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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 19 December 2018

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

Cabinet Office

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Leaving the EU: Contingency Planning

1. **Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): What discussions his Department is having with stakeholders on contingency planning for the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [908294]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The Government's policy is for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union with a negotiated deal. Individual Departments are responsible for briefing businesses and other interested parties about contingency planning for all eventualities, and the Cabinet Office is co-ordinating contingency planning across Whitehall.

Colin Clark: Will my right hon. Friend give details of which Departments have been allocated moneys for no-deal preparation, how much, and the spending timescales?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced yesterday details of a £2 billion planned spend for 2019-20. These moneys would be available for either a no-deal or a deal scenario. The largest recipient Departments are the Home Office, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for International Trade.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): In the event of no deal, we read in the press that the Government are going to inform the public about what they should do to prepare for it. Will the Minister outline for us what exactly the Government will say to the public of this country about how they should prepare for no deal?

Mr Lidington: As I said in my earlier response, it will be for the Secretary of State in each Department to determine what forms of communication are necessary to businesses or the wider public. I say to the hon. Gentleman that the message that we get back again and again from the general public is that they want Members of Parliament from both sides of the House to get on and agree the deal that is on the table.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): With reports of DEFRA making contingency plans to slaughter a large amount of livestock, what reassurance can be given to livestock breeders in my constituency looking at a no-deal Brexit?

Mr Lidington: I think it unavoidable that, given the World Trade Organisation's standard tariffs for livestock trade and the position of third countries in relation to the EU's legal requirement for phytosanitary checks and inspections, there will be difficulties for our livestock exporters in the event of no deal. That is another reason for the House to agree the deal that is available.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): After last week's shambles, we are now 100 days away from our scheduled departure from the EU without having voted on any deal in the House. We are now staring at a cliff-edge no-deal exit, which would be damaging not only for our economy, but potentially for our national security. In the event of no deal, with what assurances can the Minister provide the House that the Government have discussed with stakeholders our continued security partnership with the EU, including on cyber-related matters?

Mr Lidington: The Home Office and other Departments with the responsibilities for security interests are in constant touch with the police and other relevant agencies about those matters. I say to the hon. Lady, as I have said to others in the House, that what is needed is for every Member in the House to take seriously his or her responsibility and not to keep ducking the question—*[Interruption.]* The challenge that she has to answer is that if she does not like the deal that has been negotiated with the 27 Governments of the EU, what is her alternative and that which the Opposition are proposing?

Civil Service Relocation

2. **Mr Gary Streeter** (South West Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to move civil service jobs out of London as part of the Government's industrial strategy. [908295]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): We are committed to supporting economic growth across the United Kingdom. We have established the Places for Growth programme to relocate civil service roles to the regions and nations. That creates a presumption that newly created public bodies will be located outside London.

Mr Streeter: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can I invite him or the Secretary of State to come to Plymouth with me early in 2019 to see for themselves how digital connectivity has transformed our city? It is not just a great place to live, as it has always been, but now a great place to work and run a business. Would it not be very good for the Government to have a Government hub there?

Oliver Dowden: I know, thanks to my hon. Friend and other hon. Members, that Plymouth is a great place to work and do business. A number of potential hub locations are under active consideration. I would of course be delighted to meet a delegation from Plymouth, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster intends to visit Plymouth shortly.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): When the Minister is looking to relocate civil service jobs outside London, will he look at post-industrial areas, which traditionally have high levels of unemployment, as a way to stimulate the jobs market?

Oliver Dowden: That is precisely the idea behind the Places for Growth strategy, which is to ensure Government activity benefits all parts of the United Kingdom. That is why we have created hubs across the United Kingdom—for example, in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Belfast, Leeds, Birmingham and Cardiff, to name just a few.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): The Minister will be aware—at least, I hope he is aware—of the success of the Oil and Gas Authority being based in Aberdeen, as was presented in evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee yesterday by both our right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth and the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands from the Scottish Government. Does the Minister agree that moving civil service jobs out of London using that model has the potential to boost local economic growth across the UK?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That forms a core part of the Government's industrial strategy. As I have said, we have already created hubs in both Edinburgh and Glasgow, but I am open to all representations for further relocations of Government activity.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Mr Speaker, you would be surprised if I did not mention the great benefits in this of the far north of Scotland: a lovely environment, splendid education and cheap housing and accommodation. Positioning civil service jobs in the north of Scotland, alongside Scottish civil service jobs, would be good for the relationship between Scotland and London, and it would help strengthen the Union.

