investment in the Met this year. The challenge for the commissioner and the Mayor, who is accountable to the people of Wandsworth for how resources are allocated, is to make sure that police resources are not just allocated to existing demand but used to better anticipate future demand, reflecting factors such as those she talks about. It is a challenge, but it is one that police leadership should be up to. We are determined to make sure they have the resources they need to do their job. I am sure she would agree that this settlement enables just that.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Minister has rightly talked about the increasing pressures on policing, as the Home Affairs Committee set out in our report, and we look forward to scrutinising the detail of the figures that he set out. Will he confirm what I think he just said—that once we take account of inflation, the increased pension costs and funding, there is not a real increase in Government funding for police forces? Will he also say what he thinks the impact of the funding will be, given that arrests have halved in the last 10 years, and even in the last three years we have seen an increase of about one third in the level of recorded crime, but a drop of one quarter in the number of charges and summons? Does he think that arrests, charges and summons will go up as a result of these figures?

Mr Hurd: I thank the right hon. Lady for that question and for her challenging, but extremely good, report on future policing. This settlement enables additional investment of up to £970 million in our police system, of which £509 million could come from PCCs, if all of them use their flexibility. Within that, as I said in my statement, we have moved from a situation where the Home Office grant is flat cash to one in which every single PCC will see flat real in relation to the first increase in the grant from the Home Office since 2010. She is right to point to a worrying trend in some of the outcomes of policing. The right hon. Lady and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), identified that and were right to do so. For me, the critical thing now is to increase the capacity of the police and to fill some key capability gaps. She knows that one of the most important of those is the lack of detectives. Therefore, one thing that I and the Home Secretary will be following very closely next year, as I am sure her Committee will, is an improvement in exactly the outcomes that she identified.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I very much welcome the additional resources for policing—something that I and Government Members have raised with the Prime Minister, as the Minister will be aware. Does he agree, though, that we need to urge the Mayor of London to start using some of his £500 million of reserves to strengthen policing and to keep Barnet police station open?

Mr Hurd: I speak not just as the Minister for Policing, but as the Minister for London and a London MP. Certainly, a large part of my ongoing conversations

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with the Mayor will be on the question, “What are you doing with the money?” The taxpayer has put in an additional £100 million this year. As I have said, there is the potential from this settlement for an additional £172 million of public investment in the Met. It is already a force that has over one and a half times the national average in terms of police officers per head, so the voice from Londoners will get increasingly loud in asking, “What are we getting for the money?”

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Yet another tragic case of knife crime in my constituency led to a death within the last 48 hours. Ten years ago, there were 31,000 police officers in London, and the Mayor of London is now warning that that is going to drop to below 27,000. Back then, I had six police officers per ward in my constituency, and I am now struggling to get two. The Government were warned about the dangers of cutting the police so severely and now we are suffering the consequences. What will this announcement do to address the severe cuts that we have seen over the last eight years?

Mr Hurd: As a fellow Londoner, I say to the hon. Gentleman that there is absolutely cross-party consensus on the absolute determination that we need to bear down on this horrific spike in serious violence and knife crime. I am sure that the whole House will want to pass on through him their condolences to the family and friends of the victim of that tragedy. Through the serious violence strategy and the serious violence taskforce, on which the Mayor sits, as do other London Labour MPs, there is an absolute determination to combine robust policing with a big investment in prevention and early intervention to do just that. The Met needs more resources, as I said. An additional £100 million of taxpayers’ money is going into that system this year. This settlement enables additional investment of £172 million, if Sadiq Khan increases precept flexibility. The hon. Gentleman talks about police officer numbers. I am sure that he is aware—and will welcome the fact—that the commissioner is actively recruiting an additional 1,000 officers. We all wait to see what the result of this settlement will be in terms of updating those plans.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much welcome the statement, and I thank the Minister for providing extra resources to deal with the Salisbury and Amesbury incidents. The fact remains, however, that Wiltshire gets £151 per person from the Government to deal with policing. Nationally, the figure is £171 per person. I am sure that he wants to close that gap. Does he propose that that is done through the £161 million that he has announced today, or does he think that Angus Macpherson, our police and crime commissioner, should be raising money locally through the precept using the powers announced today?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Through him, again, I congratulate and place on record our appreciation of the work of Wiltshire police in response to the Salisbury incident. I hope he will welcome the fact that this year, public funding in Wiltshire policing

increased by £4 million and that this settlement enables further investment of up to £9 million, of which £2 million will come from additional grant funding. It is for the local police and crime commissioner to consult colleagues and weigh up his options on using the full precept flexibly. I cannot take that decision for him—he must consult local MPs and people who understand the public pulse in Wiltshire—but if he does so, he has the ability to raise an additional £7 million for local policing in Wiltshire.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Last year, West Midlands police took 40,000 extra 999 calls and recorded 27,000 more crimes and 3,000 more violent crimes, yet it has 2,000 fewer officers. Law and order in our city is now resting on the heroism of officers such as Matt Crowley, who led a major operation against the dealers of violence this week. The Minister knows that we needed £25.5 million extra for 500 extra officers to keep our city safe. At best, can he confirm that we have only half that money and that once more, West Midlands police will be sent forward with one arm tied behind its back?

Mr Hurd: I do not accept that last statement, because that is a grotesque exaggeration of the situation. The West Midlands police force is an extremely important police force in the system, with a proud history of innovation. Funding—public investment—in that system increased by £10 million this year. This settlement enables the police and crime commissioner to increase public investment by up to £34 million, of which £16 million will come from central Government grants. The west midlands has, I think, an above average number of police officers per head of population, compared with the national average, and broadly the national average in terms of crime recorded by police officers, but it is a stretched police force. I absolutely understand that and I see this settlement as another important milestone on the journey towards the next comprehensive spending review, which is the most important event in shaping police funding for the next few years.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): As someone who has campaigned vociferously on behalf of Bedfordshire police, I say thank you for enabling Bedfordshire to raise an extra £8 million next year, which is very welcome indeed. Does the Policing Minister share my outrage at the escalation in the theft of tools from vans? We have just had Small Business Saturday. Someone who steals tools from a work person’s van takes their livelihood. I am concerned that the police might not take that crime as seriously as I think they should. Does he share my concern about that particular issue?

Mr Hurd: I do share that concern, because I absolutely understand the economic impact on that small business trade, and I would expect the police to take that crime seriously. This is an opportunity for me to place on record again my admiration for and thanks to my hon. Friend for his tenacity in advocating for increased funding for Bedfordshire police. I hope that he is pleased about the exceptional grant that I announced a few months ago and that he will welcome a settlement that has the potential to increase funding into Bedfordshire police by up to £8 million next year.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): On Merseyside, we have seen a cut of more than 1,000 police officers since 2010, which is a 24% decrease. Despite the very best efforts of our police, they simply cannot provide the same level of service. Levels of certain crimes are going up and our police are under incredible pressure, as we have seen in the increase in the number of 999 calls.

I listened closely to the Minister. Will he categorically confirm that, of the £161 million increase in grants to the police, almost all—£152 million—will be eaten up by higher pensions? That will mean that inflation and pay increase costs will have to be met by council tax payers—it is about £24 a year, which we are not guaranteed to raise. That means that Merseyside police will just stand still. How on earth is that an acceptable state of affairs?

Mr Hurd: The settlement allows police and crime commissioners to absorb the increase in costs that they face while hopefully enabling them to continue their plans for recruitment and for filling in capability gaps. Like many other police forces, Merseyside police is stretched and does incredibly important and difficult work. Although the hon. Lady voted against it, I hope she welcomes the additional public investment of £5 million in Merseyside police, and that she will support a funding settlement that could increase funding into Merseyside police by up to £18 million this year, of which £8.6 million will come from central Government grant.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Policemen and women in Northamptonshire do a wonderful job in very challenging circumstances and deserve the thanks of hon. Members and of the public. Will the Policing Minister confirm that the funding settlement could mean up to an extra £9 million into Northamptonshire police, and does he share my hope that the police and crime commissioner will use the money to continue to increase police numbers?

Mr Hurd: I place on record my admiration for the work of Northamptonshire police and the police and crime commissioner. They are a good force in relation to efficiency, and benefited from increased funding of £4 million this year, which my hon. Friend voted for. I hope he will support this settlement, which I can confirm has the capacity to increase funding by a further £9 million this year. Of course, it is up to Stephen and the local chief to decide how those resources are best allocated. I am sure my hon. Friend will express a strong view on behalf of the good people of Kettering.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Where in this statement is there money for a public health model to cut youth violence? Where in this statement is there money for a police partnership with the NHS, so that they can work together to support each other and reduce the police work related to people with mental health problems?

Mr Hurd: The right hon. Gentleman raises two extremely important points. Our whole approach to bearing down on the worst spike in serious violence and knife crime in a decade is entirely based on a public health model, as the Home Secretary has made extremely clear. That is the basis of the serious violence taskforce, which brings

together all the agencies, including health and education, to discuss what needs to be done to combine robust policing with effective prevention and intervention work, and support for young people. That strategy is properly funded, not least through the £200 million youth endowment fund. That is long-term money to support that work and to support young people up and down the country.

The right hon. Gentleman's second point on the demands placed on the police system by the need to support people in crisis or who are suffering from mental health issues is an extremely important one. The recommendations of the review of the Mental Health Act 1983 were extremely valuable not only on what needs to change to reduce the demand on the police system, but on ensuring that people in crisis who are suffering from mental health issues are supported by the right people—the people qualified to help them, which in many cases is not the police. One dividend I want from the additional investment in local mental health services announced in the Budget is a reduction in the demand on policing. I hope he will support me in that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The murder rate in London is at its highest since 2008. My right hon. Friend the Minister will know that, in Harrow, we face a spike in aggravated burglaries—burglars burst into people's homes knowing that they are there to intimidate them and beat them up. That clearly needs extra policing resources, but not ordinary policing resources—it needs detectives with experience and capability. What in the settlement will encourage people to remain in the police force and encourage new recruits?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour. He is entirely right, and I will be sitting down with Pinner residents tomorrow to discuss exactly their concerns about the spike in aggravated burglary. The police response, to their credit, has been good, including enhanced neighbourhood team working and enhanced advice on crime prevention. One of the gangs in the case has been disrupted. There has been a good policing response, but the situation requires additional resources going into the Metropolitan police, in part to support increased investment in frontline officers but, critically, to support increased investment in detectives, who follow up crime and give a better service to victims. I hope he supports the settlement for that reason.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that the proposed increase in the precept in the Merseyside police force area will mean that people in all council tax bands will experience a 13% increase? Jane Kennedy, the police and crime commissioner, says that that will allow only for a stand-still budget on Merseyside. At the same time, we have seen a worrying increase in knife and gun crime, and the needless and tragic loss of so many young lives, yet the Minister has been unprepared to meet the police and crime commissioner and local MPs to discuss it. Will he undertake to meet the commissioner, the chief constable and local MPs to discuss how we can tackle that appalling problem?

Mr Hurd: With genuine respect to the right hon. Gentleman, I have met Jane on a number of occasions, and once specifically with the Under-Secretary of State

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for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who has responsibility for crime and safeguarding, to discuss serious violence.

Mr Howarth: We have asked four times and had no answer.

Mr Hurd: I am not aware of that. I see Jane quite regularly, as I do the chief. Given the seriousness of the matter, I am more than happy to sit down with Merseyside MPs—I give that undertaking, and was unaware of those unanswered requests. We have an open and regular dialogue with the police leadership.

The settlement helps police and crime commissioners to manage cost pressures—the pension issue was a serious concern—in a way that will allow Jane to go to the people of Merseyside and say clearly that any increase in the local precept will go into local policing. That is one objective of the settlement.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Despite the exceptional efforts of the Humberside force, there is growing concern among my constituents that too many serious crimes such as burglary and attacks on retail staff go without investigation. Will the Minister assure my constituents that the additional resources going to the force will allow for more investigations into those crimes?

Mr Hurd: Through my hon. Friend, I pass on my congratulations to the Humberside force for some very impressive performance improvements within existing resources, which has been noticed by the independent inspectorate.

I hope my hon. Friend welcomes the settlement, which builds on last year's, which resulted in an additional £4 million-worth of investment in Humberside policing this year. This year's settlement enables an increase of up to £11 million of further investment. It is obviously up to the local police and crime commissioner, operating and working with local MPs and colleagues, to decide how those resources are allocated, but I am sure my hon. Friend will be a powerful advocate for exactly what he describes.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Under this Government, since 2010, we have seen the lowest number of police officers in Humberside since the 1970s. It is welcome that under the current chief constable and the police and crime commissioner, Keith Hunter, recruitment is starting to take off again, but what I think worries all Humberside Members is what we were told by the chief constable. He said that if the funds were not found for the additional payments into the police pension scheme, up to 120 officers could lose their jobs and all police community support officers could go. I know that the Minister has just talked about the money that is available for this financial year, but—my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) made this point—what about 2019-20 and 2020-21?

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. Lady for welcoming the increased recruitment of police officers in Humberside, which, I should add, was made possible by a police settlement that she voted against. This settlement enables

the police and crime commissioner and the new chief constable to continue that process, not least as the increased costs and the pension costs are absorbed.

The hon. Lady made an important point about what will happen beyond 2019-20. We have made it very clear that the conversation about ongoing management of the need for increased employer contributions to public pensions is wrapped up in the conversations about the comprehensive spending review that is expected next year, which are now live.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Tomorrow afternoon I will host a meeting in the village of Lavenham, together with the police and crime commissioner, Tim Passmore, and the chief constable. It is likely to be attended by about 100 farmers, and will deal specifically with the issue of rural crime following a wave of significant incidents on the Suffolk-Essex borders in recent months. While I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, what message will he give me to take to that meeting about the resources to which we may look forward in Suffolk as a result of his statement?

Mr Hurd: Like many colleagues, my hon. Friend has been a tireless advocate of increased resources for policing, and specifically for Suffolk policing. This settlement builds on the settlement for 2018-19, which provided an additional £3 million for Suffolk: it will allow a further investment of up to £9 million. What my hon. Friend can communicate to that meeting is the Government's determination to ensure that Suffolk and other police forces have the resources that they need to meet the increasing demands caused by the change in and variety of crime in his area. I do, of course, understand the significance of rural crime, and the determination of farmers to ensure that the police and crime commissioner is attributing the right level of importance to it.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Over the last few years, the West Midlands police force has lost £175 million and 2,000 officers as a result of Government cuts. Violent crime and murders are up, and in the past 10 years the number of arrests has fallen by 50%. I am being lobbied by the public because of their frustration about the lack of action when they report crimes, and I am being lobbied by the police because, as good public servants, they are deeply demoralised by their inability to meet the legitimate demands placed on them by the public.

The Minister said that Opposition Members who raised this issue were doing so for tribal reasons. Will he withdraw that comment, and recognise that Opposition Members are exercising their democratic duty in reporting the legitimate fears of the people whom they represent? Will he also tell me whether, in one year's time, any of the negative statistics that we have seen in the West Midlands will be reversed as a result of this settlement?

Mr Hurd: I fully recognise the pressures on West Midlands police. Both the hon. Gentleman's concern and the concern expressed to him by his constituents are clearly genuine. My straight answer to him, however, is that, given that concern, he should support a police funding settlement that has the capacity to increase funding for West Midlands police by up to £34 million. In doing so, he also might correct a wrong, namely, his action in voting against a settlement that increased funding for that force by £10 million in the current year.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I do not think that members of the public would appreciate any reduction in resources for the police force because of an actuarial calculation. I thank my right hon. Friend, and the Prime Minister, for responding so well to representations from me, from London Tory MPs, and from Shaun Bailey. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is now important for the Mayor of London to put the whole £172 million of extra funding into the hands of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner as soon as possible, so that she can plan effectively for recruitment, tackling knife crime, and delivering to keep Londoners safe?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend, and other London colleagues, for their persistence in lobbying to ensure that the Metropolitan police have the resources that they need, and that the additional cost pressures, which have been a genuine problem, are cushioned by this settlement. I thank him for his support for it.

If the Mayor uses his maximum flexibility, which he has indicated that he will, there will be an additional £172 million of public investment in the Met, on top of the extra £100 million this year. That is a serious amount of money. My hon. Friend and I, together with other colleagues, will be holding the Mayor and the Commissioner to account for the way in which that money is spent, and, in particular, for ensuring that we see continued progress in driving down the serious violence that is so deeply unsettling for Londoners.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Last week I saw at first hand just how stretched our local police are when I joined officers patrolling Bradford. Areas such as mine, which have seen a surge in violent and sexual crimes, have also seen some of the biggest cuts. When will central Government stop passing the buck to local ratepayers, and take responsibility for funding our police properly?

Mr Hurd: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her support for her local police force in West Yorkshire. I am sure that, given her desire to see them supported properly, she will welcome a settlement that has the capacity to increase their funding by £28.5 million this year. I look forward to her support in the Lobby.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): The Minister knows from our meetings that I wanted to see a strong settlement for the police. I am delighted that there will be an extra £13 million for Leicestershire police, and I am very pleased about the money to protect police pensions.

Does the Minister agree with me on two points? First, does he agree that this must be a first step towards a strong settlement in next year's spending review, with a fair funding formula attached to it? Secondly, will he confirm that the new programme to look after officers' welfare will especially help officers who have been victims of violence in the course of their duty? All of us in the House want to see stiffer sentences for those who attack police officers, and we are all very proud of the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) to do just that, but must we not also look after the welfare of those poor officers who have been attacked while protecting all the rest of us?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Hurd: I could not agree more, and I think my hon. Friend senses the House's full approval of what he has said. I congratulate him personally on his tenacity in advocating more resources and support for Leicestershire police.

My hon. Friend has also raised a very important point. One of the unacceptable features of the modern landscape and the circumstances that the police have to manage is the increased number of assaults and abuse of members of the police and emergency services. It was entirely right that, on a cross-party basis, led by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the House came together to take that Bill through Parliament to send the strongest possible signal that we find such actions absolutely unacceptable.

Yes, I can confirm that as part of the settlement and part of the investment through the police transformation fund, we are working with the police to build the first national welfare programme to support the wellbeing of officers who are having to work in very challenging circumstances, often feeling very stretched. Their welfare and wellbeing is of huge importance to us, and we are investing public money to support it.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The West Midlands police service has suffered a £175 million cut and the loss of 2,000 police officers. With violent crime up, gun crime up, knife crime up and burglaries up, fear stalks the streets in too many communities in the west midlands. Today's settlement is a cut in real terms. It passes the buck to hard-pressed council tax payers, and it simply does not go far enough to put back on the beat the 500 officers whom we badly need in Birmingham and the west midlands. I pay tribute to the members of our police service, who have been nothing short of heroic, but as the thin blue line is drawn ever thinner, is it not the case that the Government are failing in the first duty of any Government, which is to ensure the safety and security of their citizens?

Mr Hurd: No, I deny that completely. Like last year's settlement, this settlement is entirely designed to make sure we increase the resources available to policing. The hon. Gentleman is tenacious in this regard, but he and other Labour Members consistently fail to make any connection between the need to reduce police budgets and the imperative to get serious about reducing the largest peacetime budget deficit in this country's history. The cuts were the consequence of Labour action, which he supported, and it was our job to try to clear up that mess. As we make progress on that journey, we are now able as a country to do more in terms of public investment in our public services. The police are a priority for the Home Secretary, as we have made clear, and this settlement could not be clearer about the ambition we have, within the resources we have got, to prioritise public safety and make sure that the police have the support they need—for West Midlands police the potential for an increase of up to £34 million of additional investment, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will support that.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): This is a positive announcement for Greater Manchester police, who serve my constituency so well. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that it will allow them to increase frontline officer numbers and that more can be done in the forthcoming spending review so that they can properly respond to the victims of crime?

Mr Hurd: Yes, I can certainly confirm that this settlement has the potential to increase funding to GMP by up to £35 million, of which almost £15 million comes from central Government grants. Again that is an enormously important police force that is stretched and is facing challenging circumstances, which is why we are determined to come to this House with an ambitious settlement to increase resources for policing and capacity for policing, and I look forward to my hon. Friend's support.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My constituents in Battersea are seeing an alarming rise in crime, with violent crime having increased by more than 15% in just six months this year. Following over £2 billion of cuts by this Tory Government to our local forces, can the Minister now confirm that the funding settlement today is only a tiny fraction of what has already been cut from our forces since 2010, and this will leave our police forces unable to meet the surge in violent crime?

Mr Hurd: I do not think my constituents would consider £172 million of increased investment in London policing, if that is what the Mayor enables, to be a small, tiny step; I think most people would recognise that to be a large amount of money. They want the police to have more support and welcome the fact that the Met are recruiting additional officers, yet the hon. Lady joins other Labour MPs in punching the same old tune on the jukebox, which completely ignores the economic reality that the last Labour Government ran out of money and ran up the biggest budget deficit in the history of this country, and it was our responsibility to sort that out.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I thank the Minister and the Home Secretary for listening to the points raised on the Conservative Benches about the need to increase funding for our police and help to tackle crime. I also hope he agrees with me about supporting forces like Staffordshire police. We are led by a fantastic Conservative PCC, who is doing fantastic work to lead that police force. Will my right hon. Friend also confirm that Staffordshire police will receive an additional £13 million due to this funding settlement to help tackle crime in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for his representations on behalf of Staffordshire police. He knows how important it is for his constituents that the police are well supported. This is indeed a settlement that has the capacity to increase investment into Staffordshire policing by up to £13 million. The excellent PCC Matthew Ellis has got some choices to make, but he will be supported by an increased grant from central Government. I thank my hon. Friend for his support for this settlement.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The police Minister knows that I have seen for myself the pressures facing South Wales police, particularly in Cardiff, not just from the increasing demand from everything from county lines to spice to missing persons, but from the specific demands on it as a capital city hosting major events and as a seat of Government. The Minister met me, the chief constable and the PCC, and we made a very reasonable request to him; I wonder if he has had a chance to consider it further and has anything hopeful to say to us. On the police pensions gap, I appreciate what he said about next year, but

beyond that the gap is projected to be £417 million a year, £10 million of which would fall as a burden on South Wales police. Where is that money going to come from in the future?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman made a powerful representation on behalf of Cardiff, which I am genuinely and seriously looking at. The more specific answer to that and his broader question around pension costs is rooted in the strategy for the CSR, which is active work under way in anticipation of a spending review next year. He talks about a pensions gap; there is not a pensions gap in 2019-20 as a result of this settlement, and I am determined that through the CSR, with the full support of the Home Secretary, we will get a robust settlement for the police that allows them to increase their capacity and improve their response to changing demand.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): During the last hour or so Members have quite rightly been standing up for their own areas, but nobody can say what I am going to say. As the Minister knows from his frequent meetings with Lincolnshire MPs, Lincolnshire is the lowest funded police authority per head in the country—just £88 compared with £99 for Norfolk, a comparable authority. The Minister knows that from our meetings, and he knows that Marc Jones, our excellent commissioner, is now warning that we might lose all our PCSOs and see the complete end of community policing in Lincolnshire. He knows that Bill Skelly, our excellent chief constable, has warned that he might lose up to 60 police officers. He knows, too, that after years of belt-tightening going back over the 35 years that I have been in this House we cannot save £16 million over the next three years. So I beg the police Minister to raise his eyes from his excellent brief and convince us in Lincolnshire that we are going to get a fair funding formula. This is about justice. This is a county that has loyally supported the Conservatives in all my lifetime; where is the justice?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend is, along with other Lincolnshire MPs—I am sitting on the Front Bench next to one now, my ministerial colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins)—assiduous, as are Marc and Bill, in making this point on behalf of Lincolnshire. I hope that my hon. Friend will welcome and support a funding settlement that has the potential to see an additional £9 million of funding going into Lincolnshire Police in 2019-20 on top of the £3 million that the settlement for 2018-19 enabled, and on top of consideration of exceptional grant funding as well. But I absolutely accept my hon. Friend's main point that there is a serious set of decisions to be taken about how funding is allocated across police forces; there is a very serious issue around the fairness of that allocation, and I have indicated very clearly that this settlement is the final stepping stone on the journey towards that work in the CSR, which is the appropriate strategic framework in which to settle police funding for the next five years. He and others have a powerful case to make on behalf of Lincolnshire, a force that does excellent work under extremely difficult circumstances and is extremely well led, not least by Marc Jones.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Minister and his London cronies really have got some brass neck, in one breath asking what the Mayor of London has done

to tackle crime, and in the next breath trying to take credit for the 1,000 police officers being put on London's streets thanks to action by London's Mayor. Is it not the case that, even after this funding settlement announced today and the huge increases in charges for council tax payers that will follow, the funding announcement made by the Minister will barely dent the loss of 3,000 police officers, more than 3,000 PCSOs and 5,000 police staff across London, and that is the tragedy that is fuelling rising crime on the streets of my constituency?

Mr Hurd: Well, to be accused by the hon. Gentleman of brass neck is something. I hope that he welcomes the fact that the commissioner is now in a position to recruit an additional 1,000 officers as a result of the actions taken in the police settlement last year—

Wes Streeting: And by the Mayor.

Mr Hurd: And the actions by the Mayor of London. We now have an opportunity to increase funding to the Metropolitan police by up to £172 million, which will seem—and is—a large amount of money to the hon. Gentleman's constituents, as it does to mine. I sincerely hope that, rather than grandstanding, he will support the Government on this.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister repeatedly claims to recognise that the first duty of his Government is to protect UK citizens, including my constituents, but he is moving funding for the police on to town council tax payers when wages are still flatlining and in-work poverty is at an all-time high. Northumbria has lost a third of its officers while demand is rising as a result of crimes ranging from burglary to historical sexual abuse to terrorism, as we have seen this week. Will he tell me whether this settlement will get us back our lost bobbies and give Northumbria police the funding they need so that hard-pressed police officers can do the jobs they love to do?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady tries to make a point about loading police funding on to council tax payers, when precept funding for Northumbria police represents 19% of total funding. The issue for Northumbria police is a low tax base and an historical decision not to raise council tax. This means that the precept level is low. Vera Baird now has an option to increase council tax by up to £2 a month, and the hon. Lady will have her own view on whether that is acceptable to her constituents. To her point, this is a settlement that builds on a settlement that put £5 million more into Northumbria policing this year, and has the potential to put in a further £18 million next year, to deliver exactly the things she is talking about, so I would be very surprised if she did not support the Government in the voting Lobby.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I have heard what the Minister has had to say about London, but the reality is that since 2010 the Met has faced cuts of £1 billion from central Government. The Government are to blame for the funding crisis in policing. Raising the council tax precept will mean that hard-working families will have to foot the bill and that police budgets will still be significantly underfunded compared with 2010. When will the Government stop abdicating responsibility and undo the damage caused by years of austerity?

Mr Hurd: My question is: when will Labour MPs grasp economic reality and understand the reason why budgets had to be cut in the first place? It is also recognised by almost everyone that there was enormous scope to improve the efficiency of the Metropolitan police, and I congratulate the police leadership on the work they have done to do exactly that. The reality is that this settlement has the ability to put another £172 million into Metropolitan police funding, on top of £100 million in 2018-19. For all those reasons, I would expect the hon. Lady to support this.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Minister has repeatedly referred to a "spike" in serious violence. May I urge him to stop using that word? It is not a spike unless and until we actually get these numbers down. The truth is that it is a rising surge. In particular, the horrific assaults on emergency workers that are preventing them from saving people's lives really have to be tackled. If the police on my patch in South Wales are to be able to do that, they will need additional resources. We need to see the law implemented fully. My biggest fear is that, if South Wales police has a £10 million shortfall in its pension fund, it will be areas such as the Rhondda and the small towns and villages on my patch that will lose out on any kind of policing whatsoever. We really need additional resources in South Wales police.

Mr Hurd: I actually understand the hon. Gentleman's point. I use the word "spike" because I am determined, as are my colleagues, that it is a spike and not a shift. We have been here before, in London 10 years ago, when there was a spike and we succeeded in bearing down on it—

Louise Haigh: We did that.

Mr Hurd: The Labour party is claiming some credit for that, but I do not think that the Mayor at the time was Labour. I seem to remember that he was called Boris. Leaving that aside, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) makes a serious point about the need for additional resourcing for policing. We on the Government Benches absolutely accept that argument, because we absolutely accept the pressures on the police. I happen to think that we are as one with Labour Front Benches on this, because we all recognise the pressure on the police. We all recognise that the police need additional resources. We are pragmatic, and we know that the public finances remain constrained, but this is an ambitious settlement that—if the police and crime commissioner uses the full power—will see up to £19 million more going into South Wales police on top of the £8 million increase that went in this year. I sincerely hope that I can count on the hon. Gentleman's support when this measure comes to a vote.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The Minister repeatedly mentioned the need to tackle debt. He will know that the debt-to-GDP ratio, which is the only measure that counts, remains stagnant under this Government and that the cuts to public services simply funded cuts to things like corporation tax, which made little or no difference to a slow-growing economy that has been hampered by this Government's failed Brexit agenda. Can the Minister look me in the eye and tell me that the massive increase in knife crime and the 130 murders

[Sarah Jones]

in London this year have nothing to do with the £850 million cuts that the Met police has already had to implement since 2010? Can he also explain how the £33 million of Government core funding that he has announced today for the Met will in any way fill that gap?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady and I share an absolute determination to bear down on this terrible violence in London, and I salute the work that she has been doing for some time on that issue. Where she is wrong is on the economics. She talks about tax cuts, but she is talking to a party that has cut income tax for 32 million people and that has reduced the amount of tax paid by a basic-rate payer by £1,205 since it has been in power. She is talking to a party that, despite what it had to do to get public finances under control, has managed to keep council tax as low as possible. That is in stark contrast to her party, which doubled council tax when it was in power.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister's commitment to the extra moneys to address terrorism and organised crime. Hailing from Northern Ireland, and from my constituency, I believe that security measures are as essential as the NHS. Funding has to be set aside for policing and communities, but funding for additional staffing must also be met. Will the Minister meet the cost of those duties and demands, and not rely on further tax hikes at council level, which would fall on the shoulders and the backs of the middle class, who are already squeezed?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman will know that this is a settlement for England and Wales. To his point, it is designed to help police and crime commissioners to manage the very real cost pressures that they face while

giving them the space to continue their plans to recruit additional officers and fill key capability gaps. Our priority is to help the police to increase their capacity and to do an even better job in responding to increases in demand. That is the full intention of this settlement.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And the prize for patience and perseverance goes to Kerry McCarthy.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. There is one advantage to being called last, in that I have now heard the Minister respond over and over again to my many colleagues who have raised the increase in violent crime, the impact of the cuts and the loss of frontline police officers in their constituencies. He has not answered anyone who has questioned him on whether the extra money he has announced today will do any more than just fill the pensions funding gap. We have lost 700 frontline police officers in the Avon and Somerset force. Will today's announcement mean that we can replace them?

Mr Hurd: I am sorry that the hon. Lady felt that she did not hear an answer to that question. The reality is that the additional pension costs for 2019-20 are £330 million, and this settlement is designed so that, if all police and crime commissioners use their precept flexibility, there will be an additional investment of £970 million in our police system. Within that, there is plenty of scope to go beyond standing still. Our intention is to support excellent forces such as Avon and Somerset to increase their capacity to deliver a better service to the hon. Lady's constituents. This year, she voted against a settlement that put an additional £8 million into Avon and Somerset police, but I hope she will not vote against a settlement that has the potential to increase funding by up to £21 million for that police force in 2019-20.

Points of Order

2.9 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for not being able to raise this matter with you in advance—the Policing Minister may be interested to hear this—but I am aware of concerns about harassment targeted at some of the peaceful demonstrators who have been outside Parliament for many weeks, months or years protesting about issues around Brexit. I am always unclear about the boundaries of the parliamentary estate, but I am sure that you would agree, along with many Members, that people should be able to express themselves and protest freely and peacefully outside Parliament's buildings.