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman makes the case exceptionally well. That is precisely why we are ensuring that Government jobs are located in all parts—all nations—of our United Kingdom. I know that there is already considerable space activity in his constituency.

Real Living Wage

3. **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): If he will make it his policy to introduce the real living wage across all Government Departments and to seek accreditation from the Living Wage Foundation. [908297]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): We are addressing this issue through the application of the statutory national minimum wage and the national living wage. This is based on the advice of the Low Pay Commission. From April, the national living wage will rise again—from £7.83 to £8.21 per hour—handing a full-time worker a further £690 annual pay rise.

Carol Monaghan: This Government like to talk about employment levels, but they stay silent on the fact that many people are now struggling with in-work poverty,

which is rising among working parents in particular. Does this Minister believe that his kid-on living wage is more effective at tackling in-work poverty than the real living wage promoted by the Living Wage Foundation?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct: we do continue to talk about employment, because 2 million jobs have been created under this Government. On the point about the national living wage, we were of course the first Government actually to introduce a national living wage. The aim is that that will rise to 60% of median income by 2020, and it is actually rising faster than the real living wage.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Everyone in the country knows that the Government's pretend living wage is not the same as the real living wage. It pays an awful lot less, and it excludes millions of younger workers. At this season of good will, will the Government not commit to making it their policy next year to seek accreditation from the Living Wage Foundation and show leadership in the country in taking on low pay?

Oliver Dowden: I think the hon. Gentleman is a little dismissive of the national living wage, which, since it was introduced, has led to a pay rise for people on the lowest incomes of almost £3,000 a year. It is rising faster than his proposal, and it will reach 60% of median income by 2020. Post that, we will look again at further increases.

Leaving the EU: Civil Service Capacity

4. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the capacity of the civil service to manage additional responsibilities arising from the UK leaving the EU. [908298]

14. **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the capacity of the civil service to manage additional responsibilities arising from the UK leaving the EU. [908308]

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): The Government are equipping themselves with the right people and the right skills for the UK to exit the European Union successfully. Almost 11,000 people are now working on EU exit-related policy and programmes across the Government, and the workforce plans will continue to be reviewed to ensure that our civil service can respond to emerging capacity and capability requirements.

Afzal Khan: The National Audit Office reports that the additional staff needed to work at UK borders after Brexit may not be in place by March 2019. Will the Minister explain why, almost 29 months since the EU referendum, the Government have not got their act together?

Brandon Lewis: All reports of the National Audit Office are obviously interesting, but I have absolute confidence in the words of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who is very confident that the Border Force will be ready—as am I, from my previous experience in that Department—for any eventuality of Brexit.

Rosie Duffield: We are hearing on the news today that the Government are preparing for every extreme eventuality and possible consequence of Brexit. Which promised or commissioned services are already not being delivered because of the thousands of civil servants transferred to EU work and preparation for the various Brexit outcomes?

Brandon Lewis: Departments are continually looking at and reviewing workforce plans, reprioritising and assessing changing needs. We have the beauty of having a fantastic civil service, with the extra funding that the Treasury has put in to make sure that we are able to get the civil service in place at this point, to continue to deliver on the important Government domestic agenda, while ensuring that we leave the EU in an orderly and sensible fashion.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): In the field of justice, we have been lucky to enjoy very good civil, mutual judicial co-operation across Europe. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, are there plans in place, and are there the civil servants, for example, to rejoin The Hague conventions in place of the regulations in Europe and so on, to ensure that we have a smooth legal transition?

Mr Speaker: There is something wrong with the microphone. The right hon. and learned Gentleman cannot be fully heard, and that is unsatisfactory, but I am sure it will be put right.