I am told that some of those protestors, particularly those from SODEM—the Stand of Defiance European Movement—including Steven Bray, are being harassed by people holding potentially defamatory placards targeting individuals and by the activities of the far right. This is a relatively recent development and, as I think you will be aware, these good-natured protests have been going on quite peacefully for a long time. Could you use your offices to speak to the parliamentary security authorities to ensure that protestors are kept safe, that their right to protest is respected and that contact is made with the Metropolitan Police to ensure that those protests are able to continue in a safe and secure way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point of order. It is matter of concern for Parliament and for Members that peaceful protests should be allowed in the vicinity of Parliament. Exactly what constitutes peaceful protest and what crosses the line into a breach of the peace is another matter, and one on which I obviously cannot comment without knowing further details. The hon. Gentleman has targeted his point of order well in raising it while the Policing Minister is still in the Chamber.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Hurd): *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I take it from that nod that the Minister has listened carefully to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). I will also ensure that the Serjeant at Arms knows about what the hon. Gentleman has said, as I am sure Mr Speaker would wish me to ensure.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 6 November, I tabled a written parliamentary question to the Ministry of Justice regarding the number of appeals involving special educational needs cases and tribunals, asking for that material to be provided on a local authority basis. On 12 November, I received a response from the Department saying that such information would be placed in the Library. It is now 13 December and that information has not been provided despite regular calls from my office to the Library and the Ministry of Justice to try to secure it. Given that so few sitting days remain, I wonder whether you can advise me on how best to secure that information so that I may update my constituents, who are worried about special educational needs tribunals.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. As she will know, the Chair has no power whatsoever over the way in which Ministers operate their Departments, but I will echo what Mr Speaker has said many times. There is a duty upon Ministers and their Departments to answer hon. Members' questions in a timely fashion, and it would appear that the hon. Lady has waited quite some time for her answer. By raising the matter right now, she has brought it to the attention of those on the Treasury Bench, and I am sure that her points will have been noted. If she still does not receive an answer, I am sure that she will come back to Mr Speaker for further advice and that he would be happy to help.

Public Health Model to Reduce Youth Violence

2.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I beg to move,

That this House has considered a public health model to reduce youth violence.

There is something particularly poignant about discussing serious violence, its terrible ramifications and a public health approach towards it in the days leading up to Christmas. It is poignant because some families will be facing their first Christmas without a son or a daughter, a brother or a sister, a father or a mother. For them, this season of good will and celebration will be filled with grief, longing and loss, so this debate is well timed. Looking around, I can see many Members in the Chamber this afternoon who have particular constituency issues, and I hope that they will help the House to understand them. I also hope that at the conclusion of the debate we will have discovered not just the Government's approach to tackling serious violence, but the will of the House to work together to stop these terrible crimes. We are all committed to breaking the deadly cycle of violence, and the Government published our serious violence strategy earlier this year, which outlines an ambitious programme of work to tackle the issue.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): It is important to state for the people watching this debate just how worried this House is. Over 40 young people between the ages of 13 and 24 have died from violence this year in London alone—over 40—but there are fewer than 30 Members in the Chamber debating this important issue right now. What does she say to people watching these proceedings who think, “Do you know what? That lot just do not care”? Look at these empty green Benches. How will the Minister explain them to people watching right now?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who contributes a great deal through the serious violence taskforce, which is chaired by the Home Secretary and brings together colleagues from across the House and people from local government, Whitehall Departments, the police, health and so on to try to tease out ways of tackling serious violence. I understand his point. It is of course for each Member of Parliament to decide which debates to attend. However, looking at the colleagues who are here, I know that they have all paid particular attention to this issue in their constituencies and in conversations with me and other Ministers. I hope that there will be more people in the Chamber for future such debates, but anyone watching should rest assured that, although the Benches may not be as full today as the hon. Gentleman and I would like, a great deal of work is going on outside this Chamber.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): How many times has the serious violence taskforce met? Where can we find the details of what it has discussed?

Victoria Atkins: The taskforce has met five times—it meets pretty much every month, although there may have been a period of five weeks between one or two meetings. There was a meeting only last week that I was unfortunately unable to attend because I was required

for a debate in the House, but the next meeting is on 9 January. We do not publish the minutes of the meeting because we want people to be able to exchange full and frank views. I am grateful to hon. Members throughout the House who take part in the taskforce, which has pushed on a programme of work across Government, including on exclusions and social media activity. I plan to move on to that later in my speech.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Minister acknowledges that this is a huge problem and that the murder rate is at its highest since 2008, with the 130th homicide of the year in London happening earlier this week. Will she therefore explain why we are taking so long to get on to the public health model? It was deployed in Glasgow in 2005 and efforts and initiatives by groups such as Redthread have been going since 2005, so why is it taking so long to get this model going?

Victoria Atkins: The right hon. Gentleman will know that the serious violence strategy, which I am about to come on to, sets out the cross-governmental, multi-agency approach to the public health model. He mentions Redthread, so I hope he knows that the Home Office has been funding charities such as Redthread, St Giles Trust and other important and valuable contributors from the charitable sphere for some time now, because we recognise that law enforcement and policing is not the only answer. Of course it is important, but we want to get to the early causes of crime to prevent young people in particular from being dragged into criminality and snared by gangs, particularly in the case of county lines.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I will give way, after which I will make some progress.

Norman Lamb: I share the concern of others about the horrifying death toll. I pay tribute to the work of the Youth Violence Commission in highlighting these issues. Given that we are considering a public health approach in this debate, is the Minister conscious of the clear correlation between people experiencing adversity, trauma, abuse and neglect in their early years and the emergence of mental ill health, exclusion from school, violence and so on? Does she agree that it is vital that we apply the evidence of what works in those early years to prevent such trauma from becoming entrenched and, potentially, to prevent violence?

Victoria Atkins: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his work on this subject over the years, and I join him in paying tribute to the work of the Youth Violence Commission. I absolutely agree about adverse childhood experiences. He will know there is a new inter-ministerial group, chaired by the Leader of the House, focusing on the first two years of life. I invited myself on to that group because it is of such interest to my portfolio.

When I speak to young people who are involved in gangs, and to their youth workers, the prevalence of domestic abuse is sadly a theme that runs through these young people's lives. That is why I hope the forthcoming domestic abuse Bill will have an immediate impact not just on violence committed in people's homes but on the

longer-term consequences of ensuring that children do not witness such violence and abuse in what should be their ultimate place of safety—their home. That can have long-term adverse impacts in their adult and teenage years.

The serious violence strategy sets out our understanding of recent increases in serious violence, our analysis of the trends and drivers, as well as the risks, and the protective factors that can help to tackle them. As a result, it places a new emphasis on early intervention and prevention, and it aims to tackle the root causes of the problem, alongside ensuring a robust law enforcement response.

The strategy sets out our response under four key themes: tackling county lines and the misuse of drugs; early intervention and prevention; supporting communities and local partnerships; and the law enforcement and criminal justice response. The strategy is very clear that tackling serious violence is not a law enforcement issue alone and that it requires a multi-agency approach involving a range of organisations, partners and agencies, including education, health, social services, housing and youth services. It supports a public health approach to tackling serious violence, which I suspect has the support of the House.

Vicky Foxcroft: Does the Minister share my disappointment that we do not have Ministers here listening to the debate from all those other Departments, which are so integral to delivering a public health approach?

Victoria Atkins: I always enjoy the company of my colleagues on the Treasury Bench. In fairness, those Ministers may not be here today, but they are there at meetings of the serious violence taskforce, the inter-ministerial group on serious violence and the inter-ministerial group on the first two years of life. There is a great deal of Whitehall involvement, and there has to be, because we have to ensure that all relevant Government Departments, at both national and local level, are involved if we are to provide a wrap-around approach to tackling violence.

The trends and analysis show that this violence is based around male-on-male offending, alongside a shift to younger offenders. Young black men are disproportionately represented as both victims and perpetrators, and although the rise in violence is national, particular communities are being disproportionately hurt by this terrible violence. The strategy is clear that a range of factors are likely to be driving the rise in serious violence, but the most notable driver is the drugs market.

Crack cocaine markets have strong links to serious violence, supported by the growth in county lines, which is also strongly linked to violence. The latest evidence suggests that crack use is rising in England and Wales and that county lines drug dealing, which is associated with hard class A drugs, has spread.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the work she is doing and for always being available when we want to speak to her, which is appreciated.

It is true that the increase in drug use is driving some of these issues, but at least three quarters of knife crime is not gang-related in that way. People are carrying

knives and getting involved in knife crime for completely different reasons, and it is important that we bear that in mind as we look at the evidence.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady, who has done so much work in her constituency and in the House on knife crime, not least through chairing the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, is absolutely right. Sadly, we know that more young people are carrying knives because they think, wrongly, that it will offer them protection. That is where education is critical.

I am extremely grateful for the work the APPG and the associated charities are doing to try to educate young people. One has only to visit the Ben Kinsella Trust, for example, to see the powerful message it delivers, as one makes one's way around the exhibition, that carrying a knife simply does not offer such protection. Indeed, many young people are killed by their own knives. That is very much part of the early intervention work, which I will outline in detail.

Social media is a driving force in serious violence and in escalating gang violence, due to the reaction of young people to supposed signs of disrespect or, indeed, encouragements to commit violence. A range of risk factors can affect a person's vulnerability and susceptibility to becoming a victim or perpetrator of serious violence through a range of adverse childhood experiences, such as domestic abuse, truancy and exclusion. The strategy also sets out the evidence and support for targeted interventions that can help to mitigate, and protect children and young people from, these factors.

I will talk first about tackling county lines and the misuse of drugs, because county lines is the first of the four key areas of action set out in our strategy. County lines is a horrific form of child criminal exploitation, and it involves high levels of violence. I am grateful to colleagues on both sides of the House for raising awareness of county lines. Sadly, in the last year or so, we have all become familiar with county lines, and it is precisely because of the questions posed in debates in this place, as well as a very informed campaign by the police and others, that the public are now much more aware of this type of crime.

We have a cross-Government programme of action to tackle county lines, which includes investing £3.6 million to establish a new national county lines co-ordination centre to enhance our intelligence capability and to support cross-border working to disrupt county lines criminality, while also ensuring that vulnerable children and young people are identified and safeguarded.

The new centre became fully operational in September, and it carried out its first week of intensification, to use the police terminology, in October, which resulted in 505 arrests and 320 individuals being safeguarded. That is an extraordinary amount of work in one week, and it shows the scale of the challenge to policing and social services colleagues. The serious violence strategy sets out further measures we will take to enhance our response to drugs, building on the drugs strategy of 2017 and providing further support in targeted areas, such as through heroin and cocaine action areas.

As has already been mentioned, the evidence to support early intervention is set out in our strategy, and a focus on early intervention and prevention is at the heart of a

[Victoria Atkins]

public health approach. That is why we have already delivered on our early intervention youth fund, allocating £17.7 million to 29 projects that will focus on diverting vulnerable young people and those who have already offended away from crime. The projects, supported by police and crime commissioners across England and Wales, will work with young people who are already involved in criminality or who have already offended, and with organisations safeguarding those at risk of gang exploitation and county lines, to deliver interventions to help them into positive life choices. Earlier this year, we also launched a major social media advertising campaign aimed at teenagers, #knifefree, to raise awareness of the consequences of knife crime and discourage young people from carrying knives. That has been supported with the creation of a #knifefree lesson plan and resources for teachers to use in schools.

As I have said previously, a multi-agency approach and local partnerships are vital. That is why we placed PCCs at the heart of our early intervention youth fund and why we are running a series of engagement events for interested and relevant agencies and partners across England and Wales. The aim of the events is to increase awareness of the strategy's key messages and actions, and understand what action is being taken locally. The events allow partners to share good practice and feedback on further support and what further action needs to be taken. Three events have already taken place in London, Luton and Bristol, and at least 10 further events will take place next year. I have attended one of them and they are very powerful programmes, allowing people to give good advice and to ask questions to improve their local response. We have also made available funding of £1.5 million for 68 projects from the anti-knife crime community fund. The funding supports communities to tackle knife crime, including through early intervention and education, as well as mentoring and outreach work. I hope hon. Members have received letters from me informing them of local projects that have received those donations.

Finally, the strategy sets out further action we will take to enhance the law enforcement and criminal justice response, including tackling social media and continued targeted action on knife crime. On 17 June, the Home Secretary announced funding of £1.4 million to support a new national police capability to tackle gang-related activity on social media. This new police "hub" will be fully operational early next year and will focus on disrupting gang criminality online, as well as identifying and referring more content to social media companies to be removed. In addition, we are taking action to ensure the police have all the powers they need to tackle violent crime. We have introduced a new Offensive Weapons Bill to strengthen our legislation on knives, corrosive substances and firearms. The Bill has completed its passage through this House and had its First Reading in the House of Lords on 29 November. We have continued to encourage police forces to undertake a series of co-ordinated national weeks of action against knife crime under Operation Sceptre. The last operation was in September, when all 43 forces in England and Wales took part, as well as British Transport police. Our newly published serious and organised crime strategy also sets out a framework for how we will use our

national, regional and local capabilities to disrupt and target serious violence activity through county lines, for example.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the Minister, in her conversations, encourage the police to use the powers they have? Let me give one example on this. A gang who were glorifying violence were convicted and banned from making any music videos—putting them online—unless the police gave their approval. The police then approved one video that had shocking lyrics glorifying gun violence. No wonder campaigners have their head in their hands when the police make decisions such as that.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I was grateful for the particular interest he took in the Offensive Weapons Bill. I am not familiar with the case he has raised, but if he provides me with the details, I will certainly look into it. When the police ask us for powers we do our level best to provide them, but I, too, would like to see those powers used sensibly when they are provided.

Sarah Jones: I want to caution against being too flippant when it comes to social media. There are big issues to address, but a lot of music that is online, drill music and stuff on YouTube, in particular, is an expression of an environment in which people find themselves, not an expression of intent. That is where the difference lies and that is what the police have to tackle. Someone expressing what is around in their community, what they see and their lived experience is very different from someone expressing intent to do something—that is the difference.

Victoria Atkins: I listen to and consider that with great care, but I must make the point that I would like to support our young people and give them the reassurance that if they do not want to be listening to or watching videos that are incredibly violent—as I say, I am not familiar with the example my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) provided—we can take a stand and say, "Actually, we don't want to see those levels of violence online, because it helps feed a narrative and a very negative atmosphere for our young people." This is one of the debates we will continue to have, not least through the introduction of the online harms White Paper, and in the context of not just serious violence, but depictions of women in music videos. This is one of the big debates of our time, but I would not want our young people to think that we feel it is okay for music videos to be targeting them with images of extreme violence, with foul language and with foul depictions. We should be doing a bit better than that for our young people.

Huw Merriman: I will indeed write to my hon. Friend, but I should make it absolutely clear that I was not talking about an "environmental issue" and I am not a prude; this video referred to taking a gun, going into a block and using it, pop by pop—and the rest. So this is shocking stuff. The other point I wish to make is that TimWestwoodTV is still on YouTube. There are 32 examples where breaches of the law have been found, with glorifications of violence and misogyny and shocking lyrics about gun and drug use. Some 100,000 people watch each of these videos. He is an absolute disgrace, but so is YouTube for even hosting him.

Victoria Atkins: We are tackling this through our social media hub and through the serious violence taskforce. These issues are very difficult and they need to be debated, not only by us in this place, but by the wider communities. As a mum, I know that one wants to protect one's child and one would hope they are not accessing and seeing material such as that. We have to tread carefully around this, because one does not want, for a moment, to step over into the boundaries of musical freedom. However, we have to be a little less forgiving of those who present these very violent images on TV and then shrug their shoulders when we think it is having an impact on how our children view each other and their friends, and how they view situations in their day-to-day lives.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: I will give way, but this will be the last time, as I must move on.

Stella Creasy: I thank the Minister for giving way. I recognise the debate that people want to have. With the greatest respect to all my colleagues across the House, I do not think this is really about whether we are prudes. Whatever material our young people are seeing, and whether they are seeing violence online or on our streets, the biggest difference is made by their having people in their lives who can be a consistent voice for making positive choices. I understand that there is an obsession with what is on YouTube, but will the Minister say a bit about how she wants to support those youth mentors and social workers that we know we need to be able to crack this problem? That is what this debate is really about today.

Victoria Atkins: It is as though the hon. Lady had my speech in front of her, because I am just about to move on to the further work that we have announced in recent months. Of course, having positive role models is key, particularly for young people with the biggest set of vulnerabilities, who perhaps do not have someone at home on whom they can rely. That may be because their home lives are difficult and chaotic, for reasons that we have heard about earlier in the debate. There is already a programme of work: the Home Office supports charities such as Safer London and the St Giles Trust to do innovative work to try to reach and then keep hold of the young people who most need their help.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I am not going to, I am afraid, because I must make progress.

It has been a great pleasure for me, as part of my role, to meet youth workers and discover what they think will most help their young people. We in the Government are then in a position to help them in their work.

On 2 October, the Home Secretary announced additional major new measures to tackle violent crime. First, he announced a consultation on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to tackling serious violence. This would mean that police officers, education partners, local authority and healthcare professionals would have a new legal duty to take action and prevent violent crime, and fundamentally support our public health approach. The consultation will be a fundamental change

in our approach—indeed, it will go further than the often-given example of Glasgow—and I will be very interested to see the results.

Secondly, the Home Secretary announced a new £200 million youth endowment fund, which will be delivered over 10 years and will support interventions with children and young people who are at risk of involvement in crime and violence. It will focus on those who are most at risk, such as those who display signs of truancy, aggression and involvement in antisocial behaviour. It will fund interventions to steer children and young people away from becoming serious offenders. Because we are delivering this £200 million over 10 years, it will provide longer-term certainty to those organisations that are helped through the fund, so that they can develop their programmes.

Thirdly, the Home Secretary announced the independent review of drug misuse, which will ensure that law-enforcement agencies are targeting and preventing the drug-related causes of violent crime effectively. Drugs have been identified as a major driver of serious violence. The review will consider recreational drug use, as well as use by the smaller number of users who cause the most harm to themselves and their communities.

Let me be clear: tackling serious violence is a top priority for the Government. The approach set out in the serious violence strategy, with a greater emphasis on early intervention, will address violent crime and help young people to develop the skills and resilience to live happy and productive lives away from violence. But we cannot deliver that alone, which is why we are supporting a multi-agency public health approach to tackling the issue and investing heavily in tackling the root causes of the problem and consulting on further measures to underpin the public health approach, to ensure that everyone is working collectively to stop this violence.

2.43 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I am very glad indeed to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I do not doubt the Minister's sincerity, but there are some in the wider community who believe that in many important ways the Government are only paying lip service to a public health approach to violent crime.

Like other Members, I have had the sad duty of visiting the families of young men who have died as a result of violent crime. I say young men because they are nearly always men—and in London at least they are all too often black and minority ethnic men. Visiting the families of these deceased young men brings it home to you that the deceased were people—someone's child. Not just a statistic or a newspaper clipping but young people who were loved and often carried the hopes and dreams of their parents, wider family and even church community. Violent crime creates fear generally, but we should always remember that it is also a personal tragedy for families and communities. Tonight, too many mothers will be going to bed worrying about that call from the public services that will tell them that their son will not be coming home alive.

The topic of the debate is youth involvement in violent crime, but we should remember that older people commit violent crime, too. Violent crime committed against and perpetrated by young people is hugely

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emotive, and the argument about catching them young and diverting them from crime is well understood, but as I have said, young people are not the sole perpetrators of violent crime; far from it. Youth violence is often associated with drug gangs, which are often run by very adult Mr Bigs—organised criminals who try to keep their hands clean. The Minister talked about county lines; as we know, violence—sometimes extreme violence—is used to claim and enforce operations and territory, drug debts and so on. The organisers and ultimate beneficiaries of the county line phenomenon are rarely young people.

It is important to set out the real nature of the problem, because the Government—although not necessarily this Minister—sometimes seem in denial on matters relating to policing and crime. These are the facts: in the latest report from the Office for National Statistics on crime in the year ending in June, there were more than 39,300 incidents of police recorded crime using knives or other sharp instruments, compared with more than 30,600 as of March 2011. In reality, violent crime and knife crime are rising under this Government. As was said earlier, we can call it a spike if we like, but it can only really be described as a spike if we see the level of violent crime start to come down.

The same ONS document says:

“As offences involving the use of weapons are relatively low in volume, the Crime Survey for England and Wales...is not able to provide reliable trends for such incidents. In this case, police recorded crime is a useful source for measuring these offences, although not all offences will come to the attention of the police.”

The ONS goes on to say that we now have the:

“Highest number of offences involving knives or sharp instruments since 2011”.

So, the reality is that knife crime has risen while this Government have been in office, but what has their policy response been?

We have to accept that one of the most vital elements in the fight against crime must be the role and strength of our police force. We know that 50,000 workers have been lost from the police service, 21,000 of whom were police officers. Up until recent times, the Government have been demanding that they do “more with less” and they are now at crisis point. Those are not my words; they are not some tribal assertion. They are the words of Chief Superintendent Gavin Thomas from the College of Policing writing in *The Daily Telegraph* at the end of October. He is simply highlighting what all of the police leadership has said and the clear verdict of the National Audit Office, the Home Affairs Committee, the inspectorate and many others besides.

Let us consider for a moment the real effect of slashing the numbers of what are known sometimes a little disparagingly as back-office staff. They do vital work, and when their numbers have been slashed, all of their work falls on the police officers themselves. I invite the Minister to imagine how she would feel if her support staff was halved or reduced to a 10th. Well, police, just like the Minister, are dealing with very serious matters—matters of life and death—and we expect them to manage with cuts in the number of staff who support them.

According to the Home Office’s own data, the number of full-time frontline police officers has fallen from 123,000 in 2010 to 106,000 in 2017. All of this has

undermined police officers’ effectiveness—that is being said not just by Labour Members but by police officers themselves—in preventing and detecting crime and in apprehending criminals when crime does occur. It is also increasingly the case that police officers do not have the time to spend on protective engagement with the public, but that protective engagement with communities is particularly important in relation to youth crime.

Fewer police officers do not inevitably lead to more crime. Some criminals, opportunistically or otherwise, may be encouraged by the lack of police visibility, and there has certainly been a sharp decline in arrest rates. But although fewer police do not lead directly to rising crime, including violent crime, the police tend to become overstretched, which means that they cannot cope with current levels of crime, let alone rising crime. I am arguing not that fewer police officers in themselves lead to more crime, but that we have to look elsewhere for the causes of crime.

I have heard the Minister talk about the Government’s commissions, strategies, and legislation, and I am grateful that she is not talking about just arresting our way out of rising violent crime. Police officers tell me exactly the opposite; that we cannot arrest our way out of this crisis. I am told by officers of one instance in which an entire drug gang, which had been dominating the area, were sent away for lengthy sentences. They had used frequent and extreme violence to enforce their rule and protect their territory. There was some jubilation in the local police station when the gang members were sent away, but the consequence was a huge upsurge in violence as other gangs moved in. We must tackle the causes of violent crime. Although I have heard what the Minister has had to say, as I said right at the beginning, the Government as a whole run the risk of being seen to pay lip service to a public health approach.

Let us reflect on a genuine public health approach to violent crime. This is the work done in Scotland around knife crime—I am sure that our Scottish colleagues will have more to say on this. Between April 2006 and April 2011, 40 children and teenagers were killed in homicides involving a knife in Scotland, but between 2011 and 2016, that figure fell to just eight. The decline was steepest in Glasgow, which once had one of the highest murder rates in western Europe. Between 2006 and 2011, 15 children and teenagers were killed with knives in Glasgow, but between April 2011 and April 2016, not a single child was killed with a knife in Glasgow.

What was the content of the public health approach to knife crime in Glasgow? The police did play a central role. Legislation was improved and toughened, but the authorities also worked in a multi-agency fashion, working very closely with the NHS, schools and social workers. They also had some very innovative projects. In one, the violence reduction unit identified those people most likely to offend and asked them to voluntarily attend the sheriff’s court. They did not have to come, but they were encouraged to do so by community police, teachers and social workers. The police had mapped all the gangs in the area, so that when the young men got there, they saw their own pictures up in court. The session started off with a warning: “We know who you are, and if you carry on with this lifestyle we’re going to come down on you really hard. We’re going to arrest you and we’ll arrest the rest of the gang. You will be

going to prison if this carries on.” But as the intervention in the court went on, the police took a more holistic approach.

The police spoke to the young men about the injuries they see as a result of violence, and had a mother talk about losing her son. That really hit home. There was help with housing, relocation, employment and training, and the young men were given a number to call if they wanted to take the offer up. Many of them did so and were put into the programme, and are no longer in the gang lifestyle. That is just one project, which was carried out in Glasgow.

I have heard what the Minister has said about this pot of money and that pot of money, but in order to replicate that sort of approach and those sorts of innovative projects, much more resource needs to be put into the public sector across the board, notably into the NHS, local authorities, schools and social workers.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments about Glasgow. As a local councillor in Glasgow at the time, I saw the difference made by the community initiative to reduce violence. I sat in on one of the court call-ins, which was as moving as she said it was. However, does she agree that the success of the Glasgow programme has been its consistency—that it has been funded for the long-term? That is the kind of investment needed to make it a success.

Ms Abbott: I thank the hon. Lady for her important intervention; I expected Scottish colleagues to amplify my remarks. She is exactly right. It is not about a commission or a pot of money. It is about a sustained investment, year on year, not just into policing, but into the public sector services that the police need to work alongside to make the public health approach work.

We have heard about the Government’s commission, working parties and policy documents, but the reality is that police numbers have gone down. The idea that we heard earlier this afternoon, that the Government are going to make good some of the drops in police funding by increasing taxes—the precept is a regressive tax paid by householders—is yet another austerity measure, with ordinary people in some of our poorest communities paying for the Government’s failure on policing.

There are other serious and concerning changes to policing; I have called it the Americanisation of our policing. This should be resisted by all sensible people. Of all the advanced, industrialised countries, the American system of policing is the last one we should emulate. The Government have encouraged the increased use of non-evidence-based stop and search, as well as knocking suspected muggers—I stress that these are suspects—off their mopeds with police cars. There is also talk about the use of routine armed patrols in certain parts of London, which alarms a number of us.

None of this is treating violent crime as a public health matter. It is actually an attempt to cover for the shortfall in our policing with the increased Americanisation of our police. This runs contrary to our tradition of policing by consent and to the fact that, in the end, the police can only bear down on violent crime with the co-operation of communities. I ask Ministers to think again about the idea that knocking people off mopeds

in police cars and having routine armed patrols in certain areas of London—we know which areas they will be—will increase community co-operation.

A holistic public health approach would mean police forces such as the Metropolitan police working closely with schools, social workers, the NHS, youth services and housing services consistently over a period of time. The Minister talks about individual projects, but all this provision is being cut because of austerity. Far from having the capacity to innovate, the public sector is under pressure just to maintain the services it already provides.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is the shadow Home Secretary aware of the work being done in Scotland by the violence reduction unit, with mentors going into schools for violence prevention sessions? That is raising the skills and confidence of school pupils in challenging threatening and abusive behaviour.

Ms Abbott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Similar projects are happening in some parts of London, but we are not doing it in the consistent way that the violence reduction unit in Scotland is doing it.

Let me say a little more about the underlying causes of crime. The recent report by the Social Mobility Commission, an advisory non-departmental public body to the Department for Education, highlights how poor the outlook is generally for young people. It is something of an indictment of this Government, conscious of what was said when the current Prime Minister took up office, that they have not tackled burning injustices for young people—they have created more injustices and exacerbated them. Under this Government, every aspect of young people’s lives, and every underlying cause of crime, has got worse. Sure Start has been savaged, the schools budget has been cut in real terms and per pupil, and school exclusions have risen. There is a very real connection between high levels of school exclusion and children ending up in pupil referral units, too many of which, sadly, despite the best efforts of people who work in them, are academies for crime. Housing has deteriorated, access to universities has worsened, the education maintenance allowance has been cut, fees have risen, and zero-hours contracts have increased—and those are often aimed at young people. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition asked after the Budget of 2011, “What have the Tories got against young people?”

All of this has consequences. The correlation between sharply lower living standards, worsening prospects, increased hopelessness and rising crime is well established. It is so well established as to have a causal element. The House should not just take my word for it. Metropolitan Police assistant chief commissioner Patricia Gallan, who spearheads Scotland Yard’s specialist crime operations in the fight against gun crime, homicides and high-harm and high-profile crimes, said:

“If we don’t invest at the beginning”
of children’s lives

“we’ll have to invest...in terms of criminal justice and in the prison system.”

Chuka Umunna: My right hon. Friend’s point about investment is absolutely key. If we invest in the early stages—I accept that this is not just a case of money,

[Chuka Umunna]

but ultimately money is an issue—we will save money for the public sector in the future. She talked about pupil referral units. It costs over £30,000 to put a young person through a PRU; if they are in mainstream education, it costs £5,000 to £6,000. If we invest to prevent them from getting wrapped up in the violence that leads to their being in the PRU, we will save money at the end of the day—although we should not be putting a price on the heads of our young people.

Ms Abbott: I thank my hon. Friend for his important intervention.

Nick Alston, the former Conservative police and crime commissioner for Essex, has said that austerity has had a negative impact on crime. The reality is that too many of this Government's policies, particularly austerity, have exacerbated some of the underlying causes of the drift to criminality in our young people.

The issue of drill music has been raised. The Minister will be aware that, for as long as anyone can remember, people have sought to blame the music that young people listen to for their bad behaviour. Much of the drill music and videos are horrifying and appalling, but at the end of the day, the music is a reflection of those young people's lives and realities. It is not a cause of violent crime.

Victoria Atkins: To clarify, I was not claiming that the music causes serious violence. From a safeguarding perspective, and as mums, surely we want to keep our children safe and protect them. We need to have a debate about what sort of music and videos we, as mothers, want our children to be listening to and watching. At the moment, I do not know where that line is. There are clear cases where violence has been incited. I appreciate that there is a grey area, and there may be terminology that we do not like, but do we, as mums, still want our children to be watching those videos? That is the point I was making.

Ms Abbott: As a mother, let me gently tell the Minister that what we want our children to view online and what they actually view online are two different things. If she is concerned about safeguarding children, maybe she should spend some time lobbying Education Ministers to make more money available for education, particularly in the areas with the biggest incidence of violent youth crime.

We respect the Minister's genuineness, but we feel that the Government have not done enough to promote a genuine public health approach to violent crime, let alone fund it. They mouth the phrase, and they set up committees and commissions, but in reality, their policies tend more towards an Americanisation of our police and the notion that we can arrest our way out of this crisis than the public health approach, which we have seen successfully implemented in other nations of Britain.

To our police officers—the women and men we rely on to uphold the law—I want to say this: we respect the work you do, and we are grateful for the way you put your lives at risk fighting crime, including violent crime, but we urge you not to be taken in by this Government. They are not defending you; they are cutting your numbers. They are not defending you when they ask you to go on routine armed patrols.

Let us have a serious discussion about tackling violent crime, addressing the causes of crime and what our actual police needs are and how to meet them. Above all, I look forward to an ongoing debate about what a real public health approach to policing would be. I would welcome never again having to meet a mother whose son has died because of violent crime. After all, if we in this House cannot take practical measures to protect young people and communities from violent crime, what are we doing?

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many Members wish to speak, and we have only until 5 o'clock. I hope we can manage without a formal time limit. We will be able to do so if everybody keeps to under nine minutes. That means doing arithmetic in looking at the clock. If I said 10 minutes, it would be easier. You would be amazed at the number of people who cannot add nine to the time on the clock when they start or who are incapable of working out how long they have. I put it to Members that this is a competition to see who is best at counting. If anyone takes more than nine minutes, it will be assumed not that they had an awful lot to say that was terribly important, but that they simply cannot do arithmetic. It is a challenge, and we will start with Mr Jack Brereton.

3.9 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. I am sorry to have to say that, unfortunately, youth violence has been on the rise in parts of my constituency over the past year—not on the scale of what has happened in London, of course, but the Meir area of my constituency now has the highest level of antisocial behaviour in the whole of Staffordshire, much of which is caused by gangs of youngsters. Over the past 12 months, there has been a massive rise in these incidents compared with previous years; in some months there has been nearly a quadrupling. These gangs are terrorising our community with totally unacceptable behaviour, and we have even seen a number of shocking knife and firearms incidents in recent months.

These issues are not reserved to the Meir area. In Fenton, we have also of late seen some unacceptable antisocial behaviour and drug-related crimes by a few individuals, whose destructive behaviour I am determined to see stamped out. It cannot be right that a few individuals are allowed to intimidate the majority of law-abiding citizens. The vast majority of our constituents, including young people, are well-minded and full of opportunity, and they make a huge contribution to our society. They do not deserve to grow up in an environment of crime that destroys families and life chances. I am pleased that the Minister mentioned domestic violence, since too many young people in Stoke-on-Trent South are being exposed to that at home. A whole catalogue of totally unacceptable behaviours are being committed by a small number of people.