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. and learned Friend asks an important question. We are now focusing on making sure that we get the deal we want negotiated with the EU—that is our top priority—but it is right that we prepare for every eventuality. My right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice is working with partners around Europe to ensure that, but the best thing we can do in this Parliament to ensure that we have a smooth and orderly Brexit, including for the justice system and security, is to support the Prime Minister's deal when we vote on it in January.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend recall that the Prime Minister said that no deal need not be the end of the world and that Britain would be fully prepared in that eventuality? With this ramping up and extra investment, will our civil service have the resources it needs to be ready and deliver on time?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is right that, with just over three months to go before we exit the EU, we need to accelerate and intensify these preparations. I am confident that the civil service is well equipped to deal with that, but of course our focus and our key priority is to get the right deal with the EU and one that we can pass that through this House in January.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Minister liaise with his colleagues in the Cabinet Office to ensure that civil servants, both there and in the Department for Transport, speedily come to a conclusion on air passenger duty and corporation tax, thereby giving a considerable boost to the Northern Ireland economy?

Brandon Lewis: My colleagues in the Cabinet Office and in the Department for Transport are working together to ensure that everything is as smooth as it can be.

However, I would reiterate that the best way to have a smooth solution to all this is to support the withdrawal agreement that the Prime Minister is putting before this House.

Voter ID Pilots

5. **Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on further voter ID pilots. [908299]

10. **Julia Lopez** (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Whether the Government plans to conduct further voter ID pilots; and if he will make a statement. [908304]

12. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): Whether the Government plans to conduct further voter ID pilots; and if he will make a statement. [908306]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The British public deserve to have confidence in our democracy. A diverse range of local authorities have confirmed that they will be taking part in voter ID and postal vote pilots for the 2019 local elections. The pilots will provide further insights into ensuring the security of the voting process.

Helen Goodman: I am grateful for that answer. Bishop Auckland has the lowest rate of passport ownership in the entire country. Does not the Minister understand that expensive forms of voter ID will exclude thousands of people from exercising their democratic right to vote?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I do; the design of the pilots acknowledges that and makes sure that a free-of-charge alternative will be available.

Julia Lopez: My previous experience as a Tower Hamlets councillor highlighted to me the significant vulnerability of poorer, more diverse communities to electoral fraud. How can my hon. Friend improve democratic education across all communities so that we can make the electoral system more robust?

Chloe Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing her experience and her voice to this debate; it is very important that we hear that. I also thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who also represents Tower Hamlets, for his cross-party support for this policy. It shows how important that is. It is essential that electors are aware that their voice is theirs alone. That message was promoted through various channels in May this year, including work with the Electoral Commission, Crimestoppers and the police, and we will do more to spread that message.

Andrew Rosindell: Will the Minister assure the House that those who do not have the documentation she requires will not be disenfranchised by the new policy?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I am very happy to repeat that reassurance. When somebody does not have the correct form of ID, local authorities will provide an alternative method free of charge. On top of that, we are working closely with a range of charities and civil society organisations so that everyone who is registered to vote has the opportunity to do so.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister not aware that ID is linked to knowing where the children of our country are: are they in school; are they vulnerable? Those in her party stopped us having that identification. Many children are at risk because of their actions on ID.

Chloe Smith: The hon. Gentleman has advanced that argument over many years in many different formats. I regret to say I am not entirely clear if I follow him this morning, but I would be very happy to have a further conversation with him if there is an important point there.

13. [908307] **Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Why does the Minister not, instead of wasting money on voter ID pilots, spend money on giving votes to 16-year-olds?

Mr Speaker: I say to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), if he is listening, that I think what the Minister was saying, in a very polite and roundabout way, is that she has not got the foggiest idea what he is on about. No doubt, with some clarifications, she will be perfectly clear on what he is talking about. I thought I knew what he was talking about.

Chloe Smith: Yes, Mr Speaker. To answer the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), she will know very well that the election manifesto on which this party and Government were elected excluded votes at 16. It is also a little sad if she does not see the merits, in their own right, of ensuring integrity in our voting processes. That means tackling fraud.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): This year's voter ID pilots cost the taxpayer £1.7 million and the only discernible effect was that several hundred people were prevented from voting. The Minister is refusing to publish details of the budget for next year's voter ID pilots. Why is she keeping that information secret, and what has she got to hide?

Chloe Smith: There is nothing to hide. I have been extremely clear about what the costs may be. As soon as I have information about the design of the pilots, I will be happy to share it with the House. Indeed, I have undertaken to do so through the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. The hon. Gentleman needs to be concerned about how his party says one thing and does another. The Labour party uses voter ID in its own meetings. If it is good enough for them, why is it not good enough for the country?

Mr Speaker: I call Giles Watling. Not here. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ooh!"] Well, I hope the fella is not indisposed. We look forward to seeing him again. I call Michael Fabricant.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I'm here!

Mr Speaker: Nobody doubted it for a moment. We always expect the hon. Gentleman to be here, and we can spot him a mile off.

Cyber-security

7. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help improve the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations; and if he will make a statement. [908301]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Our world-leading national cyber-security strategy, which is supported by nearly £2 billion of investment, sets out measures to defend our people, businesses and infrastructure, to deter our adversaries and to develop the skills and capabilities this country needs.

Michael Fabricant: With major data breaches at the Marriott hotel group and British Airways, with which I hope to be flying tomorrow—[*Interruption*] Well, I hope so, anyway—what can my right hon. Friend do to ensure that private corporations maintain security for their customers?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is spot on in his comments. That is why the National Cyber Security Centre has designed new materials aimed at members of company boards. The Cabinet Office will be launching them, along with the NCSC, in the new year.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that before the summer recess *The Daily Telegraph* reported that data breaches on gaining passes to Government buildings, including the Cabinet Office, were made available to the public because of the use of open shared drives that had been condemned six months previously. Can the Minister give a reassurance that that simply will not happen again?

Mr Lidington: Clearly, any breach of data security is to be regretted, and we have a system whereby we learn from those experiences. We also need to be aware that both criminal gangs and hostile state actors are always seeking innovative new ways to penetrate our defences, and the NCSC is our key source of expertise in combating that threat.

Topical Questions

T1. [908310] **Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Today, I am publishing the Government's "State of the Estate" report, which shows that we have successfully cut the size of the Government estate by more than a third since 2010, saving £760 million in running costs. As well as saving money, we are improving the environmental performance of Government buildings, with emissions having been cut by almost 40% since 2009-10.

Paul Girvan: What engagement has the Minister had with the Northern Ireland Office over the money required to deal with the prospect of a no-deal Brexit, and what requirement has there been in respect of the allocation of moneys to the Northern Ireland Government?

Mr Lidington: Consequential sums will flow to the Northern Ireland civil service as a result of the Treasury's announcement yesterday. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is closely involved in all Government discussions about contingency planning, and I have invited representatives of the Northern Ireland civil

service to a meeting with UK Ministers later today where they will have the opportunity to put Northern Ireland's case directly.

T4. [908313] **James Cartledge** (South Suffolk) (Con): On no-deal planning, what discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about the contingency of our ending up on the WTO's default tariff schedule, particularly in terms of the potential impact on farming and industry?

Mr Lidington: I discuss these matters regularly with both the Secretaries of State my hon. Friend alluded to. I am afraid that there is no getting away from the fact that going to WTO tariffs would impose very considerable additional costs upon our dairy, meat and livestock exports, and upon our vehicle manufacturers. That is another reason why the House should back the deal on the table and not let us be sucked into the damage that a no-deal exit would bring.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): Season's greetings to you, Mr Speaker, everybody in the House and all our staff.

Yesterday's Cabinet meeting appears to have decided to abandon all non-essential Government business and reveals an Administration in an advanced state of decay. Will the Minister now tell the House which Government functions he regards as non-essential and is now putting into deep freeze?

Mr Lidington: We have taken no decisions to put anything into deep freeze. We are engaged in prudent contingency planning so that we are prepared for all eventualities. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman yet again has ducked the opportunity to say what the Opposition's preferred outcome is, if they object to the deal on the table.

T6. [908315] **Andrea Jenkyns** (Morley and Outwood) (Con): The 29 March will be nearly three years since the British people decided to leave the EU in the referendum, and there are fears that the article 50 process will be drawn out or cancelled. In that context, does my right hon. Friend agree that democracy delayed is democracy denied?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister could not have been clearer about both our exit from the EU and the date we will leave. It is important that we leave but do so in a way that protects jobs, investment and living standards in this country. That is why this House has the responsibility to agree to a deal and not go into a no-deal exit.