In Meir, the gang is directing violence especially against local shops and businesses in the centre of the community. People are fearful to go and use those facilities, and staff face daily intimidation just in doing their job. I recently went out on patrol with Staffordshire police and spoke to residents and businesses about the

issues they are experiencing. The local KFC, for example, had a whole book of incidents over the past month, recording the all too frequent experiences of lawlessness. I think of the young member of staff—only 18 or 19 herself—who has to put up with horrific intimidation in her place of work. No one should have to put up with that when just trying to do their job.

These hardened gang members are actually children—13, 14, 15 or 16, and sometimes even younger. They are not yet of the age of criminal maturity, which means that there has often been little or no response and the totally unacceptable behaviour of these individuals continues. However, it is now well recognised that these issues can be addressed only by taking a multi-agency, multi-pronged approach. This is now very well recognised in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire.

In the past few weeks, Staffordshire police has made addressing these challenges in Meir one of its highest priorities. This means taking action, and a number of orders have recently been served or are about to be served on some of the young people involved. However, we cannot let the police tackle these issues alone; nor is that desirable. We must ensure that parents take responsibility for their children. Stoke-on-Trent City Council also has a significant role to play in taking action, and I am pleased that it is taking up the baton. In particular, it has powers that can be used against those who repeatedly breach tenancy agreements and those with repeated cases of truancy.

However, the reality is that we need a much broader approach even than that. I am incredibly pleased that the Government have recognised that in calling the debate, and it is important that we take a robust approach. I was pleased that the Minister set out a number of measures that the Government are now taking on the ground. We need to take much more proactive action involving a whole range of public, private and voluntary organisations to ensure an absolute focus on a preventive approach to tackling the root causes.

As has been mentioned, there is also a huge financial incentive to do so for organisations such as the police, local councils and health services. Vast amounts of taxpayers' money currently goes to addressing the consequences of antisocial behaviour and criminality caused by gangs. A small number of individuals and families are often passed from service to service without issues ever being fully addressed. As these young people get older and turn to more hardened criminality, the costs will only rise further, and more taxpayers' money will be wasted without any of the beneficial results of actually addressing the problems.

If only a proportion of that investment was redirected into more preventive work to stop young people being drawn into gangs, just think what could be saved in the long run and how the lives of these young people could be transformed. Many say that there is a real lack of facilities and distractions for young people, especially in the Meir community. I tend to agree, and that is why I have recently been working with Ormiston Meridian Academy to secure a new 3G football pitch. It is essential that we secure the funding we need to deliver that, and I was pleased to meet the Football Foundation last week to discuss the significant benefits of such a facility, which will help to ensure that there are activities in our community. I also launched a petition with the principal, Gareth Jones, to demonstrate to the Football Foundation the community support for the project.

Having a 3G pitch in Meir would help not only to reduce the draw of gangs but to address the significant lack of such facilities in Stoke-on-Trent South. I was pleased recently to work closely with St Thomas More Catholic Academy to secure a similar facility in the Longton area, which again helps to meet the massive demand for sporting facilities, especially 3G pitches. I hope that in future we will also have such a facility at Trentham High at the other end of my constituency.

Improving sports facilities demonstrates the massive impact that improving fitness and encouraging healthier lifestyles can have on reducing antisocial behaviour and crime more broadly. The role that sport—not just football—can have is dramatic, as it gives young people a focus, provides discipline and provokes aspirations. It also helps bring together differing cross-sections of the community, and in the most disadvantaged parts of my constituency such as Meir, it helps young people to transform their lives and achieve their full potential.

Our country cannot afford to lose young people on a path towards a life of criminality. We need our future generation, which includes every young person, to be equipped with the ability and skills needed to contribute to our industries, economy and society in Stoke-on-Trent. As we near full levels of employment, ensuring that our future generations fill important roles and jobs will be essential if we are to continue to build on the economic successes we have seen thanks to the work of local businesses and Conservative policies in government.

If we are to overcome the productivity challenges we face, further accelerate growth and build prosperity for every young person in the country, communities such as Meir will play a vital part. If we allow young people to succumb to gangs, criminality and aggression in the way we are seeing, we will have failed those young people. It can never be right for a young person in our country to feel that their community is not for them, or to be so blinded by their upbringing that they are unable to see a pathway that works.

This issue goes to the heart of why I am a Conservative: in a modern, global Britain, every child and young person must have equality of opportunity to achieve their full potential. We must continue to focus on that, working with our communities to overcome challenges. Of course we must use the full range of enforcement measures to show that there are consequences for those who behave in the way we are discussing, but we must also do much more to solve and address the root causes behind why young people are attracted to gangs in the first place.

3.17 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and to take part in this debate. A number of hon. Members have been pressing for a debate on this subject for some time, particularly the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). I pay tribute to her and her fellow commissioners on the Youth Violence Commission, including my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), as well as other hon. Members present today who have a long track record of campaigning on this issue—I am not surprised to see a couple of former colleagues from the Home Affairs Committee.

[Stuart C. McDonald]

The Committee, on which I still sit, recently commenced an inquiry into serious violence, and we started by taking evidence from parents who had lost their children to youth violence. One said to us:

“As a mum, when you have a child the child then becomes your world. When they are taken away from you in this senseless manner, your whole world just rips apart”.

As the shadow Home Secretary powerfully pointed out, such testimonies bring home the disastrous and tragic impact of this type of crime better than any statistics.

The Scottish National party supports the call for a public health approach to be front and centre of efforts to tackle youth violence. Such an approach seeks to improve the health and safety of all individuals by addressing underlying risk factors that increase the likelihood of people becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence. Only by tackling the causes of violence and not just its symptoms, and by using a whole systems approach, can we break the cycle of violence and reduce its impact on individuals, their families and communities.

A public health approach involves collecting evidence on the causes of violence, using that evidence to design interventions, and then testing, improving and upskilling them. By doing that we will achieve so much more than if we simply respond after the event through the justice system. We know it can work, because, as we have heard, it has delivered significant progress in Scotland. It was introduced there because the evidence showed it working elsewhere—in the USA, and in Chicago in particular.

None of that is to say that we still do not have a long, long way to go, but it is hard to overstate just how difficult a starting point Scotland had when it set off on this approach. As recently as 2005, one UN report declared Scotland the most violent country in the developed world, while World Health Organisation statistics suggested that Glasgow was the murder capital of Europe—thankfully no more. The shadow Home Secretary mentioned some of the significant progress that has been made: violent crime in Scotland fell by almost half between 2006-07 and 2016-17; the homicide rate halved between 2008 and 2018; offending by young people has halved since 2008; there was a fall of almost 78% in the number of under-18-year-olds being prosecuted in court since 2006-7; the number of children referred to the children’s hearings system on offence grounds fell by 83%; and hospital admissions in Glasgow due to assault with sharp objects are down 62%. By any measure, that is pretty remarkable progress.

A good number of Members, in previous debates as well as in this one, have highlighted the work of the violence reduction unit in Glasgow. I too want to pay tribute to it for the transformational work it has undertaken. I would also like to pay tribute to other organisations, such as Medics against Violence, and those implementing programmes such as “No Knives, Better Lives” and the mentors in violence prevention scheme. Building on the progress that had been made, the Scottish Government’s 2008 “Preventing Offending by Young People: Framework for Action” document reflected a significant policy shift towards prevention and early intervention, and support to manage risk and build community confidence. That has been developed further in the most recent youth justice strategy for 2015 to 2020, “Preventing Offending: Getting it right for children and young people”. That

strategy seeks to ensure that all agencies that come into contact with children and young people who offend work together, putting a whole systems approach into practice. It seeks to establish a secure care national adviser post to carry out an independent review of secure care. It will also fund the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice at the University of Strathclyde to develop, support and understand youth justice practice, policy and research in Scotland.

In practical terms, those combined strategies deliver on the ground, with early and effective intervention; opportunities to divert from prosecution; court support; community alternatives to secure care and custody; and improvements to reintegration back into the community. They are about improving life chances with a focus on school inclusion, strengthening relationships and engagement, mentoring, building life skills, and improving health and wellbeing. There is a huge amount of work still to be done, as I have said, including on employability, especially for those who have ended up in the criminal justice system, but progress is being made.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a testament to the impact of this approach on Glasgow that there are four Glasgow MPs here in the Chamber to support my hon. Friend’s speech. He is right to mention some of the strategies in place at a national and Government level, but will he join me in paying tribute to Urban Fox in Lilybank, one of the organisations in my constituency? Michael McCourt, Debbie and the team do an excellent job, delivering diversionary activities to ensure that young people make positive choices to get into a slightly better pattern of life.

Stuart C. McDonald: I very much welcome that intervention. This is probably a good moment to pay tribute not just to the organisation my hon. Friend mentions, but to organisations across Scotland and the United Kingdom that do such good work on the ground to try to divert people away from violence.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I agree entirely with what my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said. We can all think of similar initiatives in our own constituencies. The Children’s Wood in Glasgow North primarily supports teenagers who start to engage in antisocial behaviour. Instead of just calling the police to get them taken away, local volunteers went out and worked with them. Now those same teenagers, instead of being involved in antisocial behaviour, are active parts of that community. That preventive strategy is seen at all levels.

Stuart C. McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, which highlights another very useful and innovative community response.

Both the Minister and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) mentioned the impact of adverse childhood experiences—ACEs. More recently, and significantly, this has been an increasing focus of Scottish Government policy. There is increasingly convincing evidence about how certain adverse childhood experiences can result in long-term effects on learning, health and behaviour. Remarkable research in Wales found that people who reported experiencing four or more ACEs are 15 times more likely to have committed violence, 14 times more likely to have been victim of violence in the past 12 months, and 20 times more likely to have

been in prison at some point in their life. Many other studies show similar links, so working to prevent ACEs at all and to build resilience for those who have already experienced them now underpins policies in all areas. An ACEs hub, co-ordinated by NHS Health Scotland, is progressing national action, and the implications for justice policy are now reflected in the Government's "Justice in Scotland: Vision and Priorities" for 2017 to 2020.

While detailed policies cannot simply be transplanted from one community to the next, and each has to be tailored to local need, there is no doubt that the principles behind a public health approach to violent crime, and particularly violent youth crime, are absolutely solid and evidence-based. I welcome, for example, what Mayor Sadiq Khan has done in establishing a violence reduction unit in London.

Similarly, the UK Government's serious violence strategy includes some welcome steps, including the establishment of the new national county lines co-ordination centre, which the Minister mentioned, and a move towards a public health approach, but there are those who have expressed concern about it. Critics have expressed the belief that it is still overly dominated—certainly, as regards youth justice—by a criminal law enforcement response, with insufficient emphasis on some drivers of serious violence, such as poverty, and insufficient recognition of the impact of trauma on children caught up in serious violence. That is what some critics are concerned about. The Minister is a former colleague from the Home Affairs Committee, and I know that she is absolutely committed to this issue, so I hope that she can bring the Government with her in being able to respond to these questions and criticisms in the best way possible by investing in putting public health front and centre of their ambitions to tackle youth crime.

The Minister also mentioned the Offensive Weapons Bill, which was a welcome, if small step, as I said when we debated it. She mentioned a consultation on a statutory duty, which seems fine to me. We will monitor that with interest. However, I think we all absolutely agree that we cannot legislate our way out of these issues any more than we can arrest our way out of them. These challenges require evidence-based strategy and policies, and, as hon. Members have said repeatedly already, they require urgent and significant investment in them. Ultimately, everyone benefits if Government genuinely and urgently commit to that approach. We will support any and all initiatives that reflect that approach.

3.26 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), although I was rather hoping to follow the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna)—not just because he has an easier constituency to pronounce, but because I will be referring to parts of my life when I worked in his constituency. The Minister mentioned that many Members want to speak about their constituency, but I want to speak primarily about a time in my life when this issue was a real cause and passion, and not to use my voice in this place to carry that on would seem a complete waste.

My time was spent working in a youth organisation in Brixton. It was formed after the Brixton riots of the '80s, and we had two sites—one was on the Moorlands

estate and the other was further down Coldharbour Lane towards Camberwell Green. I spent my time there because originally I had worked as a barrister and found myself dealing with a lot of young offenders on the criminal side of things, when it was frankly just too late. By that time, it was hard to change their path, even if they got an order that would allow them to do so, rather than going into custody. I left the Bar and then went into finance, where I was surrounded by people whose life was great. I thought to myself, "I need to put something back and reach out to see where I can help" so that I could stop young people getting into the situation in which I had met them in my previous career.

That is what took me to that organisation as a trustee, fundraiser, staff manager and volunteer, and my goodness, we did some amazing things together. We funded teachers to provide after-school education, particularly for young children who were excluded or were just skipping school. We made it more fun, so that they would actually turn up. We also had a whole range of sports activities, which included horse-riding in inner-city London. We had a huge amount of environmental projects. Our football teams were absolutely fantastic. We basically got kids out of a life where it was all about gang culture and we made it interesting, exciting and gave them something different. To actually see their choices and the paths that they went on, and the success that many of them achieved, despite the odds, was absolutely incredible. I then moved on and spent five years as a governor in a failing school, when I moved to another part of London. Again, it was interesting to see the educational impact and, again, how a situation could be transformed through great leadership, great funding and everyone working together. That is what brought me here.

This morning, I tried to track down that organisation, and while doing so, I ended up speaking to a remarkable person, who I think is just outside the hon. Gentleman's constituency in Denmark Hill. It was interesting chatting to that community and family worker about how things are now compared with how they were when I was there in the five years from 1997 to 2002. It confirmed to me that things have got worse, which is so depressing. She feels that young children are more at risk than they were when I was there, and talked about the impact of smartphones and the fact that people can get their gang together quickly—it is so fast and people do not get the chance to think, "What am I doing?" and turn around. She specifically mentioned the music lyrics, which she believes incite young people to commit violence. I heard what the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said, but when I speak to people such as that lady, who is on the frontline—she has kids and sees it—they tell me that they absolutely believe that it causes others to follow and glamorises that culture. That is why I say what I say. I am not a big fan of censorship, but when things get this serious, we have to look at it, and do something about it and the people who do it.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I completely and utterly agree with the hon. Gentleman. There have been incidents in my constituency. Drill music went up online from one gang calling out another gang bragging about a murder in the constituency. The music should have been taken down fast but my police services did not have the resources they needed to do it, and we did not have the access we needed.

Huw Merriman: We talked a bit about this earlier. I gave an example of when the problem was not police resources—in my example, the police had the power but allowed videos to be published. We heard about police funding earlier. Hopefully, if that was the problem, things might get a little better.

Companies such as YouTube should be forced to take those videos down. I mentioned Tim Westwood. A number of gangs have appeared on his YouTube channel and people have lost their lives. The evidence seems clear to me and I find him to be incredibly irresponsible in how he promotes this music.

The lady I spoke to was interesting. Her youngest is 22 and has gone on to do great things. She said that things have got so bad now that, if he was of primary school age, she would have moved out of London, which makes it incredibly stark. She also made the point that teachers no longer have the respect of pupils. We have spoken before in the House about teachers spending far too much time on too many other matters, which has an impact on their ability to be seen as leaders in the classroom. Youngsters know that they can get away with it. She also gave me a shocking example of young boys who have located here from Nigeria being sent back to keep them safe. It is incredibly frustrating that I spent five years in that area and now find that things are not getting better, but are in fact getting worse, which is why more must be done.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). I cannot remember a week in Parliament when I have not heard her say that we need to be talking about this, and we finally are. I had expected to see her name on the Order Paper, but this is a Government debate. I congratulate her.

The question is what to do. I welcome the Government's £200 million youth endowment fund and note that bidders are being sought. The fund is to be independent, but does that mean independent of profit or independent of the Government? Perhaps it is both.

Victoria Atkins: It is independent of the Government.

Huw Merriman: Right. Therefore it could be profit-based.

Ultimately, as the title of the debate suggests, as experience tells me, and as the shadow Home Secretary said, we cannot arrest our way through this process. It is all about tackling the early signs and making interventions to ensure that we never reach the point at which that young person is arrested, or where there is a victim. I am thinking not only of the victim of a crime, but of the perpetrator, their families, and the hospitals and trauma services—there are so many victims of that one fleeting moment when someone uses a knife. I support the money, but it is critical that it is well spent. We have seen the examples from Glasgow, which is a model we need to follow or at least look at closely because the results have been extraordinary.

Alongside that, I want to press the Minister again because knife crime has got so out of control. The Offensive Weapons Bill is currently going through this House, and I welcome that, but on Report, as the Minister will remember, I supported a couple of amendments tabled by Opposition Members. One was about the ability to get hold of knives. If people shoplift and knives are not in locked cupboards, they have their weapon. The Minister told me that there was a code of practice to which many retailers were signing up, but

what worries me is the number of irresponsible retailers who will not do so, and who might even see knives being taken and do nothing about it. I was talking to someone from the Ministry of Justice who had walked past a place—again, I think it was in Streatham—and saw a meat cleaver hanging from a rope.

Let me say to the Minister that if we are not seeing a reduction in this type of crime in six months' time, I think it would be responsible of our party to look at that amendment again. As I said then, if I decide to kill myself by walking into a shop to buy a packet of cigarettes, I will find that the packets are in a locked cabinet. If I decide to walk into a shop and shoplift a knife to kill someone else, the knife will not be in a locked cabinet, which makes no sense to me at all. Public space protection orders, which the Minister has considered before, might work to that end as well.

The other amendment that I thought had a lot of worth was tabled by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). It would make moped use in knife or acid crime an aggravating factor. If there is no reduction in that type of crime, I think that the Government should discuss such a measure.

Let me make one more point. Have I hit nine minutes yet, Madam Deputy Speaker? You will tell me, anyway—or you will just look daggers at me.

I have talked about the constituency of the hon. Member for Streatham, and I will listen with interest to what he has to say about where we are at the moment. The sad reality is, however, that I have covered 200 square miles, largely rural, where I would not necessarily have expected to be dealing with this issue. After I spoke in the Offensive Weapons Bill debate, a constituent reached out to me because her son—she told me, in desperation—had been taking knives, and stealing them as well. She had been told by another parent that their child had been threatened with a knife by her son. He then went missing with the knife. She contacted the police, who said that she would have to wait until the next day to report him as a missing person, and did not take the knife aspect at all seriously or do anything about it.

I take the point about police resourcing, and it is great news that we have additional police resources, but I also think it is incredibly important for all of us, as Members of Parliament, to press our police to ensure that they are doing their job and taking this issue very seriously indeed. While we cannot arrest ourselves out of the situation, when a young person is out there with a knife, the police need to take that seriously and deal with it. It is not a missing person; it is another crime statistic about to happen, and another person about to become a victim.

I will end my speech with that point. I look forward to hearing other contributions.

3.37 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). It is always interesting to hear about Members' former lives, and about what drove them to come to this place.

Sadly, youth violence, and knife crime in particular, has affected almost every community in the country in recent years, and it is a problem that has reached epidemic levels. Just last month in Coventry, a 16-year-old boy was tragically stabbed to death in the Wood End

area of my constituency. That senseless act cost an innocent young man his life, ruined the lives of his family and friends, and left an entire city in a state of shock. It was yet another tragic example of how knife crime destroys lives and devastates communities.

That shocking event is just the latest in a rising toll of knife crime in the city. Over the last five years the number of knife crime incidents has almost doubled, from 164 in 2012-13 to 307 in 2017-18. There were more than 162 knife crimes in the first six months of 2018-19, with three fatalities in this year alone. The levels of knife crime in my area, and in other areas across the country, are rising, at a time when police budgets have been cut to the bone and the number of frontline police officers has fallen to the lowest level in 30 years. The West Midlands police force alone has lost more than 2,000 officers in the last eight years, and £175 million from its budget over the same period. There can be little doubt about the correlation between falling police numbers and rising crime levels. It is time that the Government finally acknowledged this link and acted to increase the number of officers on our streets to help protect our communities.

All forces need additional officers, and the West Midlands is no different; our PCC has asked the Government for an extra £42.2 million to cover inflation and the funding for 500 additional officers to help tackle violent crime more proactively. It is shameful that the Government failed to meet that request in full.

However, I accept that this problem has not been created by cuts to police budgets alone, nor is it a problem that can be resolved by simply putting extra officers on the streets. If we really want to address this problem permanently, we need to understand the social conditions that lie at the root of youth violence and recognise the underlying causes that have fuelled the recent surge in knife crime. In doing so it is impossible to ignore the cumulative impact of eight years of savage Government cuts to local services, which have exacerbated poverty and inequality, hampered our ability to tackle youth violence at source and pushed communities to a tipping point.

It is certainly no coincidence that areas of high deprivation have similarly high rates of knife crime. In Coventry we have seen cuts to education provision, children and youth services, Sure Start, the police and mental health facilities, all of which have had a direct impact on the most vulnerable in society. Cuts to such vital services not only make it difficult to identify young people who are most at risk of early offending due to their environments, but make it more difficult to address those environments through early intervention. That is why we need a long-term, properly funded, integrated public health approach to youth violence, an approach that focuses on the drivers of youth violence rather than the aftermath and that prioritises the safeguarding and protection of vulnerable young people over criminalisation.

We must ensure that carrying knives never becomes normal behaviour and seek to change the culture among many young people. To do this, we need to place a greater emphasis on community policing that builds trust, education programmes that equip young people to be resilient, and early intervention that targets those most at risk of becoming involved in violence, as well as targeting significant resources on prevention activities on a multi-agency basis. As a result, youth violence

would no longer simply be within the purview of the criminal justice system; instead, this would involve the police, schools, parents, health professionals, youth workers and council services working alongside community groups, young people, faith groups and the voluntary sector.

There are already practical examples of this holistic approach taking place in Coventry with the roll-out of youth workers in our local A&E department. Those youth workers intervene at “teachable moments” and speak with young people who attend hospital with a knife wound, as victims often become perpetrators of violent crime—although I think we can all agree that it would be preferable to prevent the violent incident in the first place, rather than act in the aftermath.

There is also investment in mentoring projects and youth work, including through the Positive Youth Foundation in Coventry, to divert young people away from violence. Similarly, there is investment in education programmes that warn young people of the dangers of carrying a knife. We have also seen the introduction of violence prevention mentors—young people who mentor other young people in their schools away from violence.

Such local initiatives really do make a difference to both individuals and communities touched by violence, but they do not in any way negate the need for the Government to adopt a public health approach on a national scale. We need the Government to implement and properly fund a national programme, with measurable outcomes, that targets resources at communities to tackle the problem of youth violence at source while protecting future generations from it. I hope this is something the Government will look at very seriously.

3.44 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I want briefly to talk about the consensus that I hear in the debate, as well as about some of the areas in which there is a divergence of views. I also want to make one or two constructive remarks. Everyone agrees that this is a serious and pressing issue. We cannot just look at the figures, although they are pretty appalling, with homicides and knife deaths at levels not seen for more than a decade. The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) talked about how meeting the mothers involved really brings it home to you. I have had two fatal stabbings in my constituency in the past two years, and meeting the mothers of the two young men involved was most distressing. I could not leave those meetings without committing myself to take action, and I am sure that everyone in the House has had a similar experience.

There is consensus on the urgency involved, and there is consensus that the old approach of arresting everyone and putting them in prison is not going to work. We have to have a holistic public health approach, and I think that everyone has signed up to that. I refer people to the work of the World Health Organisation on the need for violence prevention and the need to treat this upsurge in violent crime as an epidemic linked to aspects of disease. A public health approach is absolutely right. I also think we can agree on the good work that is being done in communities.

Lyn Brown: I absolutely admire the work that has been done in Glasgow, but this is not the only cause of crime in London. If we continue to focus only on the public health approach, we are likely to miss the way in

[*Lyn Brown*]

which children are being groomed by gang members and organised criminals and placed in harm's way by being used as mules and dealers. We need to understand that, in London, the problem is massive.

Sir Edward Davey: I agree with the hon. Lady, who has taken a great leadership role in this debate. However, the title of the debate is "Public health model to reduce youth violence", which is why I am focusing on that.

A great deal of cross-party work has been done on this, including the work of the Youth Violence Commission, which the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) chairs. Her ears must be ringing in this debate. Colleagues from all parties are involved in the commission, including the hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Braintree (James Cleverly) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). My constituent and friend, Siobhan Benita, a former senior civil servant, has also been contributing her skills and knowledge to this cross-party work. There is consensus that this is the way forward.

So where is the disagreement? First, there is disagreement on the speed of the response. I just do not think that we are doing this quickly enough. This is a crisis. Yes, we know that some of the responses involving the public health model are going to be long-term approaches, but there are short-term measures that could happen sooner. Why are we not doing those things ever more quickly? There is a failure to see this crisis for what it is, and to understand how it is experienced by the families in our constituencies.

The other disagreement involves resources. We can always go on about resources and how well they are used—the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) made that point—but let us remember the cost of these appalling tragedies. It is estimated that every homicide costs more than £1 million for the investigation, the autopsy, the coroner's court and so on. That is before we even talk about how much it costs to lock up the perpetrator, if he or she is caught, and before we have calculated the lost economic opportunity—never mind the emotional value to the family. We are talking about a huge waste of money and resources, as well as about the tragedy and the tears. When we look at resources, let us do our sums right. Let us recognise how much money we are wasting by not tackling this properly. I know that this is a debate that the Treasury sometimes has difficulty in hearing, but we have to get it to do its sums properly. It looks at this problem in too narrow a way, and for that reason we are getting the wrong solution. We are not making this the priority that it must be.

This has been a constructive debate, and I want to turn to some of the solutions. I am going to make one or two slightly weird suggestions, but people will see their relevance. Some solutions must be targeted and must focus on the individuals and communities at greatest risk, which can be a sensible approach for getting early responses. However, we should also consider the prevention side of things and deal with the long-term causes, as other hon. Members have said.

One such long-term problem is bereavement, which relates to the adverse childhood experiences issues to which other Members have referred. It will of course be

only one of the issues, but we do not properly treat traumatised bereaved children at all in this country. I am not necessarily talking about children who may be traumatised because one of their loved-ones has been murdered; I am talking about children whose parent may have died naturally. We are hopeless as a society at dealing with that. I have been working with the "Life Matters" taskforce, which is not considering the issue from the angle that we are looking at it today, but I want to bring it in because it offers an example of how rubbish we have been at dealing with some of the adverse childhood experience issues.

We do not measure the number of children who have lost their mother or father, because we do not record that information. I have met the Office for National Statistics to talk about that, and the reason is that when a death is registered it is recorded if there is a partner, but not if there are any surviving children. There is no requirement in law, but this is a Home Office responsibility, so I will write to the Minister about that and I am having a second meeting with the ONS. If we measure something, surprisingly enough the officials say, "Oh. That's a problem." We can then share the problem out and say, "We're not giving enough help in schools. We're not giving enough counselling." The system can suddenly kick into gear, but it does not do that at the moment because we do not realise that there is this massive problem. Let us start thinking at that level about how we can get attention on to such issues.

Another example—perhaps not so weird and wacky—is the local initiatives that are set up when someone loses a dear one. We have seen lots of charitable initiatives to tackle knife crime. We all know about Redthread, but a Christian youth charity in my constituency called Oxygen has set up an amazing programme—before the Minister reminds me, the Home Office helped to fund it—called "What's the Point?" whereby the group goes into schools, bringing along people whose loved ones have been the victim of knife murders. There is also a new initiative in my constituency called "Drop a Knife, Save a Life" that was set up by an amazing woman called Sophie Kafeero, whose son, Derick Mulondo was murdered in my constituency 18 months ago. Sophie came to this country from Uganda about three decades ago, and she was a leading community activist on HIV/AIDS in the African population. She is an amazing lady, but she lost her only child in the later years of her life. She is full of grief when you talk to her, but she tells her story and goes into schools to talk to young people.

Interestingly, Sophie has noted in her work in the community that it is the really simple stuff that matters—just like the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle was talking about when describing his time as a youth worker all those years ago—such as organising some football. Sophie tells a story about how a young boy knocked on her door after her son Derick had died and said, "Who's going to help us play football now?" Derick had arranged football games among the young people in the local community, but he was killed with a knife. If we can find those sorts of initiatives, we can get on top of this problem, but we have to give it the seriousness that it deserves. Such solutions are not rocket science, but they are vital.

I hope that the Minister will not take my final point as my bringing in a little controversy, but police resources are vital, and we are particularly missing the police

community support officers. When we had a sergeant, two PCs and three PCSOs in every ward in my constituency, the police knew what they were doing. We had days when wards had no crime reported at all, which has hardly happened since. People felt more confident and safer, and the community felt happier. Trying to measure that may be difficult, but that sort of thing is what I would call a public health model. This is about taking things in a different way and getting to the root of the problem. This is about giving our young people the support and the role models that they need.

3.54 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I will start with what motivated me to speak in this debate. I was first elected in 2015, and in September of that year I had to deal with losing two young men in my constituency. I saw the impact it had on the whole community. Since then we have lost 10 young people in Lewisham, Deptford. With 130 lost in London and 263 lost across the country this year alone, this clearly is not something we can simply tackle in Lewisham, Deptford alone.

If that many people had died in a football stadium, a music arena or a workplace, we would be having a national inquiry. From my conversations with experts and young people, I quickly realised that anything we do needs to be cross-party—we cannot play politics with young people's lives—and evidence-led. That is why we established the cross-party commission on the root causes of youth violence. Warwick University joined as our academic partner, and academics from elsewhere, including the Open University, have supported our work. A public health approach was the key recommendation of our interim report.

In talking about a public health approach, people far too often, and particularly politicians and commentators, say the words but do not understand what they mean or where they come from. In 1996, at its 49th annual conference, the World Health Organisation declared violence

“a major and growing public health concern around the world” and in 2002 it advocated tackling violence as a public health problem. The World Health Organisation identified that violence acts and spreads like a disease.

The focus is on dealing with violence just like any other disease. The World Health Organisation's evidence shows that violence spreads like a disease and, as such, we need to treat the disease and prevent it from spreading. Across the world, from Chicago to Scotland, there are numerous examples of successful public health programmes aimed at tackling violence. I could name loads of them, but I have had to cut down my speech dramatically to stay within the time limit.

Cure Violence, founded in Chicago in 2000 under the name CeaseFire, runs projects all over the world, including in England at Cookham Wood young offender institution. The project at Cookham Wood resulted in a 50% reduction in violent incidents, a 95% reduction in group attacks and a 96% reduction in youths involved in group violence.

Cure Violence maintains that violence is a learned behaviour that can be prevented using disease control methods. The Cure Violence model has five required components, three core components and two implementing components. Put briefly, the model involves, first, detecting potentially violent events and interrupting them to prevent violence through trained, credible messengers; secondly,

providing ongoing behaviour change and support to the highest-risk individuals through trained, credible messengers; thirdly, changing community norms that allow, encourage and exacerbate violence in chronically violent neighbourhoods to healthy norms that reject the use of violence; fourthly, continually analysing data to ensure proper implementation and to identify changes in violence patterns and levels; and fifthly, providing training and technical assistance to workers, programme members and implementing agencies.

In Scotland, the violence reduction unit established in 2005 has reduced the number of homicides by 39% and the number of violent crimes by 69%, which is huge. I could talk for hours about the unit's work, but I will not. I will simply say that I have nothing other than total respect for the unit's work and for the magnificent people I have met.

Karyn McCluskey and John Carnochan, who set up the unit, are two of the finest, most dedicated people I have ever met. It has never been just a job to them. They drafted the violence reduction unit's first plan and they would say that they had lots of dedicated people who worked with them, and I know that to be true. What would be the main things they would say to me if they were here? They would say, “It is about relationships.” I interpret that to mean breaking down barriers, pulling people together on a common aim and enthusing people to do something that is going to work. It is also about the importance of individual relationships. They would also say, “Follow the evidence. Don't do things that don't work. Do things that work.” That might sometimes mean trying something, realising it is not working and binning it, and then trying something else that will work. They would also say, “Listen. Listen to what you're being told and what the evidence shows you. Listen to our young people and recognise they are so, so often so very vulnerable, even if they put a super-hard act on.” One of the most important things they would say is that our approach must be long term. They had a 10-year strategy, but when we speak to them, they say it could and probably should have been 15 or 20 years long.

I am glad to see that Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, has announced the establishment of a violence reduction unit in London, which will establish a public health approach to reducing violence, learning the lessons from Scotland, but appreciating we may need some different approaches in London. Local authorities need to have the legal duty—this is not just about having a consultation on a legal duty—to underpin a public health approach in tackling violent crime. I hope the Home Office can update us on that soon.

Turning back to what the Government can do, we need to learn lessons from what works. We need to be brave and follow the evidence, which can be difficult when the Government do not store data on crucial sources of information. Can the Minister tell me why the Government do not centrally hold data on the time of knife attacks, especially as recent research has shown that young people are especially vulnerable between 4 pm and 6 pm on school days? Data on the number of knife aggravated murders in each city or local authority is also not held centrally, which makes it far harder to compare the efficacy of different local authority approaches over time. The number of prisoners that were excluded at school is also not regularly recorded. Many victims of knife crime do not report their injuries to the police, so should we not be looking for this information in

[Vicky Foxcroft]

other areas, such as the NHS? The Government do not cross-reference ambulance service dispatch data for knife injuries and police records for knife attacks. Many people believe there is a link between deprivation and levels of violence, so why do the Government not hold this information? Finally, but extremely importantly, why do we not record the number of young people who applied but failed to meet the threshold for child and adolescent mental health services treatment?

Those are all extremely important areas—and I am sure there are many more—where we should hold data, as a minimum to ensure that the Government can successfully deliver on their public health approach. I have asked numerous questions of the Government and others in order to try to find this information, but, sadly, I know the Government do not hold this data. Why is that? Will the Government commit today to seeking to hold this data?

Why do we invest in programmes that we know do not work? For example, there is no evidence to suggest that programmes in schools that say, “Do not use drugs” or, “Do not carry a knife” have any impact. We should analyse the efficacy of these programmes and if they do not work, we must stop them. We know that programmes investing in social development, home visitation, training in parenting, mentoring programmes and family therapy work. We also know that the earlier the intervention, the more effective it is.

I will skip through what I have on adverse childhood experiences, because I know that other Members have gone through it, but ACEs is an extremely important area of work and we need to do a lot more on it. I encourage all Members of Parliament to do the survey on ACEs and get their scores, as I intend to do in the future. I understand that the Government are due to publish a report on ACEs; when will it be published?

I will skip through my comments on schools, but in previous speeches on education I have said a lot about what happens in schools. It is really important that we look into whether school finishing times are right and whether we should stagger them. Should we think about closing down all pupil referral units? Should we look into expulsion? We could absolutely invest that money in our children's lives far earlier.

Let me conclude my remarks with an important quote from a Member of the Youth Parliament, Ciya Vyas, who spoke about the importance of tackling knife crime in the recent UK Youth Parliament debate on the subject. She said:

“More young people voted for this issue than any other...If there is a will for change on this issue among young people, there is a political will for change here at Westminster. Whether we see the need for a violence reduction unit and a public health approach, as pioneered so successfully in Scotland and endorsed here by London's Mayor, or the Home Secretary's recent proposals to increase levels of stop-and-search, this debate is happening now, and we cannot neglect our duty to bring young people's voices into it.”

After that debate, and following a ballot of more than 1 million young people throughout the nation, the Youth Parliament and the British Youth Council chose knife crime as the subject of their national campaign. Let us make sure that as politicians we do not let them down.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I know this will be unpopular, but in order that everybody can speak, I am going to have to drop the informal time limit down to six minutes—and no more, please. I am sorry, but I have to leave time for the Front-Bench contributions.

4.6 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Let me put on record my awe at the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) has been doing on this issue, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) and for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). It has been incredibly powerful to watch. In my short contribution I want to read into the record what it is like to be from a community in the grip of this disease, because we know at first hand in Walthamstow. I have felt like I have been living a parallel life over the past couple of years: the debates are about either Brexit or knife crime, but both have powerfully divided my local community.

We are a community who know what it means to lose our loved ones. On 7 May 2017, Elijah Dornelly was stabbed. He was 17 years old. He died. On 20 November, Kacem Mokrane died in hospital after being stabbed four days previously. He was 18. On 14 March, Joseph William-Torres was shot in his car. He was 20 years old. He died. On 2 April this year, Amaan Shakoar, 16 years old, was shot in a school car park in Walthamstow. He died. On 22 September, Guled Farah, 19 years old, was shot dead on Vallentin Road in Walthamstow.

There are not just the ones we have lost, but the ones who have—thankfully—lived through this trauma. On 14 November last year, an 18-year-old was stabbed in a Subway restaurant in Walthamstow. On 19 November, a 17-year-old was stabbed. On 5 February this year, a 17-year-old turned up at our local hospital with gunshot wounds. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford, pointed out, it is often the hospitals, rather than the police, that know about these problems. On 3 May, two young men were found stabbed in my local high street in Walthamstow. On 27 August this year, a 16-year-old was found stabbed in the neck on Markhouse Road. Mercifully, he survived. On 9 November, a 20-year-old was found with stab wounds in our local leisure centre. On 12 November, a 17-year-old was found stabbed on Hoe Street in Walthamstow. Just this week, on 11 December, a 15-year-old boy was stabbed in a school playground in Walthamstow.

It is fair to say that in the eight years that I have been an MP in Walthamstow we have always had a challenge with gangs in our local community. Professor John Pitts has catalogued that for us in work on what he called reluctant gangsters. Eight years ago, it was about postcodes and the pride that people felt about their local communities—the Beaumont estate, the Boundary Road, the Priory Court, the Drive. Kids wore their membership as a badge of pride to put fear into their rivals. People here have talked about adverse childhood experiences and definitely then that was a factor too, but now we see how it has changed from reluctant gangsters to making profits, as John Pitts points out. It is organised crime that is driving much of this violence. People have mentioned county lines already.

We might have 250 recognised gangs across London. In my local community, we have identified around 230 gang nominals. Indeed, the Mali Boys have come to

devastate our local area and to frighten many. These gangs do not advertise their membership now; it is bad for business, because it is driven by drugs. They use their territories not to deter other people, but as marketing grounds—as places where they find their customers. The most valuable resource for them is the phone, so that they can be on-call to deliver the drugs, and, yes, children are sent all around the country to deal, to as far away as Scotland, but also to Essex, to Norfolk and the Thames Valley.

The public health model reflects that, over the past eight years, the same factors are at stake: the childhood chaos, the poverty and the resources that we need to address these problems. For my local community, living in the grip of this disease of youth violence, the same fears remain. There are the parents who tell me that they do not want their kids to get on the buses to go to school because they do not know what will happen to them. There is the shock when they see the police tape and, yes, the social media posts when somebody has spotted something. There is the fear of the gang knives and the guns that we now have on our streets. There are little boys who are dying—they are boys, they are teenagers—and the girls who are caught up in sexual exploitation. There is the domestic violence that is behind much of this, and the frustrations of my local social workers who do an amazing job for Waltham Forest Council, trying to work with these families. There are the people who work through Christmas trying to keep our kids alive.

We cannot pretend that resources do not matter in these circumstances. We cannot pretend that, when finally we get those resources, it does not make a difference. This October, 30 members of the Mali gang were arrested. We have seen in just one area of Walthamstow, in St James's Street, 15 arrests in one month alone, because we are seeing guns, knives and drugs being taken off our streets. We have had a 24% increase in offensive weapon offences in Walthamstow in the past year alone, so, of course, enforcement and policing make a difference. Anybody who says otherwise simply does not understand what it is like to live within this community. But we know that that is not enough.

Finally, let me pay tribute to all the other organisations that are working with our council: Spark2life, Access Aspiration, Soul Project, Gangs United, Boxing for Life, Camara at Words 4 Weapons, Slenky, and Waltham Forest community hub and Monwara Ali. Our community will not stand by while this happens. Minister, please, give us the resources for the youth services that we need to help our young people. Give us the police that we need to work with them, because this disease is gripping us and it is frightening.

4.12 pm

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I wholeheartedly agree with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). I just want to recount to the House, by way of example, just what has been happening in our borough of Lambeth recently.

On 25 July, two boys on a moped pull up next to a parked car in Denmark Road, in another part of the borough from my constituency, but near to one of our local hospitals, King's College. The moped passenger slides sideways off the seat and falls on to the road. The driver shouts to those nearby, "Help him! Help him! He's been stabbed." Two men in a parked car jump out

to help and the moped driver just speeds off. The boy lies in the road, bleeding. He dies a few hours later. His name was Laatwan Griffiths and he was 18 years old. He also went by the name of Splash Addict and SA Harlem, and was part of the Harlem Spartans drill group based in and around the Kennington Park Estate.

A week later, on 1 August, Sidique Kamara, 23, and a member of Moscow17, is stabbed to death yards from his home on an estate in Camberwell. That estate is Moscow17's base. Laatwan and Sidique were reportedly good friends; Moscow17 and Harlem Spartans are allies. A year earlier Sidique and another member of Moscow17 had been cleared of the murder of Abdirahman Mohamed, who belonged to a rival drill group—I will come to drill in moment—called Zone 2. Zone 2 are at war with Harlem Spartans and Moscow17, and at the end of August there was another incident in the same area, involving up to 20 young boys fighting with knives. Several were stabbed, one horrifically so—a constituent of mine. And so it goes on. We lost young John Ogunjobi in the Tulse Hill part of my constituency last month. That incident was unrelated to the feud I have just mentioned, but did involve other groups. That is what is happening.

Let us be absolutely clear that this is not just an issue of black boys killing other black boys in socially deprived neighbourhoods. It affects all families. Any parent of a teenager in London now worries when they leave their home. Let us also be clear that the demand for illegal drugs from well-off, middle-class people is a major driver of this violence. This is all interconnected. Young people from my area are trafficking drugs around other parts of the country. I say to people who indulge in their cocaine usage and what have you over the weekends: when you snort that line of coke, a whole heap of violence, abuse, exploitation and general criminality has led to that powder going up your nose. You are part of this too. That is why this entire thing needs to be a national mission—an issue that we seek to tackle as a country.

Now, why is it happening? I believe in reciprocity; it is at the heart of my politics. We provide our young people with an environment in which they can thrive, and pursue their hopes, dreams and opportunities. In return, we ask that they abide by the norms, values and rules of the society of which they are a part. The bottom line is that we have broken that social contract with our young people, and unless we address it we are not going to deal with this problem.

We will not be able to reduce the bloodshed unless we go to the root causes, and we have to look at three or four different things. First, as I have said, we dispossess our young people by bringing them up in this environment. In so many parts of my constituency, richness and extreme deprivation sit side by side. In the deprived areas of my community there is a concentration of social problems all sitting in one place. Parents are absolutely struggling and are under intense pressure, often holding down two or three jobs just to make ends meet. I will just quote a young mother from the Tulse Hill estate, who said that

"if you want to support our kids, we need support too because it's a daily struggle."

So we need to sort out the environment.

Secondly, we have to talk about respect and the way it plays into this culture of violence. The friendship groups that young people are part of are surrogate families, but they are families without parental authority and without

[Chuka Umunna]

an arbiter of justice. Each boy—it is mostly boys—has to prove his worth. That is not a problem if we are talking about how good they are at sport or what they are wearing, but it is much more serious if we are dealing with disenfranchised young boys without money, hope or self-esteem, who feel disrespected. In areas where legal authority is weak, a reputation for violence is seen as the only effective deterrent against attack. That has to be dealt with. Locally powerful criminals end up providing alternative routes to respect, and boys who are desperate and looking for that respect will gravitate towards them. Of course, more and more girls are also being dragged into this and abused.

Finally—a big thing—we have to give these young people access to opportunities and hope, because as a youth worker said to me:

“If you’ve got no hope then you’ve got nothing. They need something real to aspire to.”

No one has had enough time to give the speeches they want to give, so I will just finish by saying this: this is not rocket science. We have already been through so much of this in the report on the August 2011 riots, so it is nothing new. Everything that everybody is saying can be found in the report of that panel. But the big question for this House and this Government is, when are we going to act? Year in, year out we are here debating the same issues, and we keep seeing blood on our streets. It is a disgrace. It shames this House, it shames our politics and finally we need to do something about it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): The informal limit is now down to five minutes.

4.19 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): At the beginning of November, a 15-year-old child, Jay Hughes, was murdered in Bellingham in my constituency. Less than 72 hours on from that tragic event, a 22-year-old, Ayodeji Habeeb Azeez, was murdered in Anerley, just a year on from the murder of teenager Michael Jonas, which shocked the community back in 2017. These murders have utterly shaken our community, and constituents have expressed to me their fear for their family’s safety. No parent should have to harbour such concerns. No family should have to lose their child to violent crime. Similarly, no young person should be so bereft of opportunity and aspiration that they feel that violent crime is a path to follow. But this is the situation that we find ourselves in.

We are in the midst of a youth violence crisis. I will turn to the causes, but before that, I want to say how heartened I have been by the community’s response in Lewisham West and Penge. In the face of such tragic circumstances, they have shown strength and determination to bring our communities closer. I mention not least the work of the Bellingham community project, Youth First, the local police, Elfrida and Athelney primary schools in Bellingham, and Stewart Fleming Primary School and the Samos Road community in Anerley.

But as much as the community has worked to rebuild what has been lost, they cannot do this on their own. Tackling youth violence requires work from an array of

public services in co-operation with our communities. Sadly, ever since 2010 we have seen some of the most devastating cuts made to our public services, especially the Metropolitan police, which has faced £1 billion of cuts since 2010, with further savings to be found over the next few years. As a result, we have seen the loss of 30% of police staff and 65% of police community support officers. Our police do a fantastic job, but in the wards that I represent, we have, at most, two ward officers and one PCSO per ward. They are fantastic, but they are overstretched. It is inevitable that with reduced police visibility and presence in our neighbourhoods, relationships with communities deteriorate, trust is eroded, and opportunities for crime arise. The Met urgently needs more funding so that it can work to prevent crime rather than just reacting to it. However, youth violence is not just a question of police funding and enforcement. The causes are extremely complex and involve societal problems such as poverty, adverse childhood experiences and lack of opportunity.

Tackling youth violence therefore requires a public health approach, which means addressing the environments that make people vulnerable to the risk of crime. We have talked about the example of Glasgow, where the violence reduction unit teamed up with agencies in the fields of health, education and social work, and the police force became the first in the world to adopt a public health approach. As a result, recorded crime in Scotland is now at a 40-year low. There are lessons to be learned from that, but it will work only if we join up health, education, youth services, housing, the Home Office and the justice system. Yet all those departments have been cut as part of the Government’s austerity agenda.

For example, the Government spend less than 1% of the NHS budget on children’s mental health, with many children waiting many months for treatment and often being turned away for not meeting the threshold. In the case of education, schools in my constituency tell me that they can identify children who are vulnerable from as young as three years old, because they may have older siblings or other family members in gangs. That is the point at which intervention is really needed, but schools can barely afford to go on as they are, so intervening to carry out that sort of work becomes increasingly difficult. Similarly, we have seen Sure Start centres have their budgets cut, and the loss of things like youth clubs and youth projects across the country.

The Minister mentioned St Giles Trust in her opening remarks, and I pay tribute to it for the work that it does. It was running a fantastic county lines pilot project down in Kent for six months, but then the funding from the Home Office dried up. That is the reality of the situation that we are working in. These projects need funding in order to carry on doing their work. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) for the work that she has done on the Youth Violence Commission—she has campaigned on this issue tirelessly—and also to the Mayor of London, who, despite restricted budgets, has launched the youth violence reduction unit. Such agencies desperately need money so that they can carry out this vital work.

We cannot bring back those we have already lost, but we can take action to prevent more from losing their lives. We can help prevent our vulnerable young people

from turning to crime, and we can offer them aspiration and a stake in our society. What is needed is the funding and the political will.

4.24 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) on the work she has done on the Youth Violence Commission and on securing this debate against all the odds. I do not know whether she asked for the debate nine, 10 or 11 times—

Vicky Foxcroft: Thirteen.

Sarah Jones: Thirteen! She was incredibly persistent.

Lyn Brown: And resilient.

Sarah Jones: Indeed.

Violence is not inevitable—we have to hold on to that. Just as it goes up, so it can come down, if we do the right things, and that is fundamentally what we are here to debate. I had the honour of going to Clarence House yesterday, where Prince Charles was holding an event with Prince Harry. Prince Charles, who takes a great interest in this issue, stood up and said, “Enough is enough. We have to do more to tackle this.” If the royal family are telling us we need to do more, we should pay attention.

We know that we have reached the highest level of knife crime on record and have seen more violent deaths in London than in any year since 2008. This is not a Croydon issue or a London issue; this is a national crisis. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford said, last month a poll of 1 million young people found that knife crime was their No. 1 issue. This must start from the very top, and I would like to see the Prime Minister make a speech on violence. That would set an agenda that the rest of us could follow and would be a powerful way to show that she cares.

Last Friday, some of us from the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime went up to Scotland, where we visited a young offenders prison and the violence reduction unit. After leaving the prison, we met a young man called Callum, and for me he epitomises what the public health approach can do. He was born into a family where domestic violence was rife and there was alcoholism. He had a traumatised childhood. He said that he used to spend his time in school looking out of the window, worrying whether his mother was safe at home. He looked at the gangs on the streets and thought that they were a place of safety for him.

Callum ended up getting involved with boys who were much older and in all kinds of criminal activity, which escalated, so he was in and out of prison. He took to drinking and became an alcoholic because he felt such self-loathing and fear. He got himself into a position where one day he was stabbed seven times outside his own house by some men. He looked up and saw his seven-year-old son at the window, seeing his father being stabbed. He was rushed to hospital, where he met a youth worker who said, “Callum, are you done?” and he said, “Yes, I’m done, but I need help.” That was the point at which interventions began. He had therapy, training and a whole raft of interventions that helped him get a job.

His former partner sadly killed herself earlier this year, and Callum now has sole custody of their boy. If he had not turned himself around, that cycle—the

epidemic and disease that we all talk about—would have carried on. As his parents, so him, and so his child. Now his child has a chance of a life. That is what we are talking about today.

I will not go through all the different interventions, because we do not have time, but I want to echo the points made about early intervention and prevention. In the young offenders prison that our APPG went to, a third of the prisoners had been in care as a child, 38% had experience of domestic violence and 75% had suffered a traumatic bereavement—for example, a suicide, drug death or murder. That figure is huge, and we do not talk enough about that misunderstood area. Two thirds of the boys in that prison had suffered four or more bereavements, three quarters had witnessed serious violence in their area and 76% had been threatened with a weapon. These young people are traumatised by adverse childhood experiences that have developed through their lives. It is clear that intervention at an early stage, as well as when they get to such a stage, is crucial. Our ambition must be to make this country the safest country in the world for our young people. Nothing less will do.

4.30 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I am very grateful, because of my sore throat, that the time limit has been reduced. When I heard it was originally nine minutes, I was going to encourage interventions.

I am a member of the Youth Violence Commission, alongside the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). I want to spend my allotted time making it clear that the recommendations in its report are very much evidence-based, and in particular are based on the evidence of the work we saw in Glasgow and in Scotland. When we launched the Youth Violence Commission, I said that one of the first things we need to tackle as a society is the cycle of low expectation in young people—I think we need to raise young people’s hopes—and also that youth violence is a preventable public health problem, but it does require resources and constant commitment.

That was seen when Swayed, a youth organisation that does street outreach work in my constituency, visited the London Assembly. Young people and youth workers met in London to discuss the work that is done both in London and in Glasgow, and I know that both organisations found that very beneficial.

Vicky Foxcroft: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Stephens: I will give way to save my throat.

Vicky Foxcroft: I just want to point out for the record that my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) is also on the Youth Violence Commission. I had forgotten the name of his seat when I was making my speech.

Chris Stephens: So noted—and it has been good to work with the hon. Gentleman.

On the Youth Violence Commission’s visit in October last year, we went to a school. In my intervention on the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), I mentioned the visits to schools that are made to give young people the skills to deal with challenging, threatening and abusive behaviour.

[Chris Stephens]

We visited an after-school club, which at that time was run by Sergeant Danny Stuart. We made an evening visit to Govan to see Johnny Hendry of YouthLink Scotland, a street outreach worker. He provided the commission with insights and a tour of some of the areas he goes to in Govan to engage with and support young people. Points were made earlier about gangs taking over, as well as about drug dealers and all the rest of it. Johnny tells me that what is happening in Scotland is that the violence reduction unit is dealing with the schools, but the drug dealers are after the ones playing truant.

We also visited another organisation in my constituency that has been praised in Parliament, the South West Arts and Music Project, to see its magnificent work. I am a great believer in providing young people with a creative outlet, such as video making or music. Young people can do so much to help the creative industries in our country, and it helps them with their health as well. I think that is one of the keys going forward.

The public health model adopted in Scotland has demonstrated that violence has significant social, structural and environmental root causes that need to be tackled. If a young person is subjected to harsh physical punishment or has seen physical punishment in the household, they are more likely, as others have said, to engage in violence. If we are to support the public health model across these islands, we need to have consistent funding; to provide opportunities, whether educational, recreational or economic; to promote social inclusion; and to enhance social cohesion between parents, young parents and communities. I will be doing all I can while I am a Member of Parliament to make sure that we tackle youth violence across these islands.

4.34 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Over the past 18 months I have sat in the living rooms of grieving parents who have lost a precious child to knife crime, and in community centres with angry and bewildered local residents who are terrified by the violence they have witnessed. I have faced questions on too many occasions, in school assemblies and youth clubs, from frightened children who ask what is being done to stop knife and gun crime in our area.

Today I am speaking for the bereaved families of Jude Gayle, Kyall Parnell, and John Ogunjobi. Jude Gayle was killed last year as he popped out to the local shop to buy ingredients for a family meal. Kyall Parnell was stabbed at a bus stop in West Norwood on new year's eve, and John Ogunjobi was stabbed just a few weeks ago on the Tulse Hill estate, in front of his mother who had come to pick him up to try to keep him safe.

Lambeth and Southwark, the boroughs that each serve part of my constituency, have among the highest rates of knife crime in London, and among the highest volume of serious violence against young people. That level of challenge has resulted in some truly exceptional work on this issue, and I pay tribute to the organisations that work hard every day to keep young people safe, to save the lives of those who are injured, and to intervene to turn lives around.

The work of the trauma team in King's College hospital under Duncan Bew, Malcolm Tunnicliff and Emer Sutherland is second to none. They have developed

life saving techniques for gun and knife-related injuries, and they also work with the charity Redthread, under the leadership of John Poyton, on an intervention approach for young people who come to the emergency department.

There are many inspirational community organisations, such as the Dwaynatics boxing gym, which was established by Lorraine Jones who lost her son, Dwayne Simpson, to knife crime in 2014. There is the work of Lee Dema and the St Matthew's project, which provides football coaching for young people in Brockwell Park, and the Marcus Lipton youth centre led by Ira Campbell. Brixton Wings is based on the Angell Town Estate, and the Advocacy Academy empowers young people to speak truth to power on the issues that matter to them, and to work for change in their area.

The DIVERT team led by Inspector Jack Rowlands at Brixton police station—now also in Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Croydon and Lewisham—provides intensive support and intervention for young adults in police custody. It is hugely innovative and successful, and I am glad the Government recently recognised that by agreeing to extend funding for the existing programme for a further two years. Nevertheless, more commitment is needed. DIVERT should be the norm in every police station and every community where youth violence is a serious issue, and it should be funded as a part of mainstream policing. Both Lambeth and Southwark have sought to protect funding for youth services at a time when they have lost more than half their funding from central Government. Why, when there is so much good work to celebrate, is violence that affects young people continuing to increase?

The number of school exclusions has been rising in recent years, with particularly alarming increases among children eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs, who account for almost half of exclusions. Currently, when a school excludes a child, the school's responsibility for that child comes to an end. Since the number of academies is increasing under this Government, and academies have their own admissions authorities, in many areas it is becoming increasingly difficult for local authorities to find places for excluded children. A child who has been excluded needs more intervention, not less, and children who end up out of school for extended periods following exclusion are surely at greater risk of becoming involved in violence, both as victims and perpetrators. More must be done to fund our schools to provide intervention and support for students whose behaviour is challenging, and to hold them to account for the outcomes for every child who has been on their roll.

There is a huge and growing gap in the funding of children's social services, estimated by the Local Government Association—I declare my interest as a vice-president of the LGA—at around £3 billion. As a consequence, children's social services departments are stretched to breaking point. They struggle to provide their statutory safeguarding services, and find it increasingly hard to recruit and retain social workers in an environment that is often high risk. Any department under such pressure will find it hard to do the proactive, preventive, early-intervention work that can prevent adverse childhood experiences and reduce the risk of violence later in childhood.

Our youth justice system is woefully under resourced. Government rhetoric on tough sentencing may play well in communities where young people do not regularly

lose their lives to guns and knives, but the reality is a court system on its knees, which allows—this happened in my constituency recently—a young person bailed in north London to travel to south London to rob school children at knife point the next day. Our penal system delivers the scandalously high youth reoffending rate of 41.7%. Such a system must reform as well as punish, which is even more urgently the case for young offenders than for the rest of the prison population. Youth justice must be funded and resourced to do the intensive, transformative work that is needed to stop young offenders returning to a life of violence. That is the right thing for victims as well as perpetrators and our communities more widely, and the current situation is shameful.

Access to mental health support, particularly for children and young people, remains far too difficult within early intervention and crisis services. The extent to which young people who are both the victims and perpetrators of violent crime are clinically traumatised is documented and evidenced, but still not reflected in mainstream practice in mental health services.

My final observation on this issue is the extent of the issues at local level which never register with any public services. I reflect on the conversations I have had recently with parents in my constituency. One mother told me about the number of young people with minor knife injuries who she has patched up in her kitchen because they are too scared to go to hospital, and how some of them have then become too scared to leave their own homes. She came to see me because she was struggling to support another mother whose child had been traumatised by the violence he had experienced and spent his days smashing up his mother's home. Another mother told me how she will not let her 16-year-old pop out to the shop on her estate because:

"I don't know which gang is going to be there and whether he will come back."

The public health approach to youth violence has to mean more than words. The measure of the Government's commitment to the public health approach in my constituency will be whether it relieves the anxiety of those mothers who are fearful every time their teenagers leave the house and whether it stops the killing. Next week, when I see the family of John Ogunjobi who was recently stabbed to death, I want to be able to look them in the eye and say that that this is going to stop and that other families will not have to suffer their agony. Under this Government, I do not believe I can do so.

4.40 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for bringing this debate to the Floor of the House. The magnificent contributions from right hon. and hon. Members have been truly something to acknowledge.

The issue of youth violence has moved on massively from my day. There may not be many people of my day in the Chamber—perhaps with the exception of yourself, Mr Deputy Speaker, or thereabouts—but in those far off days a "fair dig" was the worst it ever got after school and then it was all over. Things have changed, however. I was horrified to read back in March that more than 1,000 children in Northern Ireland have received criminal convictions in the past five years. The youngest criminals convicted in that period were just 12 years of age. It costs £324,000 per year to keep a

young person in custody and the Northern Ireland young offender population is proportionately larger than that of England and Wales. In total, 1,085 children under the age of 18 carried out one or more crimes in the past five years. Among that number are five 12-year-olds, the youngest of whom was convicted of criminal damage. There were 279 convictions in 2015 and 207 in 2017.

In the very short time I have, I would like to give two examples of solutions—this is about solutions as well as statistics. In my constituency, I am very fortunate to have an organisation called Street Pastors, which is a coming together of churches. Other Members may have something similar in their constituencies. It is clear that it is not simply youth violence that is the culprit in these convictions. It is also clear that this is something that must be addressed. Having seen a massive reduction in antisocial behaviour in my area with the work of Street Pastors, who have managed to make friendships, build trust and prevent cross words turning to street brawls, it is clear that the voluntary sector is an essential tool in tackling youth violence. Street Pastors has a good interaction with young people. Antisocial issues that led to violence have dissipated. I have seen its good work, which has been made possible by churches coming together.

The work carried out by community groups, churches and voluntary groups is incredible and brings dividends, but there is greater work to be carried out in other realms. I agree with the comments made by Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge with regard to social media outlets living up to their responsibility and not simply doing the bare minimum expected of them. There must be an end to cyber-bullying, which then translates to physical violence. There must be a clear campaign that weapons and criminal activity is something to be ashamed of, not something to be proud of.

Across Northern Ireland, there has been a very successful advertising campaign that raises such awareness. It states the fact that paramilitaries do not protect, they harm. The adverts are, to say the least, chilling. The screams of a young lad, lying on the floor crying for his mother after being shot in the knees, are difficult to listen to. Paramilitaries and gangs act as judge, jury and executioner, discharging their own cruel, horrific and violent surgical justice. The adverts were commissioned by the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland and they are being used on Snapchat and on other social media. I know how effective they are because of the conversations they have started with my staff and across my community. I know how harsh the adverts are, but the fact is that youth violence is harsh. It leaves long-lasting legacies. It is not a matter of being loyal and standing up for your friends, crew or gang; it is illegal behaviour that has the potential to ruin your life, harm others and bring immeasurable grief to families. The decision to run this type of hard-hitting campaign, which bids to end so-called paramilitary-style attacks, was not taken lightly, but I believe that it gets the right message across.

In conclusion—I am conscious of the time, Mr Deputy Speaker—it is my belief that we can do better on addressing youth violence and it is my fervent hope that we can do better, not simply for the victims, which is telling enough, but for all those who are caught up in it, taking things too far and being led further than they want to go. We cannot afford to lose a generation to gang mentality and rage. We must fund community

[*Jim Shannon*]

groups and work alongside churches and other voluntary sectors to work with our young people and change mentalities. We must work with parents and give them the help and support needed to deal with troublesome teens and enable teachers to have choices in their school budget to address the differing needs of pupils. There is work to be done, and we must be determined to do it.

4.45 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Let me say how much we welcome today's debate. I know that it has felt like a Backbench Business Committee debate, but it was brought forward by the Government after my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) harassed them into doing so. However, I agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), who said that it could perhaps have been brought forward with a bit more urgency.

There is not time to list everyone's contributions, but we have heard some incredibly passionate speeches. We have heard about the devastating consequences of cuts and the breach of the social contract with our young people, which my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) spoke about so powerfully. We have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), for Streatham, for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher)—we were grateful to her for bringing a non-London-centric point of view to the debate, because this is a national crisis.

We heard about the importance of preventive measures from the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). We also heard about the powerful lessons from Glasgow from the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and the spokesperson for the SNP, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald).

I want to dwell on just two Members' contributions. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton spoke about bereavement. I was on the trip to the violence reduction unit last week and to Polmont young offenders institution. The two greatest commonalities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) mentioned, were school exclusions and traumatic bereavements. Clearly, we need a fast-tracked pathway to trauma counselling for any young person who has experienced trauma, as that is a serious factor in becoming a victim of or committing youth violence.

It is impossible for me to do justice to the incredible work that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford has done as chair of the Youth Violence Commission. She gave us a full history of the public health debate and the need to treat violence as a disease—but a disease that can be cured—and she outlined the fundamental principles that need to be at the heart of the public health approach. She laid a challenge to the Government to ensure that our interventions are effective and evidence-based, and not simply knee-jerk reactions to congratulate ourselves on having taken action.

We have heard from Members about the devastating consequences of youth violence in their constituencies, but this is a national crisis, too. No society can keep its cohesion or its humanity—indeed, no society can claim to be one at all if it becomes complacent about young people dying on our streets. This is not a spike or a blip as we saw in 2008; it is a trend enveloping a generation of young people, and it requires immediate national action directed by Government. It must be directed from the very top as part of a national mission.

The Home Secretary highlighted the importance of early intervention in tackling violence when he told “The Andrew Marr Show” that we must deal with the “root causes” of violence. The £20 million a year to be spent on early intervention and prevention has to be seen in the context of the £387 million cut from youth services, the £1 billion taken from children's services and the £2.7 billion taken from school budgets since 2015. As the Children's Commissioner said in her excellent report on vulnerabilities:

“We are all familiar with frailty in old age but much less so for children and teenagers... do we know the same about children who start school unable to speak?...Do we understand how this affects their further progression? Do we realise that an inability to express yourself leads to anger, and difficult behaviour, which is then reflected in rising school exclusions ... Do we know that if this continues...not only does the child's education suffer but so does their mental health? Do we know that 60% of children who end up in the youth justice estate have a communication problem, most of which could have been effectively treated?”

We talk about hard-to-reach young people all the time in this place, but I would suggest that it is our services that are hard to reach and that we set young people up to fail.