T2. [908311] **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The National Audit Office report on the British Army recruiting partnership is heavily critical of Capita's role. It takes up to 321 days to complete the Army recruitment process, and Capita is being paid an extra £182 million, despite missing the British Army's targets every year since 2013. Considering Capita's failures with contracts such as the NHS cervical cancer screening programme and NHS England's primary care support services, will the Minister stop rewarding failure and cease awarding contracts to Capita?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): The hon. Gentleman has raised the issue of Capita's Army recruitment contract. I can tell him that we have a plan to address those challenges. We are working on a manning campaign, and we are in close contact with the chief executive of Capita to deal with precisely that issue.

T7. [908316] **Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): It is right that we try to ensure that the voting system is as fair as possible. What work is the Minister doing to improve the current system, and does she agree that a close link between constituents and their representatives is important?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): Yes, I agree that the link with constituencies is extremely important, and, as my hon. Friend will know, we are committed to keeping the first-past-the-post system for that reason.

T3. [908312] **Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Thirty-five years ago, in a unanimous five-nil judgment, the Law Lords ruled that Sikhs were an ethnic group and protected from discrimination. However, the results of the Prime Minister's race disparity audit contained no data whatsoever relating to Sikhs. The Office for National Statistics only requires public bodies to collect and monitor data relating to ethnic groups specified in the census, and the Government's White Paper fails to include a Sikh ethnic tick-box. Will the Minister commit herself to meeting officers of the all-party parliamentary group on UK Sikhs and to the inclusion of a Sikh ethnic tick-box in the Census Order, in order to bring an end to decades of discrimination against the Sikh community?

Chloe Smith: I shall be happy to meet the hon. Lady and her colleagues. I know that the independent Office for National Statistics, whose decisions these are, has written to the APPG in some detail, and I know that the ONS will also listen carefully to the hon. Lady's question and endeavour to answer it.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Are the Government still committed to abolishing the insidious 15-year rule that applies to British expats voting in UK elections?

Chloe Smith: Yes.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [908279] **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 19 December.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This Friday marks 30 years since the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, which resulted in the biggest loss of life from a terrorist atrocity on UK soil. I know that the thoughts of the whole House will be with the families and friends of the 270 people who perished, and with all those whose lives have been affected.

May I wish all Members and staff a merry Christmas and a happy new year? I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in sending our warmest Christmas wishes to all our armed forces who are stationed overseas, and I am sure that I also speak on behalf of the whole House in sending Christmas wishes to all members of the emergency services and those who will be working over Christmas. Their service and sacrifice are inspirational, and we owe them a great debt of gratitude.

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

Mike Amesbury: I wish everyone here a merry Christmas: the Prime Minister, and all other Members.

The Prime Minister may recall that during the first Prime Minister's Question Time of 2018, I asked her to do more to support the victims of the leasehold mis-selling scandal. May I use the last Question Time of the year to ask whether she has done anything about that, or whether she is going to kick it into the long grass as she did with the meaningful vote?

The Prime Minister: We have, in fact, been taking action in relation to leaseholds. We want to ensure that the leasehold system is transparent and fair to consumers, so that their homes truly feel like their own. In July, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government announced that no new Government funding scheme would be used to support the unjustified use of leasehold for new houses.

Our technical consultation on how to improve the leasehold market for consumers has now closed. We have received responses from nearly 1,300 people and organisations, and we are analysing those responses. We will introduce legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Q8. [908286] **Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): As you will know, Mr Speaker, the issue of British nationals living in the EU and EU nationals living in the UK is of the utmost importance to every Member of the House. Given the Prime Minister's welcome comments on her return from Salzburg about protecting the rights of EU nationals, at least those resident until 29 March, in the event of no deal, can she now confirm that in the event of no deal—and I hope that that will not be the case—she will reach a legally binding, multilateral agreement with the EU on the issue of citizens' rights before 29 March?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and has consistently raised and championed the needs and concerns of EU citizens here in the UK. Our withdrawal agreement does guarantee those rights, which is important not just for individuals, but for businesses. We are clear that in a no-deal scenario, EU citizens resident in the UK by 29 March 2019 will be able to stay and will be able to continue to access in-country benefits and services on broadly the same terms as now. That demonstrates our ongoing commitment; we obviously want to work with, and are strongly engaging with, our EU counterparts to urge them to make the same commitment to protect the rights of UK nationals living in the European Union. We have been clear about the rights of EU nationals here in a no-deal scenario; we want the EU to do the same for UK citizens living in the 27.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in remembering the events at Lockerbie 30 years ago. I remember the silence that fell on this entire building when the news came out of what had happened at Lockerbie. For the people of Lockerbie the trauma lives on, as it does for the families of the victims, and we should remember them today.