The truth is that the public health model can work only with intensive support and investment in our most vulnerable young people, driven by a co-ordinated effect across government. This is not just about statutory agencies—the vision and duty must sit across a huge range of community services, and voluntary sector and faith organisations. I am concerned that the Government's approach might be too restrictive and overly focused on statutory agencies. It is not clear how the new duty that the Minister has announced will go beyond the duty already placed on those agencies by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

The public health approach requires a strong criminal justice response. For that, we need police on our streets and in our communities. It requires a fundamental shift towards prevention and early intervention. Nothing that Glasgow and other public health models have achieved is rocket science. Very little of it requires legislation. However, it does require a clear mission statement, political will and leadership. It requires us to recognise that relationships must be at the heart of protecting and keeping our young people safe; and that human interventions from stable, trusted adults are the saviour of every young man or woman who has turned their life around. It requires young people's voices to be at the heart of the design of those interventions, and it requires all our services to be trauma informed.

The challenge facing the country from violent crime is truly frightening and at times can feel overwhelming, but with the right resources, the right approach and the political leadership from the House and in every community in our country, it is possible to stem the tide.

4.51 pm

Victoria Atkins: With the leave of the House, I will wind up the debate.

I thank colleagues on both sides of the House for their contributions to this important debate. We have heard, as I suspected we would, many sad instances. I thank colleagues who have shared the terribly sad stories from their constituencies in the Chamber.

I thank the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who called for the debate. I gave her a hint that it might be worth her while to ask for it in business questions last week. I am pleased that she did so because my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House was able to announce it. I also thank her for her work, along with the hon. Members for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), and other colleagues, for their work on the Youth Violence Commission, which has certainly helped to inform our debate as well as our wider work on this important topic. The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford asked a number of detailed and important questions. I hope she will understand that I will write to her to answer them. In fact, I will go further than that and invite her to the Home Office to discuss the issues she has raised, because they are important and worth considering very carefully.

As we have heard, this violence is having an appalling impact on families and communities. It is clear that tackling violent crime matters to and affects hon. Members on both sides of the House, which is why we must continue to work together to tackle it. I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), for saying that we cannot arrest our way out of this. I completely agree with her and, in fairness, have been saying that for many months. I very much hope that the approach we are taking—the serious violence strategy and the public health duty—shows that we get that and are not just focusing on law enforcement, important though that can be in some respects.

I must always mention the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) when we have a debate on this. She made the point about grooming—the shadow Home Secretary talked about focusing on young people, which we tend to do because it is so terrible to think of young lives cut short. The older people who run the gangs and groom the young people are absolutely in our sights. That is where law enforcement is important. Through the work of the National Crime Agency and the serious and organised crime strategy, for which extra funding of £90 million has been announced today, we are absolutely determined to reach the leaders of those gangs.

Hon. Members including my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), mentioned the importance of investment, including longer-term investment, in charities and services that can help to intervene and stop young people being involved in serious violence. That is why I have great expectations of the new £200 million youth endowment fund, which will be delivered over 10 years. We are in the process of setting it up, with a view to more investment. It is protected for 10 years. I can tell the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford that it will, I hope, fund innovative projects. We must accept that that

will involve risk, because while I hope that those projects will succeed, they may fail. Sometimes, when ground-breaking work is being done, understanding what does not work helps us to find out what does. I very much hope that the fund will deliver transformative change in the way in which we tackle youth violence.

I have referred to the consultation on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach. I am pleased that that has met with agreement across the House, because I think that it could help to focus minds, not just nationally but at local level, on the importance of tackling and intervening in serious violence at an earlier stage. We have also announced an independent review of drug misuse, and we are working on the final terms of reference. I hope to be able to make a further announcement shortly.

I thank the hon. Member for Streatham for his very powerful speech, and for his particularly powerful message to middle-class drug users. As he put it so eloquently, when they are snorting cocaine up their noses at the weekend, they need to understand how that coke got into their hands in the first place. I hope that the more we spread the message about the irresponsibility of such drug habits, the greater impact that will have on the young people whom we have talked about today.

There has been, interestingly, a focus on international elements. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton and, again, to the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford for mentioning the work of the World Health Organisation. We are not alone in seeing increases in serious violence in England and Wales. We know that, for example, the United States, Canada and Sweden have experienced rises in one or more types of serious violence over the last three years.

Last month we held an international symposium, drawing together more than 100 leading international and UK academics, senior police leaders, experts and practitioners to exchange ideas about the causes of those rises, and about best practice in tackling them. I managed to attend only a small part of the symposium, but it was a real pleasure to hear from senior law enforcement officers from Chicago, New York and elsewhere about what they call “precision policing”, and to learn about the international efforts to establish a health agenda as well. It was a very interesting and, for me, worthwhile exercise. We want to continue that international work, because we believe that—particularly in the context of the drug markets—we should not ignore what is happening elsewhere in the world, but should learn lessons from what has worked elsewhere.

Many colleagues raised the issue of exclusions. There is a great piece of work going on at the moment with Edward Timpson looking into alternative education provision. Having spoken to him again, I think that there will be some productive suggestions of ways of ensuring that children in alternative provision do not fall into the traps laid by criminal gangs. As we know, that happens, particularly in the case of county lines. The Department for Education is providing £4 million through its alternative provision innovation fund to improve outcomes for children in non-mainstream education. We continue to work together as Departments on the important task of tackling serious violence.

I was interested to hear what was said by the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton and the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) about the

[Victoria Atkins]

impact of grief on children. I look forward to the right hon. Gentleman's correspondence, because I think that that is an issue on which we should work together. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who, as I said earlier, made valuable contributions during the debate on the Offensive Weapons Bill. I took on board his points about cupboards, and we are having ongoing discussions with retailers about the voluntary matters.

Many other issues were raised which I regret I do not have time to deal with. Let me again stress our determination to stop serious violence, and also thank the police, emergency workers, hospital staff and everyone else who will be looking after us and our young people over Christmas. Let us end the debate as we began it, with the families who are grieving and the young people themselves very much in our minds and our hearts this Christmas.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered a public health model to reduce youth violence.

Rural Post Offices

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

4.59 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Heamoor, Guval, Carbis Bay, Leedstown, Praa Sands, Newlyn, Crowtown, Lizard, Porthleven, St Keverne: these are communities that have either lost their post office branch in recent history or where the branch is at risk of closure. I stand here today to call on the Government to make it clear that there is no post office closure programme. However, we must do more to secure the future of these rural post offices, and to do that we need to enjoy the confidence of sub-postmasters and the businesses that could consider hosting a post office counter in their outlet. I believe that large numbers of sub-postmasters have lost confidence in Post Office Ltd, and for businesses considering taking on a post office service within their current establishment, the word is out that it is not a viable business and they would do well to leave well alone. This is not something that I have stumbled upon recently. I have been working with post office branches, Post Office Ltd and local communities for over three years now, and despite an extraordinary effort by all concerned, including local Post Office Ltd personnel, we have not yet been able to resolve the difficulties faced by sub-postmasters.

It is vital that we secure the future of the rural post office network which, as we know, is integral to rural communities, often forming the hub of commerce within their villages and providing banking and post office services to constituents who would otherwise be unable to access them. The problem of post office closures is not a west Cornwall issue alone, although I would argue that if we can resolve some of our particular challenges, such solutions could be applied elsewhere, strengthening the network for all who need it.

The National Federation of SubPostmasters, with which I have been working closely, informs me that in 2018 some 8% of post offices have seen temporary closure, with 66% of those closing due to the resignation of the postmaster. For many postmasters, the business is neither viable nor fair financially. That is particularly the case in rural constituencies like mine, and it has a profoundly adverse effect on customers who rely on the vital services that the post office network provides.

Earlier this year I sought the support of constituents in west Cornwall in calling on the Government and Post Office Ltd to make sure that sub-postmasters have a viable business, to force banks to pay sub-postmasters a fair price for their services, and to increase the services available to rural post office branches. I want to touch on those three areas and explain why they are so important.

During the campaign I contacted 10,000 people and received over 1,700 responses. That is a greater response than to any previous local campaign and shows how important the issue is to my rural constituency. Those who responded agreed with me that it is in everybody's interest to have a viable post office network, which creates thousands of jobs and sustains communities. I am grateful to the communities right across west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly who are so passionate about maintaining the post office network, and to the sub-postmasters, who work hard every day to provide a service and to provide access to good provision.

It is vital that the Government intervene to ensure that sub-postmasters have a viable business. Post Office Ltd takes responsibility for the post office network on behalf of the Government and it is falling short. This is despite the Government's £2.4 billion investment in the network since 2012. People expect to get value for money. Overall remuneration to postmasters fell again last year, by £17 million, and is predicted to fall by a further £10 million. The rural post office network is not in a good place yet Post Office Ltd reported profits of £36 million in the year 2017-18.

I have been working with one particular community on the Lizard. The current arrangement, which ensures that the local community has access to post office services in the summer and also in the quieter winter period, cannot be maintained—and nor should it be—but the Post Office has spectacularly failed to find an alternative arrangement that maintains a service for the community and treats the current sub-postmaster, who has given several decades of his life to his community, with respect. In a meeting with the chief executive of Post Office Ltd on 24 April this year, I was assured of her commitment to find a solution, but there has been no further communication from her or her office. It has been left to the local community and local Post Office representative—whose responsibilities span the entire Duchy of Cornwall—to find a solution. So, three years on, there is no change.

I have now taken the fight to the Government. In a recent meeting with the Minister for Rural Affairs, I proposed a winter payment plan that recognises that the footfall over the winter is considerably reduced. That plan would help the businesses to be sustained through quieter off-peak periods. This would maintain the service for those who live in the area all year round, and ensure that the service is open when the visitors descend. I also stressed the need for a dedicated mobile service so that post office services can be provided quickly following a post office branch closure. Six of the seven post office closures in west Cornwall have left local residents with no easy access to post office services since their branch has closed. In fact, the one post office that enjoys a mobile service has had no service this week because of ill health. Even that post office, which provides temporary services for two hours, two days a week, has not provided those services this week. This is in Newlyn. It has a large community and is the fourth biggest fishing port in the country, yet it has no post office service.

I am grateful that Lord Gardiner and his officials agreed to meet the chief executive of Post Office Ltd to explore these demands. A post office branch must be a viable business for the owner, and I have long argued that Post Office Ltd has no vision or plan for rural post office services. It is now for the Minister to intervene and find a bespoke solution that supports post offices during the winter to maintain an essential service all year round. This is true not only for rural west Cornwall but for about 6,000 sub-post offices around the country.

Also, post office banking must pay. We are all acutely aware of the decline in high street banks. Now that most banking transactions can be made in a post office branch, this offers a real opportunity and a great plus for the post office network. In 2016, when it first became possible for banking services to be provided in post offices, it was a great leap forward and offered real hope and opportunity for many post offices. Post office banking has experienced strong growth of £20 million,

as reported in the Post Office's own financial report this year, but the reality is that only £3 million of that £20 million has filtered through to the postmasters. The industry average charge to a business depositing £1,000 in local and community branches of the Post Office is £10, of which the postmaster will receive only 24p for the transaction. In a larger branch, the figure rises to 37p per £1,000 transaction. For at least one of my former post offices, it was the banking that broke the camel's back. The postmaster was taking the risk and the responsibility of handling tens of thousands of pounds every week but being paid only a few hundred a year for the privilege. That community no longer has a post office branch.

Another part of the campaign, which has received such support in my constituency, is that the Government and Post Office Ltd must maintain and grow post office services. The Government share some responsibility for the services that are available over a post office counter. As we speak today, the Department for Work and Pensions is writing to people who use their post office account to receive their money to encourage them to switch to a bank account. Those people can still do the transaction at the post office for as long as the post office survives, but the DWP is sending a worrying message regarding the Government's commitment to the post offices by encouraging people to move away from the post office account.

I have met, and received some reassurance from the DWP Minister on this issue. The Government need to be taking steps that help our post offices and our vulnerable constituents, not creating confusion and divorcing our constituents from their source of support. For many, the post office is their only way of accessing the benefits system, and the Post Office relies upon offering this service to customers. Furthermore, sub-postmasters look out for vulnerable customers and often reach out to the lonely and isolated. Opportunities for someone to do that are becoming rarer in rural communities such as mine, so securing the sub-postmaster will secure not only the service, but provide the chance for someone to look out for the vulnerable and isolated in the countryside.

An added dimension and potential threat to the Post Office network that must be considered is that Royal Mail and the Post Office are different businesses facing different challenges. To maintain the Post Office in public ownership and enable private sector investment in Royal Mail's letters and parcels business, Post Office Ltd was separated from Royal Mail Group Ltd in April 2012. To ensure the continuation of their existing business relationship, the management of Royal Mail and the Post Office put in place a commercial contract between the two parties at the time of separation with the longest possible contract length permitted by law. That commercial agreement is coming to an end, and negotiations on their future relationship have started. They complement each other well and are natural business partners. In fact, the chief executive of Royal Mail said it would be "unthinkable" that there would not always be a strong relationship between Royal Mail and the Post Office.

However, I understand that Royal Mail has already introduced a service whereby people post items directly through the counter at the sorting office, bypassing the post office, and is trialling a local collect service using a national convenience store rather than the post office network. It would not be right for the Minister to

[Derek Thomas]

intervene in a commercial contract, but I plead with her to press the Post Office to ensure that it is doing everything to be competitive and to tender for vital services.

There is no time to waste. Thousands of post offices are at risk. This is an opportunity for the Government to reaffirm their commitment to local businesses and their recognition of the essential and valuable work of the rural post office network. For the sake of rural post offices and the many sub-postmasters both in my constituency and around the country and for all those who value and depend on post office services, my plea to the Minister is to ensure that sub-postmasters have a viable business, to work with the banks to ensure that they pay sub-postmasters a fair price for their services, and to ensure that every Department demonstrates a commitment, where they can, to increase the services available in rural post offices.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this important debate. He has been a passionate advocate for post office services in his constituency. We have spoken at great length about the post office network and have another meeting booked in for the new year. As he outlined, he has also met Lord Gardiner to discuss this topic. One of the best things about my role is being responsible for postal services—I know how important the post office is to all our communities, not just rural areas, so this is an important part of my responsibilities. For centuries, post offices have been the centre of social life in our communities, towns and villages. That is especially true in rural areas, which is why our 2017 manifesto committed to safeguarding the post office network and supporting rural services.

Between 2010 and 2018, this Government provided nearly £2 billion to maintain and invest in a national network of at least 11,500 post offices. The Post Office currently meets and exceeds all the Government accessibility targets at national level. Government investment has enabled the modernisation of more than 7,500 branches, added more than 200,000 opening hours a week and established the Post Office as the largest network trading on Sunday.

The Post Office's agreement with the high street banks has enabled personal and business banking in all branches, supporting consumers, businesses and local economies facing bank branch closures, particularly in rural areas. The Post Office's financial performance has improved significantly and, consequently, the Government funding required to sustain the network has drastically decreased and is set to decrease even further in coming years.

I encourage the House to look objectively at those facts, which clearly show that the network is as stable today as it has been in decades. We must remember that the post office network declined by 38% under the last Labour Government, with more than 7,000 branch closures.

Serving rural communities is at the heart of the Post Office's social purpose. There are more than 6,100 post offices in rural areas, with nearly all the population in

such areas living within three miles of a branch. Last year, Citizens Advice found that seven out of 10 rural consumers buy essential items at post offices and that almost 3 million rural shoppers visit a post office on a weekly basis. That is 31%, compared with 21% of people living in cities. Illustrating how important the post office is to such areas is the fact that almost half of rural post offices have community status. The post office is the last shop in some villages.

Rural branches, whether main branches, local branches or traditional branches, can offer the same products and services as urban branches of the same category. The Post Office recognises the unique challenge of running a community branch and supports such postmasters differently from the rest of the network. They receive fixed remuneration, as well as variable remuneration to reflect their special situation.

In addition, the Post Office delivered almost £10 million of investment via the community fund between 2014 and 2018, which enabled community branches to invest in their associated retail business. The Post Office has now launched a smaller community branch development scheme, which will benefit an anticipated 700 branches. Let me be clear that this Government and Post Office Ltd will continue to support rural post offices.

My hon. Friend will be interested to hear that network modernisation has led to the creation of 450 additional opening hours in his constituency, delivering greater convenience to consumers. However, I am aware that there have been a number of service issues in St Ives, and it is fair to say those issues have not been sorted as quickly as the Post Office would have liked. I fully appreciate how frustrating it is for a local community when post office services are interrupted.

In rural areas such as the St Ives constituency, when the shop in which the post office is based closes, there may be few other commercial premises from which services can be offered to consumers. In such instances, the Post Office explores how an outreach service run by a nearby postmaster can ensure the continuity of services for the community, such as via a mobile van.

For example, in my hon. Friend's constituency the St Keverne postmaster will be extending the mobile visit timetable to provide services at—excuse my pronunciations if they are not correct—Heamoor, Gulval, Carbis Bay, Leedstown, Praa Sands and Crowtown over the coming months. Outreach and mobile services are highly valued by the communities they serve, as they offer all the same services as a bricks-and-mortar branch.

Derek Thomas: I thank the Minister for listing those places—she was not far off. Does she accept that it was the work that we have been doing as a local community to put pressure on the Post Office, and to bring this issue to the Minister and other Ministers, that finally got the Post Office even to consider that mobile service, which at the moment is not in place? Some of those villages have not had post office services for more than a year.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his point. He is right in what he says and I recognise that. I was going to come on to this later, but I will respond directly to his point now. The Government are the sole shareholder in the Post Office. It is right that we work with the Post Office, challenging it where necessary, and with constituency

MPs and the community to make sure that we can deliver the right services for the community. As I always do when speaking about post offices at the Dispatch Box, let me say that we are committed to working with MPs and their communities, and we will continue to do so in order to maintain the branch network we have and to try to serve communities as best we can.

Outreach and mobile services are highly valued by the communities they serve, as they offer all the same services as bricks-and-mortar branches. They have been successful in taking key services such as everyday banking to customers, giving them vital access to cash in areas where there are no bank branches nearby. The Post Office directly contributes towards the costs of those outreach services, in conjunction with the postmaster running them, whose parent branch benefits from the transactional income accrued from the visits to outlying communities.

My hon. Friend raised important points about the specific challenge of running a post office in communities where seasonal trade and variation plays a significant role. I know that the Post Office listens to the community and the postmasters in St Ives by taking a more flexible approach to opening hours requirements across the year. That will allow branches to be more sustainable through the leaner, off-peak seasons, when their post office and associated shop has fewer customers. As he said, the issue was taken up by Lord Gardiner in his meeting with Paula Vennells, the Post Office's chief executive officer, on 4 December. I understand that there will be a follow-up meeting with her in the constituency in the New Year to discuss this and other matters further. I am confident that this ongoing, frank and sustained engagement is the right way to proceed, so that the issues can be understood and a solution be provided for the benefit of postmasters, businesses and residents of St Ives.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to clarify some misconceptions about the Post Office's franchising programme, particularly the assumption that franchising means closures and the downgrading of services. Those criticisms are misplaced. Post Office branches are not closing, but are being franchised, either on-site or by relocating to other high street locations. Franchising is nothing new; almost 98% of post offices across the UK are successfully operated by independent businesses and retail partners. Moving the directly managed Crown offices to retail partners has been instrumental in reducing losses in that part of the network.

My hon. Friend raised an important point on postmasters' remuneration, especially for everyday banking services. As these services have developed and increased, I know the Post Office is looking at ways to better recognise the effort required of its postmasters for banking transactions. In fact, the Post Office has recently

notified postmasters that their rates for banking deposits have been increased this year. I understand that the Post Office has now entered negotiations with banks on the next banking service agreement. The Post Office has reassured me that it will do all it can to ensure that postmasters are better remunerated for the vital services that they offer. I should add that the Post Office is picking up vital services in areas that banks have left. It is right that the Post Office does its best to make sure the banks accept the responsibilities involved and the work that post offices are doing on behalf of those communities and, we hope, properly remunerate them.

My hon. Friend also raised an important point about postmasters who cannot exit the business because of the absence of alternative operators to take over their branch. Although that is an operational matter, I assure him that the Post Office is taking it very seriously. As of November 2017, there were more than 450 branches of that type across the network. To help the remaining postmasters, the Post Office has extended the network transformation resignation timeframe to March 2020. That means that all parties can continue to work together to ensure that no communities are left without the invaluable post office services that they rely on. The postmasters affected will continue to receive both fixed and variable remuneration throughout that period. Where solutions are found, the postmasters concerned can leave while still qualifying for their leaver's compensation.

My hon. Friend raised some particular issues relating to his constituents. I am not aware of some of the detail of those cases, but we are meeting in the new year, so I look forward to discussing those points and seeing how we can move forward.

I reassure my hon. Friend that all post offices across the network, including rural branches, are of the utmost importance to the Government. We recognise their value and importance, and we will continue to honour our manifesto commitments so that post offices can thrive and remain at the heart of our rural and urban communities. I thank my hon. Friend again for making his points, and for his hard work in support of access to post office services for his constituents. I assure him that I will continue to work with him and the Post Office to make sure that the constituents of St Ives receive the post office service that they deserve.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I am sure the House would like to wish all postal workers the best for Christmas and the new year, and to thank them for getting the parliamentary mail through.

Question put and agreed to.

5.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 December 2018

[JOAN RYAN *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Withdrawal Agreement: Economic Analyses

TREASURY COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.31 pm

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): We begin with the Select Committee statement. Nicky Morgan will speak on the publication of the 25th report of the Treasury Committee, “The UK’s economic relationship with the European Union: The Government’s and Bank of England’s Withdrawal Agreement analyses”, HC 1819, for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Nicky Morgan to respond to those in turn. Members can expect to be called only once, and questions should be brief. I call the Chair of the Treasury Committee.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to make a statement to the Chamber on the 25th report of the Treasury Committee on the economic impact of the withdrawal agreement and political declaration, and on the Bank of England’s analysis. I place on record my thanks to the Treasury Committee’s staff, my fellow members of the Committee, the witnesses who appeared before us, and all those who submitted written evidence—all of whom played a vital part in producing the report with great speed.

Over the summer, I wrote to the Chancellor, the Governor of the Bank of England and the Financial Conduct Authority on behalf of the Treasury Committee and asked them to produce and publish analysis of the economic impact of the Brexit withdrawal agreement and of the future framework, once it had been negotiated by the Government with the EU. The purpose of securing those analyses was to ensure that Parliament’s meaningful vote on the withdrawal agreement, whenever that may be, is properly informed. Like many other Select Committees, the Treasury Committee has spent the last few weeks poring over the details to ensure that all right hon. and hon. Members walk through the voting Lobbies with the best possible evidence.

When the analysis we requested was published a couple of weeks ago, there were accusations of “Project Fear Mark 2”. Some ramped up the rhetoric even further, with cries of “Project Hysteria”. Let me clear: the analysis of the withdrawal agreement published by the Treasury, the Bank of England and the FCA was requested by the Treasury Committee for Parliament. The timing of the publication was driven by us to

ensure that there was enough time for evidence sessions on the analysis ahead of the vote as we then expected it. Any personal criticism of the Chancellor, the Governor of the Bank of England, our regulators or witnesses, all of whom were responding to parliamentary requests, is wholly unfair and does not aid constructive discussion of the issues—and they are important issues. The analysis that the Treasury Committee received helped it greatly in producing its report on the Brexit deal, which was published and sent to all Members of Parliament on Tuesday morning.

Although Committees can be divided along ideological, party and, more recently, Brexit lines, consensus is always sought. There are 11 Members of Parliament on the Treasury Committee, and I am sure that there are at least 12 different views on Brexit, but this report, like the other 24 reports that we have published since I became Chair 17 months ago, was unanimously agreed. That shows that while the House, and indeed the country, appears more divided than ever, compromise can be achieved. As I have told the House before, all hon. Members will have to compromise if we are to find a way through Brexit.

The firm aim of the report was not to recommend how Members of Parliament should vote, but to ensure that they are as informed as possible and as aware as possible of all the relevant evidence when it comes to choosing a Division Lobby. Unfortunately, the Government made this difficult to achieve. They provided economic analysis of the UK leaving the EU under five different scenarios. The White Paper scenario, which is akin to the Chequers proposal, represents the most optimistic reading of the political declaration, rather than a more realistic scenario. It does not represent the central or most likely outcome under the political declaration, and therefore cannot inform Parliament’s meaningful vote.

In the report, the Treasury Committee expresses its disappointment that the evidence provided by the Treasury does not analyse the backstop. The Treasury also failed to include any short-term analysis, including on public finances and on regional and sectoral job losses or gains. Members of Parliament, as representatives of their constituencies, will understand how important that regional analysis is now and in the future.

Specifically on the Government’s decision not to model the backstop, the Committee concluded that that was a mistake. The Governor of the Bank of England told us

“on average for a trade deal from start to finish, it is something in the order of four years”,

but we know that previous EU negotiations have taken longer—for example, the trade agreement between the EU and Canada took eight years. Even if the implementation period is extended for one or two years beyond December 2020, it is feasible that the UK could enter the backstop, which, as we know, is politically contentious, given what we have already heard in the withdrawal agreement debate. Despite it being neither the UK’s nor the EU’s preferred position, the Government should have modelled the backstop.

We as the Treasury Committee would not be doing our duty to the House of Commons if we did not look at the effects of the withdrawal agreement on the financial services sector. In each of the five modelled scenarios, the sector will contribute less to the UK economy, but

[Nicky Morgan]

we know that it is a critical taxpayer, as well as being part of presenting a face of global Britain on the world stage. The Financial Conduct Authority expressed its concern that the UK would be a rule taker during an implementation period. In assessing the financial services sector's ability to withstand a no-deal Brexit, the Governor provided reassurance that the Bank of England is

"sleeping soundly at night, because the core of the financial sector is in the position that it needs to be in for the tough scenario."

While the Governor's sleeping patterns may provide some succour to MPs, it is clear that a vacuum of information exists. There is a dearth of analysis that shows how the economy will transition to a new trading relationship. There is also a lack of modelling on the future framework between the UK and the EU.

However, Parliament may wish to draw from the range of scenarios that have been modelled, in order to assess the economic impact of the draft withdrawal agreement and political declaration. The scenarios range from 0.6% less GDP under the Chequers plan than would otherwise have been the case, to 7.7% less GDP in a no-deal scenario.

Select Committees play an increasingly important role in the life of this Parliament, particularly given its make-up and the nature of the Brexit issue that it faces. I was very clear, and I would like to thank the Committee's members again for their support, in saying that we wanted to make sure that analysis and evidence were put before MPs. As I said, we wanted to do that not to tell them how to vote—we are all grown-ups and should be able to make decisions on behalf of our constituents as their representatives—but to make sure that the information was out there.

We know what happened earlier this week, which is that the meaningful vote was suspended and postponed. It will come back before the House at some point—maybe not until the new year. I suggest to the Minister here today—the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury—that that gives time for some of the issues that are identified in our report to be potentially remedied, or for more evidence to be given to the Committee, which we will report to the House, as we have done before.

In conclusion, whenever this vote comes back to the House, I hope, on behalf of the Treasury Committee, that all Members of Parliament will find time amid the turkey, crackers and festive wrappings to read our report before that Division bell rings.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. The Treasury Committee's report is a damning read for those who had dared to hope that the Government's withdrawal agreement analysis would enlighten the debate. We already knew that this Government's Brexit was going to damage our economy; every piece of credible independent analysis has shown that, and the Government's own analysis has shown it, too. As we see from the Committee's report, the Government failed to provide all the evidence the Committee requested and

"modelled scenarios...yet did not model scenarios that are considered probable and have the potential to be persistent over the medium to long term".

What is worse, none of the Government's economic analysis even attempts to give Members or our constituents accurate information about the things that matter most, which are jobs, incomes and prices over the next year. Put simply, the Committee has confirmed that the Government have failed to show leadership at this time of immense uncertainty and fear in our country.

I have just a couple of questions for the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), the Chair of the Treasury Committee. First, is it not true that none of the Government's proposed options will be good for the economy, to the tune of at least a 4.9% hit? The Chancellor described that hit as being "slightly smaller", but I must admit that a hit of more than 4% does not feel small to me. I would like the right hon. Lady's view on that issue.

Secondly, as there is no analysis of what happens if we remain with the backstop, we can only conclude that the Government either do not know what the effects of that option are or that they do not want us to know what the effects are. Can the right hon. Lady enlighten us and say which of those she thinks is true?

Finally, given that the Bank of England considers that a no-deal scenario could be worse than the 2008 financial crisis, and given that the Government think that a no-deal scenario would cut as much as 11% from our economy, does the right hon. Lady agree that it is utterly irresponsible to threaten something that no responsible Government would ever consider allowing in their own country?

Nicky Morgan: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions, and it is good to have this debate—I am sure we would have had it on the Floor of the main Chamber if it had continued, but now we have time to reflect on all of this.

The hon. Lady is right to say that the first thing the Chancellor admitted—I think both publicly, when the analysis was first published, and before the Committee as well—was that none of the scenarios shows that there will not be a negative impact on the UK economy. A 4% hit is substantial, if we think about that figure in the context of the financial crisis, and we as MPs all know that many of our constituents still feel the effects of that financial crisis 10 years on. Wages are now growing, but it has taken some time for them to do so.

Another of the hon. Lady's questions was in relation to no deal. I know the Minister will not answer now, but he will be more than capable of answering for himself at some point in the future. However, I have been a Treasury Minister myself, and to be fair to the Government, they have dropped the "No deal is better than a bad deal" language. Parliament has already made it very clear that we are not going to sign off on any kind of no-deal arrangement, although we all have to debate among ourselves how we will head that proposal off at the right time. It is very clear that the Government do not want there to be a no-deal scenario, and I am glad that the analysis has shown why a no-deal scenario would be so very damaging and why it is of such concern to businesses, importers, exporters and those employing our constituents.

The hon. Lady also asked about the backstop modelling. Members will see in the report and in the transcripts of our sittings that we asked all our witnesses and the economists who gave evidence whether it was possible to model a backstop. With any modelling, it is all about

the underlying assumptions. Some assumptions would have to be made about the way the backstop would operate and how long it would last. The Government told our Committee that, because they do not want to be in the backstop and because the backstop is not the preferred Government policy, it did not have to be modelled.

I think we all hope that that is the case and that the backstop is an insurance policy not to be called upon. Undoubtedly, however, on the basis of how long it takes to negotiate free trade agreements, there is a possibility that the backstop will be needed. That would then have an impact on those relying on importing to and exporting from this country. There is time now, and it might well be that this is something the Government Economic Service might want to consider, although its staff also deserve a Christmas. They might want to consider how they might give some more evidence to the House on this issue before we get to the meaningful vote.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Lady and her Committee for producing this report, which could be summed up in one sentence: Brexit makes the country and every one of our constituents poorer. We see that when we get to the conclusions.

However, my question is about financial services. I have tens of thousands of financial services jobs in my constituency, and under all the models examined in the Treasury Committee's report, the financial services industry shrinks, by anything between 9% and slightly less than 1%. That would have a disproportionate impact on Edinburgh, because of the way its financial services sector is set up. Was any modelling done on how many jobs would be lost and on what the Government need to do between now and 29 March next year to put in place a system, mechanism or part of a deal that would mean that the financial services industry would not shrink but, indeed, grow?

Nicky Morgan: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for his question. I am pleased that he has mentioned financial services, because the view among those in the financial services industry is that they have not really had quite as much attention devoted to them as they should have, given that they are such a significant taxpayer and employer. I am also glad he mentioned Edinburgh, because we tend to think sometimes just about the City of London. He is of course absolutely right to say that there are many financial services jobs in his constituency and in other constituencies around the country.

Before I get on to his point that all scenarios will make us poorer, one interesting thing about the economic modelling for the Treasury is that it is done purely on the trading impact. It is fair to say—it is both a negative and a positive—that there is no domestic policy assumption made at all. Of course, it is possible for any future Government to consider how they might respond to the scenarios as they unfold.

There was not specific modelling of jobs. There have been estimates, and again we asked the chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority for some, as we have asked other financial services witnesses. The initial estimates of jobs moving overseas have not come to pass, but we are still looking at between 5,000 and 10,000 people being impacted.

The financial services sector now talks about “day one” and “day two” impacts. As for day one, we know that a lot of financial services firms are already putting in place contingency arrangements and that they are trying to keep job moves to a minimum. Depending on the deal that is eventually arrived at—this relates to the hon. Gentleman's question about what deal could be put in place to help this process—the impacts of “day two” and beyond on jobs being lost or moved could be very significant for the financial services sector. Obviously, we could be talking about thousands of jobs. These are often well-paying jobs, and they are not something that any of us here today want to see disappearing from our constituencies.

Let me answer the hon. Gentleman's question, though, which is actually about the deal on the table at the moment. The political declaration refers to a system of equivalence, but a lot of work needs to be done to work out the equivalence regime. Andrew Bailey, the chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority, went through with our Committee how he thought the equivalence regime needs to be enhanced, and I think he is right on that issue.

I do not think it is any great secret for Members of this House that I am in favour of a Norway-plus type of option, whereby we would retain access to the single market. I know that there are other objections to that proposal, but for financial services it would keep the passporting regime in place, which would be of significant benefit to financial services firms, and therefore in terms of the numbers of people they can employ going forward.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I join in thanking my right hon. Friend and her Committee for the work they have done, together with their advisers and the witnesses. In conclusion 6, there is a reference to the backstop, which leads to paragraphs 35 to 40 in the report. There, Professor Nickell says that it is possible to model the backstop, and then says that the backstop might be in place for 15 years. I do not think that is a very serious kind of modelling to do, because we do not know what change there would be. Am I right in saying that, unlike most trade agreements, the ones we will need to make with the EU27 are based on equivalence now, rather than trying to bring people together?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course, one of the issues is that it is not known how long the backstop might be needed for. One would hope that 15 years is probably a wild overestimate, but it is true that the Canadian-European trade agreement took eight years; however, as my hon. Friend says, they were starting from a very different position from the UK and the EU, given the trading relationship that we have at the moment and very much want to maintain.

My understanding, which I think comes from evidence that the Secretary of State for International Trade gave to the relevant Select Committee and to the Exiting the European Union Committee, is that significant progress has been made in rolling over existing trade agreements. It is not just the new trade agreement with the EU that has to be negotiated; the UK then needs to separate out, and become a party to, the trade agreements the EU has with other countries. Progress has been made on that.

However, my hon. Friend is right: the point about modelling the backstop is not that it is impossible, but that it is possible, with very clear explanations of how it

[Nicky Morgan]

has been done. Generally, the comment on all of this—we saw this with some of the reporting around the Bank of England scenarios—is that it is easy to overestimate or overinflate the damage. The Bank of England was very clear that these were scenarios, not forecasts. Again, that could be done with the backstop: we could set out some scenarios that can be modelled, while making it very clear that they are not predictions of what is going to happen in the future.

Protection for Homebuyers

1.51 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered protection for homebuyers.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Ryan. I start by expressing my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate; to Paula Higgins from the HomeOwners Alliance, and Emma Thomas and Steve Turner from the Home Builders Federation, who took the time to brief me; to the House of Commons digital team, which facilitated a digital debate on the subject earlier this week, in which hundreds of members of the public participated; and especially to the many individuals up and down the country who have been in touch with me to share their experience of buying a new home, particularly my constituents Lisa, Mike, Denise and Deepak. I also thank the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury—for listening to the introduction of this debate, at least. I hope he will find our discussion to be of interest.

I am sorry to say that the experiences that homebuyers have related to me are not happy ones. I regret that I cannot mention every individual case that has been conveyed to me, but I will do my best to reflect the wide range of issues raised, in relation to both the defects that homebuyers too frequently encounter when they move into a new-build home and the poor customer service that follows when they try to have those defects rectified. Of course, everyone expects to find snags in a new house, but I was pretty shocked that Shelter reported that more than half those surveyed in a YouGov survey in 2017 said that they had experienced some, or a lot of, major problems with their new home, and some of those problems were frankly dangerous.

In Woodsend in my constituency, residents moving into new Persimmon homes experienced a toilet that was flushing boiling water; a toilet that did not flush; dripping from the loft; holes in the walls; skirting boards that needed replacing; problems with light fittings; a front door that could not be closed; and a whole host of other problems. From across the country, I have heard reports of waste water from a lavatory not being connected to flow into the sewerage system, and gathering underneath the house; uneven floors; exposed nails; unfinished electrics; waterlogged gardens; issues with insulation; and problems with sinks, walls and fixtures.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this welcome debate before the House. Bellway Homes built homes in my constituency in 1988, and there is a suspicion that the gas installation did not meet the 1988 gas regulations. Residents have been fighting Bellway since, and the matter has now come to a head: the company has put its lawyers on to the question of whether it should comply with those regulations, despite the gas safety advisors saying that the homes do not meet the regulations.

Should we be highlighting these issues more often, and saying to people who are purchasing these homes that they require a much greater level of protection, either from Government or from insurance, to make sure they are covered for not just a few years but for decades into the future?

Kate Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. The issues of protections through statute and of information to purchasers will be among the many points that I hope to draw to the Minister's attention during the remainder of my speech.

A couple of weeks ago, the BBC's "5 live Investigates" reported on the shocking experience of a couple who had moved into a new Bovis home in Worcestershire. During that programme, homebuyer Craig read out a list of a staggering 354 defects in their new house. Last week, the "Victoria Derbyshire" programme reported on homebuyers who found that the mortar in the walls of their new Barratt and Taylor Wimpey homes was crumbling. Buyers report that once they have decided to buy a house, they are placed under considerable pressure to complete the purchase speedily, so that the developer is paid and managers meet their sales targets. Quality is clearly being compromised as a result of those pressures.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The pressure that buyers are put under to conclude purchases quickly is something I hope to talk about later on. Is my hon. Friend aware of issues with developers insisting that particular solicitors complete the transactions?

Kate Green: Indeed I am, and that too is a point to which I hope to return in the course of my remarks.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I apologise for not being able to stay for at least the middle part of the debate, because of another parliamentary duty. Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the consequences of this debate and those BBC programmes is that publicity attaches to the builders? It would be a good idea for there to be some forum that other media could look at, so that the names of the builders that manage to build homes without defects or correct them quickly get praised, and those that do not get damned.

Kate Green: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point about the impact on the reputation of the whole industry. Although some of the builders involved are household names, it is important to recognise that, as I have heard, some smaller local builders are implicated in delivering poor-quality build, whereas others meet a very high standard of both build and customer service. However, too often, it is the large developers—whose reputation people will be familiar with, and in which buyers might reasonably feel they could place some trust—that are letting their customers down so badly.

I will put on the record a few of the other major household names that I have heard mentioned, as although I will be talking about my constituents' experience with Persimmon Homes, Persimmon is far from being the only offender. I have also heard about problems with Bellway Homes, which my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) mentioned; Harron Homes; Charles Church, which is an arm of Persimmon; Linden Homes; David Wilson Homes; and Keepmoat Homes. It is entirely possible that colleagues will add to that list in the course of our discussion.

The problems of defects are compounded by the appalling customer service, and sometimes outright bullying, that homebuyers experience when they attempt to have defects remedied. My constituents in Woodsend began complaining about their new homes many months ago.

Lisa tells me that she waited a year and a half before Persimmon even gave her a named customer service contact, although the company did find time in that period to pay its then chief executive a £75 million bonus. I wrote to the company on Lisa and her neighbours' behalf earlier this year and was staggered to be told that it was not Persimmon's policy to deal with MPs. However, it was not dealing with or responding to the homebuyers either. I think the House will agree that that is truly shoddy and reflects systemic problems that are incumbent on Government to sort out.

Buying a house is the biggest, most important purchase most of us will ever make. People work hard and save up for their dream home, but too often instead they are suffering huge cost, stress and inconvenience.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing such an important debate to the House. I want to add something about the frustration that her constituents feel, especially with Persimmon Homes. A constituent of mine said:

"Unfortunately, we have had nothing but continuous issues since we moved in. What should have been one of the happiest times for us has been plagued by bad workmanship and appalling communication and customer service."

They expressed to me that it had had such an impact on their life at what should be a happy time. Does she agree that it is a life-changing moment and that bad house builders are causing such distress to constituents?

Kate Green: I absolutely agree. In fact, my hon. Friend's constituents have been posting on Facebook about some of their experiences with Persimmon, which echo those of my constituents. She makes an important point about the impact these things have on people's emotional wellbeing. Some of the homebuyers who have contacted me in recent weeks have talked about being forced to take time off work because of mental health problems created by the stress they are experiencing.

As my hon. Friend said, buying a new house is a life-changing moment for many people. In and of itself, it is a big, emotional, stressful experience and is often accompanied by other big life changes, such as leaving the family home for the first time or an enlargement to the family. It is important to acknowledge that that stress is significant, often lasts for a protracted period of time and is exacerbated by the reluctance of developers to engage with people's problems.

Despite all that, house purchase is one of the areas of consumer law that is least protected in consumer legislation. Property is exempt from the Sale and Supply of Goods Act 1994, meaning that if it fails to live up to expectations, there is no right to reject it and demand a refund. The role of building control inspectors is to ensure that technical standards are met. They are not responsible for monitoring build quality.

What is more, the person carrying out the work—in other words, the developer—has the choice of which building control body to use to carry out the inspection. A confusing landscape of codes of practice, warranty schemes and even, as was reported on the "Victoria Derbyshire" programme, attempts to gag buyers from going public leave people at the mercy of the developers and warranty companies. All in all, as the HomeOwners Alliance says, people get less protection when buying a house than they do when buying a toaster.

[Kate Green]

What needs to change? The all-party parliamentary group for excellence in the built environment made a series of recommendations—I know the Minister will be familiar with them—in an extremely well researched and comprehensive report in 2016. Earlier this year, the Government undertook a much-needed public consultation on strengthening rights and protections for homebuyers. I welcome those initiatives, and I am glad the Government have indicated their support for the introduction of a new homes ombudsman, but there is no detail as yet or timescale for implementing that.

In the meantime, the multiplicity of codes, warranties and complaints systems makes things very complicated for homebuyers. The Home Builders Federation told me that it is working on a series of industry-wide reforms, including preparing for the introduction of an ombudsman scheme, a standard sales contract, a single code of practice and a minimum set of warranty standards. It hopes to work with mortgage providers so that compliance would be required for a purchaser to obtain a mortgage. That is all well and good, but I just do not think people will be reassured simply by a voluntary, industry-led approach. The Government need to be much more precise and prescriptive.

The HomeOwners Alliance and the all-party group have called for a number of measures that would significantly help to improve the situation for homebuyers. In her response, I hope the Minister will specifically address them. First, they propose a 2.5% snagging retention so that new-build homebuyers retain 2.5% of the cost of the house, which would be held back for six months, until the end of the defects period, where it would be paid over only if the defects have been corrected. That would create a powerful incentive for builders to sort out problems.

The HomeOwners Alliance and the all-party group propose a right for homebuyers to inspect their new home before moving in, without prejudice and with the right to bring their own surveyor or snagger. Builders selling their properties off plan will often refuse to let buyers inspect the property before they take the keys. That practice is unacceptable and should be ended.

Standardised contracts should include the full plan and specification as standard, rather than them being hidden away in an office. The contracts must include standardised terms and have more detailed specification so that builders cannot swap for cheaper materials. Consumer groups should be involved in the development of those contracts, otherwise the fear is that they will continue to be stacked in favour of the developer.

A focus on quality is much needed across the sector through the adoption of International Organisation for Standardisation standards. A review of the inspection and warranty regimes is required to give consumers reassurance that buildings meet standards set by Government and greater clarity about what is covered. Buyers believe their warranties will protect them for up to 10 years, but after the first two years, warranties typically cover only serious structural defects. Again and again in preparing for this debate, I heard reports of warranty companies refusing to take responsibility for sorting problems.

We also need minimum standards for compliance inspections. A single homebuyers code should replace the many different codes, which are so confusing for

homeowners. The new ombudsman, funded by the industry—I think that is the Government's intention—should be the guardian of the code. It should cover after-sales service as well as the quality of the building work.

Developers should not be able to recommend individual solicitors. That point was raised a few moments ago by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). Solicitors should be working for the homebuyer, but if they get most of their business via the developer, that naturally creates a conflict of interest.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am pleased that my hon. Friend has secured this debate. Does she not think that it might be an idea for the Law Society to look into the behaviour of solicitors who put themselves in the position of having that serious conflict of interest, which is so detrimental to our constituents?

Kate Green: I absolutely agree, and I hope the Law Society will take note of that suggestion.

The final suggestion for improvement and reform is for prospective homebuyers to have more up-front information about the property they are purchasing, including whether properties are leasehold or freehold and the implications of buying leasehold property. We have all heard reports of rip-off service charges and ground rents that rise every year affecting leaseholders in our constituencies. The Government need to act to address that scandal. There should be a standardised key facts document, as there is in financial services, such as for mortgages. Also, better information needs to be handed to the consumer once the property has been completed. I hope that the Minister will respond in detail to those suggestions.

Before I conclude, I should say that no debate in this House right now would be complete without a reference to Brexit. Fundamentally, the problems I have described come down to corporate greed, but they have been exacerbated by pressure to build the new homes needed to meet Government targets, which the construction industry is struggling to cope with. Poor quality workmanship has been attributed in part to being forced to rely on inexperienced, unqualified labour.

The Construction Industry Training Board tells me that, in response to the shortage of skilled workers, many developers are relying on EU workers to fill gaps in their sector, including electricians, carpenters and bricklayers. Those are skilled trades, and investment in upskilling the domestic workforce to meet demand is imperative. However, were we simply to turn off the tap on EU labour, the pressures that the industry faces would only increase.

We are still waiting for the Government's immigration White Paper, although I was pleased to hear the Leader of the House promise in business questions this morning that we would see it next week. There are particular worries in this sector, not least because of the reliance on self-employed labour, yet there is a real lack of information about how the Government's post-Brexit immigration system will work for self-employed workers. Will there, for example, be the possibility of third-party sponsorship schemes to enable such skilled tradespeople to continue to come in and provide labour in our construction sector? I urge the Minister to press her

Home Office colleagues to ensure that the immigration policy that it introduces meets the needs of this crucial sector.

This House cannot sit by while so many of our constituents face such great cost, stress and disappointment when making such a significant investment. The industry needs to get its house in order, and the Government have a responsibility to ensure that it does so. The Minister must tell us exactly what steps she will take to protect our constituents from seeing their dream home become a nightmare. I look forward to her response.

2.12 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Ms Ryan, presiding over the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) both on securing this important debate and on her excellent opening speech, which covered so much ground. I am grateful to the House of Commons Library and to the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership for their briefings. I will focus on two points: leaseholder tenure, which my hon. Friend mentioned, and, briefly, fire sprinklers.

I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform with the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). It is good to see our inestimable vice-chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), in the Chamber.

Governments of both persuasions have recognised that homebuyers are vulnerable to purchasing a property that does not meet their expectations. The Tories legislated in this area in 1986 and 1993, and Labour did more in 2002. Despite incremental increases in protection, the Government recognise that more needs to be done. As a result, the Prime Minister, and successive Secretaries of State and Housing Ministers, have been making promises on ground rents, the conduct of property management companies, the right to manage, dispute resolution and commonhold. We have had various statements—written and oral—a White Paper, calls for evidence and consultations. The Law Commission has been tasked with a major review of the law and is on the case.

The first anomaly comes with the purchase of the property. I say “purchase”, but as the Library briefing makes clear:

“Owners of long leasehold properties do not necessarily appreciate that, although they are owner-occupiers, they are in a landlord and tenant relationship with the freeholder.”

It might not be clearly pointed out by the solicitor acting for the purchaser. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston mentioned, that is perhaps no surprise when those solicitors are recommended by the selling developer and, it can be reasonably suggested, manage to juggle a conflict of interest that would be beyond most of us.

My constituency of Poplar and Limehouse has the second highest number of leasehold properties in the country, and had the highest number of leasehold sales in 2015. Whereas the Home Builders Federation says that more than 90% of new homebuyers say that they would buy a new-build home again—somewhat contradicted by the nightmare stories articulated by my hon. Friend—a national survey in 2016 conducted by

the Leasehold Advisory Service, the Government-funded advisory body known as LEASE, found that 57% of leaseholders regretted buying a leasehold property. That is quite a contrast.

LEASE has come in for quite a bit of criticism for not doing enough for leaseholders. When Mr Gavin Barwell was Housing Minister, he stated that LEASE should be the leaseholders’ champion, but LEASE still has a remit for freeholders and developers. That looks like a conflict of interest, and I would be grateful if the Minister would give her view of where LEASE sits within the legislative framework.

There is no doubt that some leaseholders are perfectly happy with their homes. However, many are not. The duration of leases can be anything from 99 years, 125 years, 250 years or 999 years. That is quite a range. The Library briefing lists a range of potential problems, some of which were mentioned by my hon. Friend. They include high service charges and a lack of transparency over what people are being charged for; freeholders blocking attempts by leaseholders to exercise their right to manage; excessive costs for building insurance; administration charges; applications to extend lease agreements; and event fees.

I was contacted by a group of leaseholders in my constituency only last night, on the Aberfeldy village estate, complaining that their property management company, Rendall and Rittner, had raised service charges in 2016-17 by 12%, and this year by 6% in a new estate. Residents are also complaining about the poor service for the significant charges that they are paying—nearly £3,000 per year. The Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, the campaigning charity in this area, and the all-party parliamentary group secretariat, run by Martin Boyd and Sebastian O’Kelly, ably assisted by Ms Katherine O’Riordan, have been lobbying the Government on those matters for years.

One of their notable successes early on was getting the Department for Communities and Local Government—now the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—to revise the figures for leasehold properties. The Department was working on the basis of 2.3 million properties for a number of years. LKP persuaded it eventually that there were many more, and the Ministry now uses the figure of 4.3 million. However, LKP calculates that there are more than 6 million such properties, and the all-party parliamentary group knows which figures we think are likely to be more accurate.

The Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government is in the middle of an inquiry, the conclusions and recommendations of which are keenly anticipated by the sector. There is strong pressure to regulate the sector in respect of property management companies. Some are trying to do a professional job and are observing their own voluntary standards in the meantime—many are members of the Association of Residential Managing Agents. However, many others need regulation that requires them to perform to professional standards. Lord Best has been leading a working group developing a regulatory regime, which the Government have committed to introduce.

Helen Goodman: Does my hon. Friend not agree that it sounds as though there has been some serious mis-selling, and the Minister ought to refer it to the Financial Conduct Authority?

Jim Fitzpatrick: There are certainly anomalies in the whole system. I think that there are more problems with the actual tenure of leaseholds, which makes buyers vulnerable to a range of things. Developers and freeholders then abuse the power and privilege that they have. Whether that is a matter for the FCA or not is another matter. The Minister might want to comment on that when responding.

My last point about leasehold relates to cladding. After the tragedy of the Grenfell fire, and following a major review of high-rise properties across the country, many blocks were found to be at risk. It is welcome that the Government set aside £400 million for councils and housing associations in the public sector to remove and replace defective cladding in homes and carry out remedial work. However, in the private sector the Government have restricted themselves to encouraging and exhorting freeholders and developers to do the honourable thing and accept the costs. Sadly, that has not worked in all cases. More troublingly, where it is not working, in blocks such as New Providence Wharf in my constituency, companies such as Ballymore are passing the costs on to leaseholders simply because they legally can.

In some buildings, the National House Building Council 10-year warranty has provided protection, as it has in New Festival Quarter in my constituency. Along with the positive decision by Bellway that has already been referred to, that stands in stark contrast to Ballymore. These costs run into millions; most of the residents of these flats are young professionals who are mortgaged up to the hilt, with no capacity for additional borrowing even if they wanted that option.

On 29 November, the Secretary of State published a written statement on the matter, in which he stated:

"I am...writing to local authorities with buildings where the owner refuses to remediate unsafe ACM cladding, to offer them our full support to take enforcement action. This will include financial support where this is necessary for the local authority to carry out emergency remedial work.

Where financial support is provided, local authorities will recover the costs from the building owner.

I am determined that building owners will not evade their responsibilities and that local authorities will have all the support they need to ensure that all high-rise buildings with unsafe ACM cladding are made permanently safe for the people who live in them."—[*Official Report*, 29 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 18WS.]

Further to that statement, I submitted a written question asking

"what legal powers local authorities have to recover costs."

The Minister for Housing answered:

"The Housing Act 2004 allows local authorities to take enforcement action...If local authorities need to take emergency remedial action but are unable to fund this work up front, we will consider requests for funding which would be repaid once the local authorities recover the costs from the building owner."

I would be grateful if the present Minister confirmed, first, whether the 2004 Act is the relevant legislation, secondly which section of the Act can be applied—perhaps her officials could highlight it for us—and thirdly how much money is being set aside for such contingencies.

Most of what I have to say about tenure relates to points that I have raised before, but I make no apology for raising them again because they still need to be pressed. The Government's work programme is very welcome, but we want to see it reach a conclusion.

My final point, which is somewhat connected, is about fire protection and the use of fire sprinklers. The Scottish Government are legislating for fire sprinklers in houses in multiple occupation, following a private Member's Bill, the proposed Social Housing (Automatic Fire Suppression Systems) (Scotland) Bill. The Welsh Assembly has passed building regulations to require an automatic fire suppression to be introduced into new and converted homes, which is due principally to my former Fire Brigades Union colleague, Ann Jones AM. Wales was the first country in the world to pass such legislation: the Building Regulations &c. (Amendment No. 3) and Domestic Fire Safety (Wales) Regulations 2013, which came into effect on 1 January 2016.

In its ninth report of 2017-19, published on 18 July 2018, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee recommended:

"Where structurally feasible, sprinklers should be retro-fitted to existing high-rise residential buildings to provide an extra layer of safety for residents. The Government should make funding available to fit sprinklers into council and housing association-owned residential buildings above 18 metres, and issue guidance to that effect to building owners in the private sector.

We heard strong evidence recommending the Government require sprinkler systems be installed in a wider range of buildings, including student accommodation, hospitals and large commercial warehouses. The Government should undertake a consultation into whether it would be appropriate to require the installation of sprinkler systems in these buildings too."

I would be grateful if the Minister updated us on where the Government stand on the installation of fire sprinklers in homes for vulnerable people, HMOs, buildings above 18 metres and high-rises above 30 metres, and gave us the latest news on sprinkler retrofitting.

There is much more fire protection work that can be done to protect people. The Government are moving towards better protection for people who have leasehold tenure, but that protection cannot come quickly enough. I look forward to the speeches of the Front-Bench spokespersons, especially that of my fellow West Ham United supporter, the Minister.

2.25 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on securing this important debate. I would like to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) in speaking about leasehold issues that relate to the protection of homebuyers.

An estimated 12.4% of homes sold in Washington and Sunderland West were sold as leasehold in 2016. I realise that my constituency does not have the largest number of leasehold homes—certainly not as many as the constituencies of some of my hon. Friends—but the issue is still important to my constituents. That is why I recently began a consultation on leasehold homes in which I asked constituents to get in touch with me about their experiences. I only launched the campaign three weeks ago, but 30 constituents have already written to me with their concerns, in some cases in detail. I do not have time to go into the details of each, but I would like to share the themes that have become apparent from their emails.

Most homebuyers were not aware what a leasehold was when they purchased their home. There is a serious lack of knowledge about what leasehold and freehold are; I feel that developers have a duty to inform prospective buyers about the difference between the two and what it means for them. As we have heard, solicitors also have a part to play. It makes a person wonder who they act on behalf of—the buyer or the developer—especially when the developer includes free conveyancing as part of the sale. Solicitors should always act in the best interest of their client, who in this case should be the buyer, not the developer. I have to agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), who is not in her place at the moment, that this abuse should be referred to the Law Society. I hope that the Minister will make that recommendation; I am sure it is in her power to refer dodgy solicitors to the Law Society.

Does the Minister agree that if we are to protect homebuyers, we should educate them to know the difference between leasehold and freehold so that they can make the best decision for themselves and their families? That should certainly be the case for first-time buyers, and financial education lessons in schools have an important part to play in achieving that.

Notwithstanding the issue of educating the population as a whole, there should be complete transparency from very early on in the sale about whether the property is leasehold and what that means. Two of my constituents have told me that they were not informed that their property was leasehold until the very day of signing the contract. Another has told me that they were not aware that their property was leasehold until nearly 15 years after the original purchase—probably when they tried to make alterations or build an extension. Because of the lack of knowledge about leaseholds and the lack of information available to homebuyers, there is a lot of confusion and variation when it comes to buying the freehold.

Many leaseholders were told that they could purchase the freehold at a later date, perhaps when they had saved enough money. However, when some constituents inquired about purchasing the freehold, they found that the goalposts had moved and the price was much further out of reach than they had expected. Some have even been informed that the freehold is now not for sale—in some cases because it has been sold to a third-party company without the leaseholder's knowledge.

Not only is the cost of buying the freehold out of reach for some of my constituents; so is the cost of ground rent, which can increase year on year. Then there are the admin fees that homeowners have to pay when asking the freeholder's permission to make changes to their own property. One of my constituents was charged £400 by the freeholder to build a conservatory on their own property. Another constituent expressed great frustration that they are charged £100 for a yes or no decision on basic things, such as replacing a kitchen, bathroom or even a window. It can sometimes take more than eight weeks to hear back on whether that is a yes or a no.

I know that some leaseholders out there listening will now be horrified and will be deterred from making queries to the freeholder, for fear of being charged some of these exorbitant fees. Too many leaseholders are locked into a state of being regularly over charged by freeholders, being unable to afford their ever-increasing

ground rent, or never being able to afford to buy their freehold due to being linked to some sort of escalator that was hidden in the small print of the contract, which their solicitor never pointed out to them. I share the concerns of my constituents who feel like they have been ripped off by leasehold contracts and I call on the Government to launch an inquiry into the scandal as soon as possible.

2.30 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on securing this extremely important debate and on the way she managed to cover a whole range of issues. There are many aspects to this issue. As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) said, I am vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform. I pay tribute to him and the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) for the work they have done, ably aided by the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, in raising the many issues in many debates here.

The title of the debate is "Protection for Homebuyers". The truth, as we have heard, is that there is little protection, if any. We have a system based on the historic principle of caveat emptor—buyer beware—which is a principle I often hear quoted back at me when I raise concerns about some of the more insidious practices developers have adopted over recent years. Buyers should beware, because caveat emptor relies on a buyer and a seller having equal bargaining power, and that is simply not the reality in 2018. We have a huge shortage of housing, there are significant barriers for buyers in getting on the housing ladder and there are a handful of huge companies responsible for the vast majority of housing delivery.

The situation has been exacerbated by the Help to Buy equity loan scheme, which offered support to first-time buyers for new-build homes only. That led to an effective monopoly being held by some developers. If someone wanted to purchase their first home in the area where they grew up, the only choice would have been to visit the sales office of an individual supplier.

Kate Green: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just individual homebuyers who are being ripped off by some developers, but the taxpayer, because it is public money, through the Government's Help to Buy scheme, that is helping to boost their profits?

Justin Madders: I absolutely agree. The reliance on this small group of developers has been a very poor deal for the taxpayer, and it is against that backdrop that the leasehold scandal has emerged. Once-trusted household names such as Bellway, Persimmon, Redrow, Taylor Wimpey and Countrywide acted in, I believe, a deliberate way to exploit the circumstances and rip off thousands of people around the country—and the taxpayer, in the process.

For no other reason than profiteering, houses in many areas gradually began to be sold on a leasehold rather than a freehold basis. Punitive permission fees—where a leaseholder is forced to pay a significant sum for everything from putting up a shed to changing a carpet—were hidden in the small print of the leases.

[Justin Madders]

Service or maintenance charges were then added, charging leaseholders for the same services that they are already paying council tax for. If that was not enough, the developers then added onerous clauses, causing the ground rent in many cases to periodically double, taking them from an initial modest sum to thousands of pounds after a few decades, rendering the properties unmortgageable and unsellable in the future. The ground rent is, of course, being levied for absolutely nothing in return.

When purchasers query the leases on the properties, they are offered a range of scripted reassurances, being told that the properties are “virtually freehold” and that they would have first refusal to buy out the lease. In almost every case, the lease is then sold without the knowledge of the person actually living in the home, to become an income stream for a network of opaque investment companies. People are then told they can purchase the freehold of their own home only if they are prepared to offer tens of thousands of pounds.

As we have heard, purchases of these properties take place in an extremely tight and completely artificial timescale, imposed by the developer through a hard-sell approach. To compound the unequal relationship between the parties to the transaction, a variety of pressure and incentives are used by developers to encourage the use of a solicitor on their own panel. While the solicitor of course has a duty to act in the interests of the purchaser, the reality is that when hundreds of cases are being provided by the developer, that independence is inevitably put under some strain.

My constituent, Katie Kendrick, has helped to lead an incredible campaign on behalf of leaseholders around the country against this scandal, and I pay tribute to her for everything she has done to bring it to the attention of the public. Her own case is a textbook example of the kind of issues we have talked about. In July 2014, with her husband, she bought what transpired to be only the lease to her home from Bellway, a company with a revenue of more than £2.5 billion last year. It was bought through the Help to Buy scheme, and they had only 28 days to complete the purchase following payment of the £500 deposit to reserve the plot. Because of this developer-imposed and completely arbitrary timeframe, Katie and her husband were pressured into using the Bellway-recommended solicitors.

They were informed during the process that, after two years, they would have the right to buy their freehold without any problems and that it would cost in the region of £2,000 to £4,000. Less than two years later, in February 2016, they received notification that the freehold to their home had been unilaterally sold to Adriatic Land 4 (GR1) Ltd. When they inquired whether they could purchase the freehold, they were quoted an amount of £13,350.

I have concluded that Katie’s experience was deliberately manufactured, because it is simply not feasible for the exact same actions to have become standard practice across a range of developers throughout the country. If this situation, as I believe, was deliberately manufactured to exploit thousands of people up and down the country, what is the Minister going to do about it?

If the situation is so serious and inequitable that it should be banned from ever occurring in the future, as is the Government’s apparent policy, how can she justify

taking no action to help those people who have already been affected? What examination has been undertaken of the Government’s role in the leasehold scandal? Does she accept that Help to Buy—a scheme created with good intentions—not only helped to create a monopoly position that was exploited, but has also subsidised the perpetrators? What is going to be done about that?

The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee investigation into these issues is extremely welcome, and I would urge anyone who has not yet done so to look at the evidence provided to date. Some of the responses from developers are completely incredible, in the literal sense. All the developers were unanimous in their support for ending the leasehold scheme that they have already inflicted on thousands of people around the country. Taylor Wimpey told the Committee that when the doubling ground rent issue

“came to our attention...we made a very quick decision to convert the homes that we sell to freehold.”

That implies that until that point they were unaware of the basis on which they were selling their homes.

When Bellway was asked why it sold the freehold off to a third party rather than to the people actually living in the property, their chief executive, Jason Honeyman, replied:

“It is how we have always operated as a business. I am sure that is not the answer you want.”

A member of the Committee pressed him further on this point:

“I am asking why your customers do not get the chance to exercise the opportunity to buy their freehold. You are selling the freehold out from under them without their knowledge.”

His response was simply:

“Yes, we are.”

We know from many Bellway customers that they were specifically told by the sales staff they would be able to buy the freehold, yet here is the chief executive admitting that they have always sold them on to third parties. That, more than anything, shows that when I first called this scandal the payment protection insurance of the housebuilding industry, I was right to do so.

Although the initial response to this emerging scandal from the Government was the right one and was positively received by leaseholders, there is a huge amount of frustration at what are perceived as broken promises. Leasehold houses are no longer to be completely banned, as was promised by the Government. Ground rents will not be reduced to a peppercorn, but to £10, which creates an asset and again amounts to a broken promise by the Government. Will the Minister explain why there has been this backtracking from removing ground rents altogether to having a minimum cost? For all those people already trapped in leasehold properties more than two years on from the scandal coming to public attention, we have little more than warm words from the Government, and no action.

One of the reasons for people’s anger is that, although obscene bonuses have been awarded to Persimmon executives, the bulk of the profits have come from the taxpayer through the Help to Buy scheme. The Government need to accept that they are not simply a bystander, but a financier of the scandal. They cannot simply watch from the sidelines as our constituents continue to be ripped off while a handful of predators generate profits. It cannot be right that the companies that are guilty of

this industrial-scale rip-off are the very same ones that we will end up relying on to get us out of the country's very real, very damaging housing crisis. There seems to be an over-reliance on the market to deliver the new homes that we desperately need. I have seen very little evidence to suggest that developers will act responsibly.

As the leasehold scandal shows, developers have become ever more adept at squeezing cash out of homeowners. Another way of doing that is through the provision of grounds maintenance and other communal services. It seems that the idea of the developer paying the local authority a commuted sum to cut the grass and maintain common paths has had its day. I am not clear whether the blame for that lies with local authorities for asking for too much or with developers that are not prepared to cough up enough funds in advance. I am sure they will always blame each other. The net effect is that more and more homeowners now have, in effect, to pay twice for the maintenance of open spaces—once through the management fee and once through their council tax.

Of course, council tax pays for lots of things, but something as visible and obvious as grounds maintenance leads people to ask why they face a double-whammy. My suspicion is that developers will always be tempted to save themselves the expense of an up-front payment to the local authority by letting their customers pay further down the line long after they have fled the scene. It is not only a double payment; it is also inefficient and lacks accountability. If the grass is not cut on the verges in most parts of my constituency, either I or a local councillor will hear about it and respond. It is not that easy to get a response from a management company.

I want to say a few words about the difficulty in getting developers to comply with their legal obligations once they have completed the bulk of the work. Yet again, the name Bellway crops up. Although it finished building the properties on an estate several years ago, the roads have yet to be adopted by the local authority, because they are not yet up to highway standards. Years of wrangling and paperwork followed the work. We all know about the significant cuts in funding that local authorities have experienced, and yet they have to waste their precious resources chasing developers that are reluctant to face up to their responsibilities.

Another example of that in my constituency is in the Mostyn House development in Parkgate. Originally, it was a boarding school in a listed building. Once the school shut, the site was an attractive one for developers. It is now an impressive mix of new builds and apartments woven into the fabric of the old school, but it suffers from one major disadvantage: although some people have lived there for five years, it still does not have planning permission. The reason for that is that the revised plans were submitted halfway through the redevelopment. Despite the best efforts of the local authority enforcement officers, the developer, PJ Livesey, continually dragged its heels, and as a result there is still an outstanding long list of works.

Our Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), is not someone who goes around fishing for compliments, but she and the shadow housing team are very engaged on these issues. I hope they continue to develop a full suite of important policies that will tackle many of the injustices we have heard about.

The net effect of all this is that there is no protection for homeowners. Once the developers have left town, they show little interest in keeping to their legal responsibilities. Worse, they continue to market their properties as a revenue stream for third parties.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston said earlier, why can we not have a retention scheme for snagging? Part of the purchase price could be held by an independent third party, only to be released when everyone was satisfied that things had been resolved. We do that with deposits for tenancies, and we are talking about something much more significant—sometimes a once-in-a-lifetime investment. People deserve more protection than they currently get. The cowboys in the developer sector need to be consigned to the history books.

2.43 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on securing this debate and on the eloquent way in which she set out her case. She and other hon. Members showed that there is a major problem, and I hope the Minister will address it in her remarks.

When my hon. Friend said that she was seeking a debate on this issue, I immediately said, "I would love to be part of that debate," because for the past eight or nine years I have been having problems with house builders in my constituency. I have been most struck by the fact that, of all the casework I deal with, they are the most difficult group to get a response from.

My hon. Friend said that Persimmon has a policy of not dealing with Members of Parliament, and that is certainly my experience. Despite numerous letters and telephone calls, it was only when I sent it a message saying that I was about to stand up in Parliament and make very derogatory remarks about its failure to respond that I even got the courtesy of a letter. It then took many months to get a meeting—I got one after, I think, five years of trying. That part of the house building community really needs to sort itself out.

We have heard a lot about the leasehold scandal. We have heard about snagging with new properties, and homeowners' problems in getting that sorted out. I want to talk about two issues that have been a problem for me in my constituency. As a background, I should say that Hull is one of the most successful Help to Buy areas of the country. Lots of my constituents have scrimped and saved to get together the money to buy their home, and they are really proud that they have been able to do that. They are then faced with developers who, once the house has been sold, seemingly wash their hands and think they have no responsibility for sorting out the problems they have left behind. My constituents are left high and dry.

I want to give two examples. The first involves Harron Homes and Persimmon Homes, which developed a housing estate around Whisperwood Way in my constituency. The estate was completed in about 2007, but it took me and the residents four years of campaigning to get the road surfaced by the developers and adopted by the local authority. Of course, that should have been done before the residents moved in. It was unsafe, it

[Diana Johnson]

damaged people's cars and it was dangerous to children and the elderly. There were also problems with Yorkshire Water completing the sewerage works. Harron Homes dragged its feet to get the road surfaced.

It is clear that developers, utilities and, in some cases, local authorities, should have stronger responsibilities placed on them to ensure that issues such as that do not drag on for four years. The residents have to pay their council tax, their water rate bills and everything else, but there is seemingly no mechanism to ensure that the problems they face are dealt with.

While all that was happening, I was approached by some more residents from Whisperwood Way. They came to me because they had moved into properties in Leadhills Way that were built right up to the edge of the Sutton Cross drain. Those families told me that their homes had been built by Persimmon in 2006, and they were having two problems. The first was that the homes were built too close to the drain, which caused their gardens to sink and their fences to collapse into it. The second was that the pathways on the estate were not surfaced to a council standard. A local resident said:

"My children are extremely eager to play on their garden toys but I am reluctant to let them do so because of the fear that the fence and land near to it will simply fall/slip down into the drain if they so much as go near it. Our garden (and I'm sure several of our neighbours' gardens) are extremely fragile due to erosion caused by the 'drain' and the tractors who 'dredge' the sides by simply pulling the ground away. I feel like myself and my children are living like prisoners. I appreciate that this sounds extremely dramatic, but this is how this issue is making us feel. It's especially hard during the school holidays when both of my children are off."

The key issue in that case is that there was no way for the council to take any enforcement action against Persimmon to compel it to sort out the problem that had developed on the land very close to the drain that it had built houses on.

If residents had someone—an ombudsman, for example—to turn to, backed by real powers to compel developers to put right problems, such matters could be sorted out, without adding to the years of stress and misery, which my constituents are still going through. Although finally, after five years, we got Persimmon to a meeting where we agreed that it would carry out a report into what was happening, proper resolution of the problem at the back of those houses is still lacking.

Danielle Rowley: My constituency of Midlothian is the fastest growing in all Scotland, and every town and village has a huge new development. That is the same for a lot of areas throughout the UK, which is why it is such a big issue. With huge new developments, although there are also good developers, a lot of problems come to the fore. Such issues need to be tackled now as we are building on a scale we have not seen in a long time. I hope that the Minister will take note of all the fantastic contributions today, because this is an urgent issue that needs to be dealt with.

Diana Johnson: We also want to see more house building, so we need to get this sorted out and to get it right.

My constituents have asked me to say that they feel that the way in which a company such as Persimmon has behaved—with disregard for their problem for so

many years—is an utter disgrace. Persimmon should be facing massive fines for its behaviour, not giving out the massive bonuses to which many hon. Members have referred.

As I started by saying, in Hull we have one of the most successful Help to Buy schemes. Persimmon has benefited, as did the former chief executive Jeff Fairburn with much of that £75 million in pay, shares and bonus that he pocketed. He has gone, obviously, but his successor at Persimmon, David Jenkinson, is getting about £40 million from the bonus scheme. That is not acceptable, and I hope that the Minister will comment.

In conclusion, my constituents' issue has gone on for far too many years. It needs to be resolved. I hope that we see progress on an ombudsman with some real powers on the side of residents who have done their best—they are aspirational and want to buy their own homes—but find themselves in a nightmare scenario in which companies can simply ignore them and their problems.

[Mr VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

2.52 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for securing this important debate. It is not before time that the House has had the opportunity to turn to the issues faced by homebuyers, in particular the buyers of new-build homes. At a time when we all recognise the need for substantial home building, we perhaps give too little thought to what happens after the homes are built, bought and sold, and to what happens to the buyers.

My hon. Friend has already spoken about the problems faced when defects are found after purchase and the difficulty of getting a response, let alone a solution, from the house builders. I can certainly echo her concern from experience in my constituency, but I want to look at a couple of other issues that also affect my constituents. The first is that of the completion and adoption of new housing estates. It has very much been a preoccupation for me, not just as an MP but as a local councillor in the years before that.

A new Barratt/David Wilson Homes and Persimmon Homes development was started more than 10 years ago. I will not name it because the residents have mixed views on whether that would be a good thing. Some householders were already living on the site when development stalled in about 2011, because many would-be buyers were unable to find mortgages after the banking crisis. It picked up again, however, and the last house was sold nearly two years ago—most of them long before that.

Families moved in with the promise of play areas for their children, but it took years for them to appear and, as many of those who bought early said, their children were now grown up and not interested in play areas—although, thankfully, the many younger children on the estate are. Buses that were promised to take people from the estate to the local bus interchange, avoiding the need to use a level crossing, did not materialise. The council proposed a price to adopt play areas and public open spaces, but the developers thought the price too high and opted to go with a private management company. Even now, however—one of the companies, Barratt's

David Wilson Homes, has been updating me—they are still arguing about the cost and arrangements of that contract, meaning that residents are concerned about maintenance and safety into the future, and of course about the appearance of their estate.

A spine road runs through the estate, in a loop from one entrance to the other, but it was not until this year that work started on completing the surfacing of the road and installing kerbs for drainage. Checking that latest update I received, I find that the date for completion of the work has been pushed back to January '19. Residents are very concerned about that, with lots of young children on the estate and cars flying about on a very uneven surface. They are worried about damage to the cars but they are much more worried about damage to the children, who until recently had nowhere else to play. Furthermore, no fees have yet been paid to the council for the adoption of the roads, despite its best efforts, and street lighting is not finally sorted out. I could go on—but we get the picture.

We—residents, local councillors and me—have not sat back and let that happen. We have met with the developers, looked at enforcement action and complained like hell. We even had a liaison committee with the two developers, to work through all the issues, but, sadly, despite hours of talk, everything seems to come down to money and the developers not wanting to spend the money on the estate to complete it.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend is making some valuable points that have not been mentioned so far. The issue of unadopted roads came up on a new-build development in my constituency, especially with regard to an area where shops, the takeaway, restaurants, pubs and things have been built. The roads are unadopted, so people can just park wherever they like, creating huge issues with knock-on effects, such as on safety, which she has mentioned. I raised this in an Adjournment debate on the Floor of the main Chamber, and it would be great if something came out of this debate regarding unadopted roads on new-build estates.

Liz Twist: My hon. Friend reminds me of something else that I should have mentioned: at the time of buying the properties, my homebuyers were told that there would be a shop, a pub and a bus, but none of those things has come to pass. Even while we were telling residents that that was not going to happen, new buyers towards the end were still being told that there was going to be a pub on site—all the residents already knew that that was not going to happen. That is an important point, and she made another one about safety. As we all know, parking on new developments is a huge issue, with residents feeling it is insufficient and with the dangers that that can present.

Mrs Hodgson: On that very point, I am grateful that my hon. Friend has given way, because I do not think that I made myself clear—though she probably knew what I meant. Because the roads are unadopted, there are no yellow lines. On the roundabouts, articulated lorries can pull over to park, and no one can move them on because there are no yellow lines or anything—the roads are all still unadopted. That is a major problem in the whole area. Some measure should provide for temporary adoption of the roads for safety reasons, even while the estate is still being built.

Liz Twist: Thankfully, we do not have articulated lorries—we do not have a shop on the estate either—but there is a real problem of people parking wherever they want to because there are no lines. That is one of the issues we have talked about over the years.

It cannot be right that developers can start estates, build homes and sell them all, and then lost interest and leave them. We need measures in place to allow us to tell developers, “You must complete this work by this timescale and to an adoptable standard.” I know many residents on the estate; they are hugely frustrated by the process.

The second issue I wish to raise, which has been raised already, is future adoptions and maintenance of new developments. With local authorities seriously cash strapped, many are looking at policies that increasingly involve private management companies taking on maintenance of grounds and roads for a service charge. It is vital that there are clear and transparent ways in which those management companies are accessible and responsive to residents, and that residents have a voice in the condition of their estate. It is not good enough just to pass over a lump of money for someone to maintain part of an estate in perpetuity, with no way of redress thereafter.

That brings me on to the third issue I wanted to mention: leasehold. Service charges have some common features with leasehold. My hon. Friends the Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) have talked quite a bit about leasehold issues so I will not go over them all again, but I want to raise two points: service charges and the use of developers’ solicitors, either through encouragement or referral fees.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston referred to the inquiry of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. As a member of that Committee, I heard from some leaseholders and other witnesses. Service charges are particularly important to leaseholders because of shared areas, but they affect new homebuyers, too, under the new arrangements where management companies may be involved in maintaining estates. It is important that people are clear about what their rights are and that they have redress when things go wrong. The problem of developers encouraging people to use their nominated solicitors affects both freeholders and leaseholders.

The residents on the anonymous estate that I mentioned and the leaseholders who gave evidence to the Select Committee said that they were not informed of important issues about their properties or their estate, whether they were planning issues, were about the leasehold or were about increasing ground rents. For leaseholders, that can have particularly long-reaching effects. Not being told about ground rents and service charges or the way they increase means that some buyers of first homes are trapped in what was their dream first home, because they have a growing family and need to move. The Select Committee heard evidence that a number of people are trapped by increasing ground rent and the wariness of mortgage lenders to lend on those properties. Those people are especially affected, having been told they can buy the freehold in future, when they find out it has been sold on to developers at extortionate costs. That cannot be right.

[Liz Twist]

It cannot be right that referrals fees, arm twisting or inducements such as new carpets or garden landscaping can be used by the seller to encourage the purchaser into using their preferred solicitor. There are codes of practice that solicitors are bound by, which should protect buyers, but the number of people who told us that they were not aware of conditions shows that something is going wrong. The system has to be seen to fair and right. I hope the Minister will address that issue.

Homebuyers deserve protection and better ways of effectively addressing their concerns, whether they are freeholders or leaseholders. The proposed changes that my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston told us about would be helpful. However, as she said, voluntary codes are useful, but much more rigorous action needs to be taken to protect homebuyers. I hope the Minister will assure us that homebuyers will get the protection that they so need.

3.5 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I will not speak for all that long. I thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for introducing the debate and those who have already spoken on leasehold and other issues.

In West Durrington, where 700 homes are being built, Chamonix Estates, working for Taylor Woodrow and for Persimmon, have some questions to answer from the residents. Although it is probably better not to use today to put those on the record in detail, if it does not solve the problems, I will.

What we are talking about has happened in the social sector, too. When I first became a Member of Parliament, I represented part of the Ferrier estate in Kidbrooke, where the Greater London Council had managed to build 5,000 homes, but where there was no pub, post office, church or chapel, and the sewerage system worked the wrong way rather than the right way. It was demolished within 20 or 30 years. Things were almost unbelievable until we heard the cases of some residents represented by Members of Parliament here in the debate.

I have a question for the Minister; I am sorry to put it to her without notice, so perhaps an answer by letter to Members would work. If she or her officials listened to “Money Box” on BBC Radio 4, they would have heard that if landlords charge leaseholders directly, there is no VAT, but if they charge them through a managing agent, there is VAT. Even taking the inputs into account, there is still a charge of between 15% and 13% extra. That needs to be sorted out before or after we leave the European Union. Apparently, it is a European Union requirement—I do not know whether that is true. It seems vital that we should take the opportunity, rather than having artificial arrangements, to make it plain that if the leaseholder pays the service charge there is no VAT, whether they pay it through a managing agent or directly to the landlord.

We understand that officials in the Department have to work on leasehold issues with greater width and depth than they did 10 years ago because, then, they did not know how many residential leasehold properties there were and it was not anticipated that so many more would be built. If the majority of homes are leasehold, we have to put the majority of our effort into ensuring

that new leaseholders of flats, old leaseholders of houses and flats, and everyone else, get a fair deal. The Prime Minister talks about justice for all—justice for those leaseholders should be a big part of that.

3.7 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on bringing not only a very important but a highly interesting debate to listen to, which has included various Members around the Chamber. It is very challenging to sum up the debate because there have been so many powerful points made by so many hon. Members, but I will do my best to pick out some of the key points as I saw them.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston talked about the unhappy homebuyer experience and the impact that has on people when they have made a huge investment in their future. She also mentioned the number of problems that occur, particularly with new homes. Giving due praise to good home builders is important, because there are many. I am very fortunate: in the highlands, due to the scale—it is probably not the same scale as in other urban areas—the home builders are very good in general. They are not without problems—there are still issues, which I will talk about later. The hon. Lady was right to pick out those large developers who are getting away with some of the things she described.

The hon. Lady said that buying a home was one of the big, significant life changes, but that buyers were having to buy their houses more or less without having seen the final build. She also talked about the introduction of the new homes ombudsman. Like her, I would like to know more about what that will entail. It would be useful if the Minister covered some of those points, albeit she may want to do so briefly. The hon. Lady was right also to highlight the dangers of a voluntary approach when there is clearly such a widespread problem in house building.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) mentioned issues for leaseholders as opposed to freeholders, and went on to address issues with ground rents and service charge hikes. I will talk later about property factoring charges. Those are important issues for people. Importantly, he also mentioned fire safety and sprinkler legislation, and pointed out the moves to tackle those issues in both Wales and Scotland.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned shocking additional charges that homebuyers uncover after purchase. That is clearly wrong. No one should be put in a position where they buy blind and suddenly find additional costs coming out of the woodwork—literally, in this case.

It is important to highlight the serious issue of solicitors’ conflict of interest, which a number of Members raised. It makes no real sense for the system to exist in that way. Clearly, there has to be segregation so people have confidence in the legal process when they buy a new home. The hon. Gentleman talked about people being pressured to use a solicitor from a panel due to purchase time pressures. Consumers should not be put under pressure when making a purchase of such magnitude in their lives. He challenged the Minister on those issues. He also raised the issue of paying maintenance charges twice, which I will come to, and suggested that the Minister might want to look at a retention scheme.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) told us, shockingly, that she had waited five years for a meeting. That is disgraceful, and she rightly named and shamed Persimmon for doing that. She mentioned the issue of sinking gardens, which sounds horrendous, and one householder's fear that her fence and land would slip into the drain, which the council could not take enforcement action on. Since Persimmon was mentioned a number of times, it is important to touch on the obscene bonuses paid to its chief executives. Surely, such grandiose remuneration is unacceptable.

Other hon. Members talked about completion and adoption, promises that are made about facilities and the scary arguments that come later with developers about costs. It is common for problems to occur a couple of years after the purchase price is paid and people move in, and for the developer either to be nowhere to be found or to argue. That is simply not good enough.

We do not know what consumer protection measures will be proposed—as was highlighted, they have yet to be published—but they are unlikely directly to affect Scotland because of the devolved nature of housing. However, that does not mean they will have no effect, so I am keen to see what comes from them. For a number of years, homeowners have had issues with property factors. The UK Government recently consulted on the issue as part of its implementation of reforms to the leasehold system, which is very different.

The Scottish Government brought forward the Property Factors (Scotland) Act 2011, which means that since 2012, registration has been compulsory for property factors operating in Scotland and they have had to follow a code of conduct outlining minimum standards. There is also a new dispute resolution system. The homeowner housing panel, and now the housing and property chamber of the first-tier tribunal for Scotland, have allowed homeowners to challenge property factors in Scotland.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Property factors being property management agents in Scottish speak, yes?

Drew Hendry: I am grateful for that translation from the Scots.

A test case was brought by Mr Michael Marriott, a householder in Clackmannanshire, against Greenbelt Group in 2015. He took his case to the Lands Tribunal for Scotland and won, because it was found that the deeds were not compliant with the legislation. Perhaps that is a learning opportunity for the UK Government. Where there is a clear breach, homeowners can pursue a course to get factoring clauses taken out of their deeds altogether.

That has made a big difference, but it would be foolish to say it has cured all the problems. There is much more work to be done in Scotland, including on issues with shared factor arrangements on private housing estates. There is one such estate in Milton of Leys in my constituency. One of my constituents was advised that his factoring bill had risen from £100 in 2005-06 to £173 in 2017-18, with no explanation—it was just applied to the costs.

Kate Green: The hon. Gentleman is making a really interesting point. I know from personal family experience that one of the difficulties with factors is that those homeowners are often older people who live in specialist

or sheltered estates. Does he agree that it is particularly important that any regulation and legislation attends to the needs of more vulnerable homebuyers?

Drew Hendry: I am very grateful for that intervention. That is an important point. Lots of people are in a vulnerable situation. They tend to be elderly people and people with disabilities, but it is important to recognise that there are other vulnerable groups, such as the young and inexperienced, who may not be able to think about entering into a contract in the same way as other people. Some people have found it difficult to get recourse when work is not done to the standard they expect, and others have found that maintenance of communal landscaped areas is ignored completely.

As well as introducing measures to protect homeowners, the Scottish Government are working to ensure that those who aspire to home ownership are able to achieve it. I will mention a specific programme that the Minister may find it useful to hear about. Ensuring that everyone has a safe, warm and affordable home is central to the Scottish Government's drive for a fairer and more prosperous Scotland. Since 2007, they have delivered more than 80,000 new homes—as a proportion of the population, that is a third more than in England and three quarters more than in Wales. More than 28,000 households have been supported through the Scottish Government's low-cost initiative for first time buyers scheme and the Help to Buy programme. Nearly 20,000 houses have been built for affordable home ownership.

The Scottish Government have also introduced a new land and buildings transaction tax relief for first-time buyers, which will raise the zero-rate threshold for that group to £175,000, benefiting all first-time buyers in Scotland by up to £600. That reform means that more than 85% of those who have bought a property worth £40,000 or more since April 2015 have either paid less tax compared with stamp duty land tax, or no tax at all.

Affordable housing to buy is very important for my constituents and across Scotland. A recent survey found that increasing numbers of young people want to live and work in the highlands and islands. In 2015, when the survey was previously carried out, many young people cited poor connectivity and a lack of housing as barriers to wanting to stay.

Working together is delivering results. Mid-market rent projects are delivered through the city deal investment in a partnership between the Highland Council, the Scottish Government and house builders. Through partnerships with Highland Housing Alliance and others, young people who cannot yet afford a mortgage are given the opportunity to rent a home at a mid-market rate to allow them to save for a deposit and buy the property after a number of years.

I want to quote my constituents, Sally and Ruairidh, who have just moved into their new home this week through the Highland Housing Alliance mid-market rent initiative. They will be able to buy the property in five years, after paying a mid-market rent that allows them to save. Sally said:

"This move has been transformational for me and my partner. We are now in a secure home where we hope to start a family one day, and we're able to save hundreds more each month to help us towards a deposit for a mortgage."

The Raining's Stairs development in my constituency in Inverness, which includes mid-market rent properties, won the award for the best residential development of

[Drew Hendry]

under 70 homes at the Inside Housing development awards in London last month, so it is appropriate to mention it in this debate. Some 55% of Help To Buy recipients were aged 30 years or under. The Scottish Government recently announced a further £100 million to extend the scheme by two years to March 2021, to help even more people into home ownership.

The debate has been interesting. I wanted to touch on points specific to Scotland, but I will underline that some of the voices we have heard talking this afternoon about the costs incurred by constituents and homebuyers and about the activities of house builders have been eye-opening. I hope that the Minister has had her ears open and is willing to proactively address the many deep concerns that people have. I look forward to hearing her response.

3.31 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for securing this important debate. I commend the exceptional and knowledgeable contribution that she made in opening the debate, which has taken us far beyond the debate's title. The contributions have been wide and varied, but they all fall within the subject of justice and fairness for people buying their own homes.

If we are to end the housing crisis, we need to build hundreds of thousands of new homes every year, but what is sometimes lost in a number-focused, target-based approach to house building is the issue of quality. The desire or requirement to complete at speed overshadows the checks and details that people buying brand-new homes expect to have within the system of sign-off before properties are exchanged. Unfortunately, far too many new homes fail to live up to the standards that homebuyers should be able to take for granted.

A YouGov survey commissioned by Shelter found that almost all homeowners of recent new builds experienced some problems when moving in, with more than half of new homes having major faults. As a consequence, there is a crisis of confidence in the quality of new homes, with only two in 10 people thinking that new homes were built to a higher standard than old ones, and only three in 10 preferring to live in a new home rather than an old one.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston made some alarming statements in her contribution. There was a higher level of danger in some new homes because of poorly installed heating or electrics; a lack of security when front doors did not close; and a public health risk when drainage from bathroom facilities was not properly fitted. We surely cannot consider that acceptable in this day and age, so there is a clear quality problem within some new homes. The worst of it is that homeowners experiencing difficulties suddenly find that they have limited protections and guarantees regarding their new home's standard.

All political parties accept the need to significantly increase house building output in this country, and that brings with it an urgent need for a more accountable system to check on new builds and restore confidence

that buying a new home does not come with a Pandora's box of problems and headaches for owners. That includes the issue of leasehold, which my hon. Friends the Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) dealt with in great detail. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse said that the Government recognise that there are gaps and failings in legislation relating to leaseholders, but no concrete action has yet been taken. I am sure he feels the Government owe it to his constituents to get it sorted.

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West talked about the lack of information about leaseholds. There is a real lack of knowledge and understanding, so perhaps the Minister will set out what she is doing to make sure that people are aware of their situation when they buy a home. Clear, concise information is needed. When people buy a new home, the amount of information they are sent is enormous, so how can we make sure that leasehold information is at the top of their list of concerns and is addressed and explained properly? My hon. Friend also highlighted the purchase of freeholds. The price is often set far out of the reach of individuals, or the freehold is sold to third parties.

There is also the issue of rip-off fees charged by freeholders. The Minister has overseen changes to rip-off fees in the rental sector to some extent. She took on board many of my comments in the Tenant Fees Bill Committee, and I thank her for that, but when will she take further action? If rip-off fees are not acceptable in the rental sector, we cannot say that they are acceptable in the home ownership sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston talked about the rip-offs around ground rents rising to extortionate levels, making homes unmortgageable and unsellable. He described the valiant efforts of his constituent, Katie, who led a campaign on behalf of leaseholders around the country to highlight that scandal in all our minds. There is an opportunity to take retrospective action, but the Government have been reluctant to talk about it. I have no doubt there are complications, but, as my hon. Friend said, this matter is the PPI of the homebuying and leasehold sector. If we can take action on PPI contracts, why can we not take action on those leasehold contracts?

The creation of a new homes ombudsman is welcome news for consumers, but when can we expect to see that ombudsman in action? Precisely what powers will they have? The Government must press ahead with greater enthusiasm to give homebuyers the sense of security they need when buying a new-build home. Despite a home being the most expensive and important purchase that most of us will ever make, homebuyers too often do not enjoy the same protections that we enjoy when we buy even the most basic everyday goods and services. If somebody bought a book with missing pages, a box of chocolates with their fillings missing or a TV that did not produce a picture, they would be able simply to return the product for a refund or a replacement. But when it comes to a new house, consumers are left to navigate a complex and inadequate warranty system, the whims of developers and the small print of warranty providers. When problems arise, new homebuyers have

to go through toil and stress simply to get what they paid for and what they should rightfully be entitled to as consumers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson)—a democratically elected Member of this House who is of some civic standing—said it took her five years to get a meeting with a developer. Developers must understand the potential for embarrassment when being held to account publicly in this place. It should not take a Member of Parliament to have to address this matter. It should be simple and straightforward for an individual to get action from developers, and it certainly should not take my hon. Friend five years to get an audience with these incredibly important people in the developer sector.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend on the Front Bench is making a strong speech. Does she not agree that the large number of cases presented today and previously shows that the situation is not accidental? We are talking not about one or two mistakes, but about a deliberate strategy by the developers to set things up so that they have all the cards and the homeowner has no rights.

Melanie Onn: My hon. Friend is right. Some of the dismissive responses from some developers have been mentioned in the debate: “Have you been doing this?” “Well, yes.” “Has it previously been to the disadvantage of leaseholders?” “Well, yes.” “Have you been able to do anything about it?” “Perhaps, but it is only now that we are prepared to do it.” It just goes to show that highlighting such things and putting pressure on the companies can have a swift effect, not least if they want to save their reputational skins.

It is not acceptable that people have to put up with major problems with their home or delay moving in, or even that they have to move out during belated repairs to bring the house up to scratch. The Government should bring forward a full suite of consumer rights for homebuyers when they introduce the measure on the new homes ombudsman. However, when more than half of new homes are built with major problems, it is clear that problems in providing protection and standards to homebuyers run deeper than consumer rights. There are clear failings across the house building sector, allowing homes to be built systematically in a way that quite clearly falls below the standard that anyone should expect.

That was highlighted well by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), when she talked about unfinished estates and issues of completion, adoption and delays. She mentioned people living for too long on building sites when there are delays in completing properties, as well as lack of transport and infrastructure, and the failure to provide basic amenities such as shops, play areas and community centres—the things that build a community. Instead, estates are left full of Lego houses, with no centre or heart.

We have a planning permission bidding system with too much flexibility on both affordable housing and standards of building, and bidders can see the building of a home to a high standard as a costly extra. Too often, they fail to recognise that they are not simply building houses; they are building communities, which confers on them a corporate ethical responsibility. They should take pride in the work they do, the homes they provide, and the communities they are building around the country. It sticks in the craw when large companies

exploit the system and fail to live up to their moral duty to deliver affordable housing of an acceptable standard, but still pay uncomfortably high bonuses—despite benefiting from the Government Help to Buy system.

We have already heard about Persimmon’s horrendous customer service. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North may be surprised to learn that it gets three out of five stars for customer satisfaction. Perhaps she would think that that rates it rather too highly. It will no doubt be disappointed that it is not getting five stars in the HBF customer satisfaction ratings, but rather than concentrating on improving building standards or communication with customers, it insists on paying out £75 million in bonuses to its executives. That is alarming.

Last year, I met the new bosses of Bovis Homes, another company that was struggling to meet acceptable standards, because of a combination of over-expansion, too much subcontracting and being too distant from customers. For a long time it had a five-star building rating, of which it was incredibly proud, but it lost it. It was heartening for me—and it did not take me five years to get a meeting—to hear that Bovis bosses were determined to turn things around. They were quite crestfallen that the company’s reputation had been hit so hard. They had been known as a high-quality, trusted home building brand. Customers were pleased at the change of heart, but there were those who had hoped to move into their dream-forever home for whom the game change was too little, too late.

The need to build hundreds of thousands of homes a year should not lead to reduced standards in house building or allow companies to exploit the housing crisis by making a fortune from an under-regulated housing system. The Government should consider the call from the Federation of Master Builders for a licence to practise, to root out cowboy builders who forgo the rules during construction.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston talked about a single homebuyers code, developers not being able to insist on particular solicitors to be used by homebuyers—who would have a free choice—and an information pack post-sale. She also highlighted the issue of training for subcontracted staff, and looked forward to high-quality apprenticeships in the building sector. Those are issues that it is well worth considering.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse talked about safety and retrofitting sprinklers, and that should not be forgotten. The issue is not just about houses; it is also about flats, of course. When we think about high-rises, the Grenfell tragedy and its effects should not soon be forgotten if we want citizens to be safe.

I hope that the Government will take seriously what has been said in the debate, which was a good and helpful one. I hope they will seek to tighten regulation of planning standards and materials quality, and ensure that the homes we build are safe and up to scratch. Like the HomeOwners Alliance, the Government should want better new build, and should take much stronger action, including retrospective action for leaseholders.

3.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, as it was to serve under Ms Ryan’s.

[Mrs Heather Wheeler]

I thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for securing the debate and providing an opportunity to debate all the issues. I understand that she and many of us present today want better protection for purchasers of new-build homes. The Government are committed to making the housing market work. We aim to increase house building to an average of 300,000 net new homes a year by the mid-2020s. As we move towards achieving that target, we will not sacrifice higher quality and standards. They must go hand in hand. It is vital that as housing supply increases the quality of new-build homes continues to improve. In our housing White Paper we set out our ambition for a housing market that works for everyone. We expect all housing developers to deliver good quality housing, to do it on time, and to treat house buyers fairly.

I, like other hon. Members, was shocked to hear about the terrible experiences of the poor families featured on “5 live Investigates”, including the home with 354 faults. For families who worked hard to save and buy their new home it should have been an exciting time, as so many hon. Members have said. The programme highlighted the plight of Mr Wakeman and his partner Tracey Bickford. It was heartbreaking to hear Mr Wakeman read the list of issues with their home, and describe the disgraceful disruption to their lives, including having to move out of their home. Although theirs is an extreme example, such cases happen far too often. We all hear of them happening. I have heard it from many constituents who write to me through their Members of Parliament, and also in my own constituency correspondence.

Equally familiar are stories of houses not completed on time and purchasers who are not kept informed, which the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) discussed. Families and households save for years to afford a new home. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have bought a home can remember the feeling of excitement and joy at getting the keys. Everyone deserves to be able to enjoy their home and start a new happy chapter in their lives.

We know that mistakes will happen. Building new homes is a complex undertaking, involving many different skills and trades, which necessarily means that there is a higher risk of something going wrong. The critical thing, however, is that when things do go wrong, house builders and warranty providers fulfil their obligations to put things right. The Government have been absolutely clear on that point. In too many cases problems with build and finish quality are not resolved quickly enough. The after-sale service that developers provide must improve. We shall therefore be keeping the pressure up on industry, not only to put things right but to prevent them from going wrong in the first place.

The Government are committed to reforming the process for purchasers of new-build homes to obtain redress. I acknowledge that the current process is complicated, and that the proliferation of schemes and warranties has resulted in varying levels of service and protection. That is why we are taking action.

In October—only two months ago—we announced our intention to bring forward legislation to require all developers to belong to a new homes ombudsman, because it is absolutely right that consumers should have fair, quick and easy ways to get things put right

when they have a problem. Earlier this year we consulted on how we could improve redress, not just in relation to new-build homes, but for residents across all housing sectors. I will return to this later, but let me say now that we will be publishing our response to that consultation soon. At the same time as exploring more substantive reforms, we are challenging industry to simplify redress now and to provide proper support for consumers in the early years of a house purchase, when most problems occur, until we have the ombudsman in place.

In November—one month ago—I met the executive chairman of the Home Builders Federation, which is taking forward proposals to implement a better redress system, based on the recommendations in the reports by the all-party parliamentary group for excellence in the built environment published in 2016 and this year. I believe this work is a positive step in the right direction.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston was very agitated, as were many other hon. Members, about the potential conflict of interest with solicitors. It is not acceptable that there is a conflict of interest. The Secretary of State has written to the Law Society on the issue and has also written to the Solicitors Regulation Authority, in the context of leasehold reform and conflicts of interest between developers and conveyancers. I expect those two authorities to take note and come back to us on the matter.

A number of hon. Members mentioned that we often hear that new-build homes are not completed to the standards required under building regulations. These regulations set the standards for the design and construction of new homes. The primary responsibility for compliance rests with the people carrying out the work. Work on new homes is subject to building control either by the local authority or a private approved inspector. However, it is the responsibility of the building control body to take all reasonable steps to assess compliance. It is a spot check process carried out at certain points during the building work. A building regulations compliance certificate issued by a building control body is not a guarantee of the highest standards and the responsibility is not removed from the builder or developer. If a consumer feels that the building control body did not carry out its functions properly, they may complain to the local government and social care ombudsman in respect of a local authority. A complaint about an approved inspector can be made to CICAIR, the Construction Industry Council Approved Inspectors Register, which is the body that approves inspectors.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) asked about sections in the Housing Act 2004 and about local authority powers to make developers undertake remediation for unsafe cladding. I will write to him about that and also about retrospective fire sprinklers.

Melanie Onn: I recently visited London Fire Brigade to talk about building regulations and the checks that are undertaken. The issue with spot checks is a real concern for safety. The failure to put an insulation sock underneath a window caused a new-build block of flats to be engulfed by fire just weeks after people had moved in. Can the Minister think of anything more that can be done to strengthen the system, to make sure it goes further than spot checks, so that key factors that support people's safety in their homes are not missed?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the hon. Lady for that very useful intervention. My team will take that back and we will write to her with an answer.

We know more needs to be done and expect more to be done. That is why the Government announced measures to champion the rights of buyers of new-build homes, including a new homes ombudsman. That will provide one obvious place for consumers to go, and will have the powers such a body needs and the interests of consumers at its heart. It will ensure that when people buy a new-build home and do not find the standard of build they expect, they are treated fairly and their concerns are dealt with quickly. We will work with consumers and the industry to develop our proposals, which will be published in more detail soon and will set out the scope and powers of the ombudsman.

In the meantime, we have been challenging industry to improve redress in the shorter term. The work being done by the Home Builders Federation could lead to a voluntary new homes ombudsman and better redress for consumers in the short term, while Government works towards legislation. In our response to our redress consultation we will set out the standard we expect these voluntary arrangements to meet. We also expect that any new redress scheme for buyers of new-build homes should be free to the consumer, as in other sectors.

We believe there should be a clear and quick escalation route for issues of building safety and are exploring a number of options. Again, we call on the industry to implement actions and processes so that the examples we heard on BBC “5 live Investigates” do not happen in the first place. We want to see a marked improvement in the standards of new homes and will ensure that home buyers get those standards, not only for new-build homes but across the market.

Further to building regulations and standards of new-build finish, the leasehold system needs to be fair and transparent to the consumer, so that their home truly feels like their own. Unfair practices in the leasehold market have no place in the modern housing market, nor do excessive ground rents, which exploit consumers who get nothing in return. In July, the Government announced that no Government-funded scheme would be used to support the unjustified use of leasehold for new houses.

Sir Peter Bottomley: We are all grateful for what the Government have said in the past and what the Minister is saying now. One of the problems with ground rent is the question of what it is there for at all. The commonhold gets rid of ground rents. We do not know whether the help to buy scheme is used to commonhold. Can the Minister make an announcement about how that problem will be solved, so that commonhold homes can be accepted for help to buy?

Mrs Wheeler: There are discussions going on about commonhold. I will be happy to talk to my hon. Friend about this offline.

Our technical consultation on how to improve the leasehold market and make it fairer for consumers has now closed, and we are analysing the responses. We want to see developers support everyone who has onerous ground rents, including second-hand buyers, and for customers to be proactively contacted. We are helping existing leaseholders by making it easier and quicker for

leaseholders to form residents’ and tenants’ associations. We are proposing a single, mandatory and legally enforceable code of practice covering letting and managing agents, giving people a clearer and simpler route to redress. We are publishing a how-to-lease guide for consumers and looking carefully at how we currently give support and advice to leaseholders.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) was very interested in educating leaseholders. We are publishing the how-to-lease guide, which will educate leaseholders. We have also held workshops with the industry to develop the how-to-buy and how-to-sell guides, which will be published in 2019.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse asked about leasehold reforms. LEASE, the group that we use to help give information, is unambiguously on the side of leaseholders. LEASE no longer pursues any commercial interests and it does not advise leasehold professionals. [HON. MEMBERS: “Good.”] Yay—I just had a good. Get that in *Hansard*—sorry, I shouldn’t say that.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West asked about permission fees. Lord Best has a working group that is considering permission fees and whether they are reasonable or they should be banned in total.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned the £10 ground rent. For a peppercorn to exist there must be a consideration of exchange of money. We are concerned that peppercorn could be open to abuse and therefore we have considered that an amount should be specified in statute. We have chosen £10 because that is the annual amount used for right to buys.¹

Justin Madders: It is helpful to have that explanation, because I have been mystified about what led to that situation. Obviously, peppercorns have been around for centuries; I do not know whether there is some legal advice that the Minister may be able to share, even confidentially, about why we still have to have a financial figure rather than a peppercorn.

Mrs Wheeler: Given the previous week’s history of sharing legal advice, I might skip over that one, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind. Perhaps he and I could have a cup of tea. The £10 peppercorn ground rent was part of our recent leasehold consultation and we will be considering our approach in light of the responses to the consultation.

Sir Peter Bottomley: How about 10lbs weight of peppercorns?

Mrs Wheeler: Black pepper or white pepper?

Melanie Onn: Or pink?

Mrs Wheeler: Or pink—yes, please—or green; we could have green pepper as well. This poor *Hansard* writer, dearie me.

I recognise that many freeholders have to pay charges toward the maintenance and upkeep of communal areas on an estate. That is especially prevalent on new estates, exactly as the hon. Member for Blaydon mentioned. Freeholders who are unhappy about the transparency of those charges are becoming an increasingly frequent part of my ministerial postbag, and I understand why they are unhappy. Leaseholders have a whole suite of

1.[Official Report, 21 January 2019, Vol. 653, c. 1MC.]

[Mrs Wheeler]

protections and rights that enable them to hold management companies to account, but freeholders have no such equivalent, even though they may be paying for the same or similar services.

The Government agree that the current situation is unfair to freeholders, and we are committed to legislating to plug that gap. We have set out our proposed approach to implementing those measures in part 4 of the recent leasehold reform consultation, which closed on 26 November. We intend to create a new statutory regime for freeholders, based on the rights enjoyed by leaseholders, which will ensure that maintenance charges must be reasonably incurred and services provided of an acceptable standard, and include a right to challenge the reasonableness of charges at the property tribunal.

Helen Goodman: The Minister is being generous in giving way. I do not know whether she noticed my ten-minute rule Bill on that precise point, but when she brings forward the legislation or proposals on freeholders, would she consider capping the charges and making it possible for the freeholders to buy and self-manage the common areas, which, as she knows, are being sold on and on and on to a series of exploitative management agents?

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Lady poses a number of questions, all of which are very interesting. I will reread *Hansard* after the debate and take on board what I can.

The Government agree that the situation is unfair, so we intend to introduce a new statutory regime and are considering whether freeholders should have a right to change the provider of maintenance services by applying to the tribunal for appointment of a new manager, which may be useful if a freeholder is dissatisfied with the service they are receiving. As it happens, my officials are now analysing the responses and the Government intend to bring forward legislation to implement changes as soon as parliamentary time allows.

We move on to another area in this vast debate, home buying and selling. Around 1 million homes are bought and sold in England each year, but another 25% to 33% of planned sales fall through, costing consumers around £270 million and creating stress for far too many people. The Government published our response to the home buying and selling call for evidence in April 2018, setting out an ambitious programme of action to make the buying and selling process in England cheaper, faster and less stressful, in line with our manifesto commitment. There is no silver bullet that can change everything at a stroke and fix the process. Instead, we will need to make a number of practical changes, some big, some small, which taken together will make the experience much better. To put hon. Members' minds at rest, we as a Government are here to tackle those issues.

We have already started work. We have created a new working group focusing on the regulation of property agents, chaired by Lord Best. We have begun working with industry and the National Trading Standards estate agency team to develop guidance on making referral fees more transparent and to look at the case for banning them. We have also doubled the funding available to that team. We have written to all local authorities reminding them of the Government's ambition to have a property search request completed within 10 working days. We have consulted in implementing reforms to the

leasehold system, seeking views on fixed timeframes and maximum fees for freeholders and managing agents to provide leasehold information.

We have held workshops with industry to develop detailed and thorough how-to-buy and how-to-sell guides to inform consumers, to be published in 2019. We have started work with industry and consumers to make conveyancing data more transparent so that buyers and sellers can make a more informed choice and we have worked with industry to develop a standardised reservation agreement. We will commission behavioural insight analysis to support its implementation; it will increase commitment between buyers and sellers much earlier in the process. Together, our reforms will create a much better process, which guides buyers and sellers and gives them the information they need at the time they need it, allowing them to make the biggest purchase of their lives with confidence.

I confirm to the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse that I will write to him regarding cladding and sprinklers. My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West kindly brought up the question of VAT on service charges. As he will know, that is a matter for Her Majesty's Treasury, but it is something that has only recently raised its head, so I will write to him about that.

On bonuses for those larger businesses, we announced in August that we are helping to improve shareholder scrutiny of executive pay, strengthen the employee voice in boardrooms and build confidence in how large companies are run. Under those reforms, all quoted companies will be required to disclose and explain annually the rationale for the chief executive's pay and the ratio to the average pay of their UK employees. The new reforms will provide greater transparency on the impact of share growth and executive pay.

The Government have been clear that this should be a country that works for everyone. That means building more of the right homes in the right places and ensuring the housing market works for all parts of our community. We must ensure that ordinary people purchasing a new home have the protection they deserve and are treated fairly.

Mrs Hodgson: I was listening carefully to the Minister, but I may have missed this—if I did, I am very sorry. I wonder if she could say something about a point that both my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and I mentioned, about referring some of these dodgy lawyers, conveyancers or solicitors to the Law Society when they are not acting in the best interests of their client, who should be the buyer.

Mrs Wheeler: Absolutely. I am sorry that the hon. Lady did not hear me say it, but the Secretary of State has written to the Solicitors Regulation Authority, the SRA.

Mrs Hodgson: Thank you.

Mrs Wheeler: My absolute pleasure. We must ensure that everybody has the protection they deserve and is treated fairly, and that all efforts are made to ensure that builders build to the standards and finishes that we expect. Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston for securing this valuable debate, and I look forward to her summing-up speech, right now.

3.58 pm

Kate Green: I thank all hon. Members, the Front-Bench spokespersons and the Minister for their contributions to this wide-ranging and, if I may say so, very well-informed

debate. I again thank all the individuals who shared their stories with me and with other colleagues who are here—in particular those who joined in the discussion by participating in the House of Commons digital debate.

I very much welcome the Minister's commitment this afternoon to improving protections and redress for homebuyers, and I look forward to—I hope it will be soon—the Government's publication of their response to the consultation responses that they have received. There is considerable enthusiasm in the House for receiving further details of the homebuyer's ombudsman scheme and further information on the strengthening of protections for leaseholders. The House will have noted the Minister's promise of legislation when time allows, and I hope that that time will come shortly. We also will have noted that she sees industry-led reforms, although welcome, as only an interim step in underpinning the protection that buyers need.

I echo the comment made at the start of the debate by the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley): that many builders do a good job and many buyers are delighted with their new homes. However, we are all very pleased to have had the opportunity this afternoon to give voice to the very legitimate concerns of those who have been treated shoddily. As the Minister undertakes to hold the industry to account, we in the House undertake to those individuals to hold the Minister to account. We will not allow the encouraging commitments that she has made this afternoon to our constituents simply to slip away.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered protection for homebuyers.

4.1 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 13 December 2018

DEFENCE

Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of the Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations (RFCAs) combined annual report and accounts for 2017-18. I am very grateful to the RFCAs for their valuable work in support of the reserve forces and the cadet organisations. I should also like to thank Lieutenant General (Retd) Robin Brims for all he has done as chairman of the Council of RFCAs, as he prepares to step down from the role at the end of the year.

[HCWS1179]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telecommunications Council

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The telecommunications formation of the Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council took place in Brussels on 4 December 2018. The deputy permanent representative to the EU, Katrina Williams, represented the UK.

The Council began with the formal adoption of legislative “A” points, during which the Council adopted the European electronic communications code (EECC) and body of European regulators of electronic communications (BEREC) proposals. The Austrian presidency then secured a partial general approach on the digital Europe programme, which the UK supported. A progress report and policy debate then took place on the European cybersecurity industrial, technology and research competence centre and the network of national co-ordination centres proposal. Following this, a progress report and exchange of views took place on the ePrivacy regulation.

Afterwards, the Austrian presidency provided information on the progress of current legislative proposals, namely: the recast public sector information directive; the .eu top level domain regulation; and the Cybersecurity Act. The Austrian presidency also provided an update on the state of play of the digital single market. The Council ended with a presentation from the incoming Romanian presidency on their work programme for the first half of 2019 and their priorities for the digital single market. These were: innovation; cybersecurity; skills; and women in tech.

[HCWS1182]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): As the provisional agenda stands, the only item for fisheries will be a Council regulation on Atlantic and North sea TACs and quotas for 2019, for which a political agreement is sought.

The primary focus for agriculture will be on the post-2020 common agriculture policy (CAP) reform package. Council will consider a progress report, covering three regulations: one on CAP strategic plans; a second on financing, management and monitoring of the CAP; and a third on common market organisation (CMO) of agriculture products.

Council will also hold an exchange of views on the updated EU bio-economy strategy.

There are currently six items scheduled for discussion under any other business:

information from the Croatian delegation on the inter-parliamentary conference “The role of Parliaments in shaping the future of food and farming” (Zagreb, 22-23 November 2018)

information from the Commission on the current legislative proposal on a regulation amending regulations (EU) No. 1305/2013 and (EU) No. 1307/2013 as regards certain rules on direct payments and support for rural development in respect of the years 2019 and 2020

information from the presidency on the conference “The development of Plant Proteins in the European Union—Opportunities and Challenges” (Vienna, 22-23 November 2018)

information from the presidency on massive forest damage in Europe

information from the Commission on the follow-up to the Fipronil incident: state of play of implementation

information from the Danish delegation on the establishment of an international centre for antimicrobial resistance solutions (ICARS) to strengthen the fight against AMR internationally and especially in low and middle-income countries.

[HCWS1176]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Chemical Weapons Convention

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): On 19 and 20 November 2018, 160 states parties to the chemical weapons convention (CWC) met for the annual conference of states parties (CSP) to discuss implementation of the CWC and agree the annual budget for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). This was the first CSP since the UK and international partners called a special session in June 2018 to address the threat from chemical weapons use following recent use in Syria and Salisbury.

The former Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), updated the House on the June special session on 9 July 2018 (HCWS835 and HLWS809). The November CSP was vital to consolidating the success achieved in June and implementing the decision to enable the OPCW to attribute responsibility for chemical weapons attacks in Syria, and potentially more widely at the request of an affected state party.

On 20 November, states parties overwhelmingly rejected attempts by Russia, Iran, China and Syria to reverse the June decision. Equally importantly, the CSP voted by 99 votes to 27 to adopt the budget proposed by the OPCW director-general for 2019. This included a 2.4% increase to the budget specifically to fund part of the Syria

attribution work and to improve cyber-security. The vote sent a clear signal of broad-based commitment to upholding and strengthening the CWC and the ban on development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons.

The UK is proud to have been at the forefront of diplomatic efforts to secure this positive outcome. We look forward to supporting the OPCW technical secretariat and fellow states parties to enable Syria attribution arrangements to become operational as quickly as possible, and to further discussion of the director-general's proposals on verification and technical assistance work, including attribution work beyond Syria.

The five yearly review conference, designed to review the operation of the convention, immediately followed the CSP. This year consensus on a final report from the review conference was not possible. This was in part due to Syrian and Russian refusal to include references to Syrian regime responsibility for chemical weapons use, including the findings by the OPCW-UN joint investigative mechanism. A lack of a formal report is not unprecedented and will neither affect continuing implementation of the convention nor prevent implementation of the CSP decisions, including the UK-led June decision.

The UK will continue to work with states around the world to support progress towards universal and effective national implementation of the CWC and to uphold the global ban on chemical weapons, including through the provision of £1.1 million of funding to the OPCW to assist the implementation of the June decision and the OPCW's work more broadly.

[HCWS1177]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Independent Breast Screening Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): The independent breast screening review was announced on 2 May to look into a serious incident in the breast screening programme in England, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of women aged between 68 and 71 not being invited to their final breast screening. I would like to apologise for the distress and suffering caused by this incident.

The review concluded that the policy on the upper age limit for breast screening had been ambiguous since the outset of the programme in 1988. A new specification, issued in November 2013 by the Department of Health and NHS England (NHSE), attempted to clarify how the upper age limit should be defined. However, the specification inadvertently changed the policy, which resulted in a discrepancy between the specification and the IT systems in use, and was not consistently implemented by the breast screening units. This was the source of the incident, which first became apparent in January 2018. The impact of the change in policy was not fully understood at this time.

While subsequent advice provided to the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), was based on an incomplete understanding of what had happened, we welcome the review's conclusions that the former Secretary of State was correct, based on the information provided, to inform the House of the breast screening incident. The

review makes clear that the number of women affected by this incident is significantly lower than previously estimated. Based on the review's conclusions, Public Health England's (PHE) current estimate of the number of women who may have had their lives shortened is zero to 34. We agree with the recommendation that PHE progresses as quickly and as sensitively as possible the clinical review with the NHS of all women who may have suffered harm.

The protection of the public's health has been, and remains, the paramount consideration when responding to this incident. Although PHE was slow to develop a clear understanding of the incident and its causes, we reiterate the review's praise of the operational response. We would like to put on the record our tremendous gratitude to PHE and the dedicated NHS staff in breast screening centres across England who worked tirelessly to manage significant additional demand and pool capacity across centres to ensure that additional appointments were made available and offered to all women who wanted one.

We agree that there is an urgent need to clarify how we define the upper age limit for breast screening. We will commission the UK National Screening Committee (UKNSC) to provide advice as soon as possible on the scientific evidence to support a precise definition of age. On the basis of the committee's advice, we will ensure that a new, fit for purpose specification for our national breast screening service is agreed and is reflected in the programme's delivery. DHSC will work with NHSE and PHE to ensure that the management of local breast screening units, quality assurance of the service they provide, and the national breast screening programme performance indicator are consistent with the new service specification.

We agree it is vital to ensure clarity in roles and responsibilities within each of the national cancer screening programmes, and in accountability arrangements for how these services are commissioned and delivered. We welcome the report's reference to the comprehensive review of cancer screening programmes by Professor Sir Mike Richards that was recently announced by NHSE. Terms of reference will be published once we have had an opportunity to fully reflect on the review's recommendations.

We also need to ensure that our current systems adequately support effective delivery and we acknowledge the review's criticisms that the current national breast screening system (NBSS) is outdated. We welcome the review's conclusion that the introduction of breast screening select by PHE in 2016 was a step forward. I can confirm that Government have already committed an initial £1.8 million to design a replacement for NBSS.

We will continue to monitor closely all screening IT systems to ensure they are robust and operating as they should. A series of fail-safes to ensure the monitoring of the use of "call and recall" systems within breast screening offices has already been put in place, together with additional national assurance to ensure that these fail-safes are being used effectively.

The AgeX trial will continue as planned. The trial will provide significant new evidence on screening women under 50 and over 70 that simply is not available now, providing the evidence needed to make decisions about the age range for breast screening.

It is essential that we take all necessary actions to learn from the mistakes made. We will consider the review's report and its recommendations in detail over the coming weeks and will provide a substantive response in the new year. I would like to record my thanks to the co-chairs of the review for their thorough report.

[HCWS1175]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government are committed to making it easier for lawful residents to demonstrate their right to work in the UK, and to strengthening the support we provide to employers when complying with the provisions in the Immigration Asylum and Nationality Act 2006 to avoid employing illegal workers.

In April this year, the Home Office launched a new online checking service. This service enables UK employers to check the current right to work, in real time, of a person who holds either a biometric residence permit or a biometric residence card, and to see whether they are subject to any restrictions.

The system works on the basis of the individual first viewing their own Home Office right to work record. They may then share this information with an employer if they wish, by providing their employer with a "share code", which can be used to access the record. This authorisation represents an important safeguard and means employers will only view an individual's information having received their consent and the share code allowing their access.

We have worked closely with UK employers and with users of the service in developing this new system, which has been operating effectively to provide employers and migrants with additional assurance where used to support right to work checks.

In order for employers to actually rely on the new online service to discharge their legal responsibilities under illegal working legislation, it is necessary to amend the Immigration (Restrictions on Employment) Order 2007 to properly integrate the service into Home Office legislation which stipulates the checks employers should conduct to avoid a penalty for employing an illegal worker. These checks are currently largely predicated on a face value examination of a physical document.

Today we have laid before Parliament the Immigration (Restrictions on Employment) (Code of Practice and Miscellaneous Amendments) Order 2018, in accordance with the 2006 Act, together with a revised code of practice, which provides that employers will be able to rely on an online check from the end of January 2019, where a prospective employee has an immigration status that is compatible with the online checking service (holders of biometric residence permits or cards, and those with online immigration status).

From the end of January 2019, employers will be able to request either the online check or the existing document-based check. Online checks will therefore be a voluntary option while migrants and employers develop familiarity with the new service and take up becomes more prevalent.

The online checking service has also been developed to enable EU migrants granted leave to remain under the EU settlement scheme to view their status and to

share it with employers and other service providers where appropriate. Current arrangements, under which EU citizens can demonstrate their right to work in the UK by producing their national passport or identity card, will continue after the UK leaves the European Union and for the entire duration of any implementation period. However, with the latest development, EU nationals may alternatively choose to rely on online status issued following a successful application to the EU settlement scheme, by using the online service to share their right to work with their employer. Further detail on the future immigration system will be set out in a White Paper shortly.

The Immigration (Restrictions on Employment) (Code of Practice and Miscellaneous Amendments) Order 2018 also seeks to amend the list of documents which demonstrate a right to work, to remove the requirement that a British birth or adoption certificate must be the full certificate for these purposes. The intention is to make it easier for British citizens who do not hold a passport to demonstrate their right to work, using a short birth or adoption certificate with a national insurance number.

In addition to the order, we have also laid the Licensing Act 2003 (Personal and Premises Licences) (Forms) (Amendment) Regulations 2018. The regulations make consequential amendments to prescribed licence application forms to reflect changes to the order.

Successive UK Governments have introduced measures to tackle illegal working which represents the principal pull factor for illegal immigration to the UK, and the 2018 order underscores our commitment to improve the necessary system of checks for employers and workers alike. I would be happy to arrange a demonstration of the new online service for hon. Members.

[HCWS1181]

JUSTICE

Chief Coroner's Fifth Annual Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): I am pleased to lay and publish the Chief Coroner's fifth annual report to the Lord Chancellor on the operation of coroner services under section 36 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 ("the 2009 Act"). The report covers the period 1 July 2017 to 30 June 2018.

In particular the Chief Coroner's report sets out:

- the continuing work to promote consistency in the resourcing of and practices in coroner offices across England and Wales;
- the training and guidance that coroners and their officers have received and the engagement with a wide range of stakeholders;

recommendations to improve coroner services further.

I am very grateful to His Honour Judge Mark Lucraft QC for building so effectively on his first year's achievements.

I am grateful, too, to all coroners and their officers and other staff, for having supported the Chief Coroner to improve services for bereaved people and for their valued and continuing frontline work.

Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office and in the Printed Paper Office.

The document will also be available online at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/chief-%20coroners-annual-report-2017-to-2018>.

[HCWS1183]

SCOTLAND

Supreme Court Judgment on the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill**The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell):**

Today the Supreme Court handed down its judgment on the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill. The Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament in March of this year. In April the UK Government's Law Officers referred the legislation to the Supreme Court for a ruling on whether it is within devolved legislative competence.

As I stated when the Bill was referred to the Supreme Court, given the view of the Presiding Officer that the continuity Bill was not within the legal competence of the Scottish Parliament, it was right to seek clarity. The reference was simply in line with the processes provided for in the Scotland Act 1998, which anticipated such situations occurring.

And so I am grateful to the Supreme Court for examining the issues here and for providing greater clarity. This is not simply a question of where constitutional powers lie, important as those questions are. Greater clarity was needed to ensure that our statute book functions properly and that the law is clear for businesses and individuals.

The UK Government thank the Court for its time in considering this case.

The Court's judgment that significant parts of the Bill are outside the competence of the Scottish Parliament shows that the UK Government was right to refer the Bill to the Supreme Court. We will now carefully review the Court's judgment.

We want to continue to work with the Scottish Government to provide much needed clarity for businesses and individuals in Scotland. This has been our aim throughout this process.

I have always been clear that it is in the best interests of the people of Scotland for the UK and Scottish Governments' to work together as we leave the EU.

This remains my commitment and this will continue following this judgment.

[HCWS1180]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council met on 6 December 2018 in Brussels. The deputy permanent representative to the European Union, Katrina Williams, represented the UK.

Two legislative proposals achieved general approach at the Council. These were the proposed regulation establishing a European labour agency and a third batch of amendments to the worker protection directive on carcinogens and mutagens.

The Council reached political agreement on a recommendation on access to social protection for workers and self-employed and there were presidency conclusions on gender equality, youth and digitalisation.

The Council also discussed the European semester. As part of this agenda item, the Council approved a contribution to the draft recommendation on the economic policy of the euro area made jointly by the Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Social Protection Committee (SPC); endorsed their joint messages on aspects of digitalisation and robotisation; and endorsed EMCO's key messages on the latest biennial assessment of member states progress tackling long-term unemployment.

There were a number of progress reports and information items during the Council. These included an update on progress in negotiations regarding a regulation on the European globalisation adjustment fund (EGF); a proposal from 2008 for a directive on equal treatment; and a presentation from the Commission on its 2019 "Autumn Package" of annual growth survey, alert mechanism report, and draft joint employment report.

The Council closed with updates on the status of other legislative files, broader developments in the field of employment and social policy, and an overview of the priorities of the incoming Romanian presidency.

[HCWS1178]

Petitions

Thursday 13 December 2018

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

Home Education: draft guidance and the consultation

The petition of residents of South Walsall,

Declare that the “Home Education—Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” has been written following significant consultation with local authorities and no consultation whatsoever with the home education community; further that the consultation is consequently for little more than show as an intention to implement the content has already been stated; further that it seeks to encourage local authorities to breach the ECHR Article 8 and the GDPR; and further that the report provides no accessible means for a parent to address ultra vires behaviour by their local authority, where many of those authorities already act routinely in an ultra vires manner.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw the draft guidance and the consultation, until it has put in place an accessible and workable complaints procedure and further has consulted with home educating parents, as it has with Local Authorities, what the contents should include.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Valerie Vaz, *Official Report*, 14 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 540.]

[P002289]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

The consultation “Home Education—Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” closed on 2 July 2018. The relevant documents can be found at:

<https://consult.education.gov.uk/school-frameworks/home-education-call-for-evidence-and-revised-dfe-a/>.

As well as the call for evidence, the consultation includes draft versions of two guidance documents on the current arrangements for home education. These are intended to replace the Department for Education’s current non-statutory guidance for local authorities, which is to be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/elective-home-education>.

The Department discussed home education with stakeholders in the normal course of business up to the launch of the consultation on 10 April.

All responses to the consultation will be considered before publishing the finalised guidance documents. At no point has the Department stated an intention to publish them as final versions without revision in the light of responses received to the consultation.

Representations on whether the contents of the two draft guidance documents breach Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (right to private and family life) or the provisions of the General Data Protection

Regulation (as embodied into UK law in the Data Protection Act 2018), will be taken into account as we consider responses to the consultation.

The documents in their draft form contain no reference to remedies for behaviour by local authorities. This is because no special provision for this is necessary in respect of home education. The Education Act 1996 already contains general provisions for this purpose relating to local authorities. However, the Department will consider whether the finalised versions of the guidance documents should contain specific information on this.

This Department does not recognise the suggestion that consultation has been flawed or inadequate. Several thousand responses, the majority of which have come from home educating families, have been received, as well as a substantial petition, and there has been considerable opportunity for detailed comment and input from such families. Following the consultation and consideration of the responses, the two guidance documents will be published in the autumn of 2018 in their revised and finalised form. In addition, a formal Government response document analysing responses to the call for evidence, and setting out next steps, will also be published in the autumn of 2018.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum of Nelly Gelves

The petition of residents of North East Lincolnshire,

Declares that the situation in Venezuela is desperate and inhumane; further that it would be wrong for an asylum seeker of 73 years old to be returned to political and religious repression in a country where she has practically no access to money, food and basic medicines.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the Asylum and Humanitarian Protection of Nelly Gelves in the UK to allow her to continue to live with her family.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Melanie Onn, *Official Report*, 21 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 976.]

[P002295]

Observations from the Minister of State for Immigration (Caroline Nokes):

The Government cannot comment on individual cases, because doing so would breach their obligations to treat such personal matters in confidence.

The Government have a proud record of providing protection for those who genuinely need it, in accordance with our international obligations under the Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights. Every asylum claim is carefully considered on its individual merits, by assessing all the evidence provided by the claimant against policy, relevant caselaw and available country information from a wide range of recognised and publicly disclosable sources. These include the UN and its agencies, Governments, the media and human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The Government will grant protection where someone demonstrates they face persecution or serious harm in their country and they are unable to seek protection from the national authorities or move to another part

of their country to live safely. The Government are very clear that we do not return anyone who faces persecution or serious harm to their country.

There may be exceptional situations where conditions in a particular country, for example, absence of water, food or basic shelter, are unacceptable to the point that return in itself would constitute inhuman and degrading treatment for the individual concerned. Some of the factors which will be taken into account by asylum decision makers when considering the asylum claim include age, gender, ill-health, the effect on children, other family circumstances, and available support structures.

There is also provision in the Home Office policy on Discretionary Leave to allow people to stay in the UK on a discretionary basis, where they do not qualify for protection, but where there are other exceptional circumstances such that expecting them to return to their country would not be appropriate.

Those who are found not to need protection are refused and have a right of appeal to the courts. Once their appeals rights are exhausted they are required to leave the UK. If they do not leave voluntarily, the Government will seek to enforce their removal.

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