May I also take this opportunity, Mr Speaker, to wish you and all Members of the House and everyone around our country a very happy Christmas, particularly those who have to work over Christmas and of course our armed services who will also be on duty over the Christmas period? All the best for a peaceful and welcome 2019. *[Interruption.]* I have gained acquiescence. My Christmas good wishes do extend to everyone over there on the Conservative Benches as well.

However, until then I just have to say this: the Prime Minister has plunged this country into a national crisis. She refused Parliament the right to vote on her Brexit deal. She said that she did that to seek "further assurances"; she failed. She is now claiming that she is still seeking further assurances while all the time running down the clock on the alternatives, so can the Prime Minister explain to us when the European Council will meet to approve the changes that it has already ruled out?

The Prime Minister: We are indeed still working with the European Union; we have discussions with the European Union to seek those assurances that this House wanted us to seek. May I correct the right hon. Gentleman on one point? He referenced the issue of the meaningful vote; we will have that meaningful vote here in the House. I set out earlier this week—*[Interruption.]* I set out—*[Interruption.]* There is absolutely no point in Opposition Members shouting out "When", because I set out in the statement on Monday when that will take place.

I just say to the right hon. Gentleman that, week after week, he has stood here on this issue and talked about what he is against; he never says what he is for. If he wants to fulfil the will of the referendum—to support jobs, to end free movement, to do those trade deals, to avoid no deal—he needs to vote for this deal. He can talk all he likes about a meaningful vote; all he gives us is a meaningless position.

Jeremy Corbyn: We should have had the vote a week ago. The Prime Minister denied Parliament the opportunity to have that vote and she is still unclear as to when it will actually take place.

There are no meetings of the EU Council scheduled until 21 March, and the EU has been very clear: there are no more negotiations, clarifications or meetings. The Prime Minister will be bringing back the same deal she pulled last week; this is an intolerable situation, and she is simply playing for time.

On Monday, in response to a question from the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) on the backstop, the Prime Minister said:

"I am seeking further political and legal assurances in relation to those issues, which can be achieved in a number of ways."—*[Official Report, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 534.]*

The Prime Minister must clearly set out now how she will achieve those legally binding assurances before the House is due to return on 7 January.

The Prime Minister: We will set out what is achieved in our EU discussions when we return in the new year, when we have had those discussions, when we bring those assurances back. The right hon. Gentleman can get as angry as he likes about this issue, but it does not hide the fact that he has no Brexit plan. I know it is Christmas, and I know that he has looked in his stocking, down the chimney and under the Christmas tree, but he still has not found a Brexit plan. He has to accept his responsibility to deliver on Brexit—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Yasin, you are normally a most composed, almost laid-back individual. You are becoming very hot-headed and I am worried, for your own sake. Calm down! Be a good fellow.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has to accept his responsibility for delivering on Brexit. There are some people who say that the Leader of the Opposition is just going through the motions, but what we saw this week is that he is not even doing that.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is the Prime Minister who is supposed to be undertaking the negotiations. It is the Prime Minister who has failed to bring an acceptable deal back. If she does not like doing it, then step aside and let somebody else do it. The reality is that she is stalling for time—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I made it clear that the Prime Minister must not be shouted down, and no one should even bother trying to shout down the Leader of the Opposition. It will not work against the Prime Minister, and it will not work against the right hon. Gentleman. End of subject.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that the Prime Minister is stalling for time. There is still no majority in this House for her shoddy deal. It is not stoical; it is cynical. As the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) said: “we have displacement activity designed to distract from last week’s failed renegotiation”.

The International Trade Secretary said:

“I think it is very difficult to support the deal if we don’t get changes to the backstop...I’m not even sure if the cabinet will agree for it to be put to the House of Commons”.

So can the Prime Minister give us a cast-iron guarantee that the vote in this House will not be delayed yet again?

The Prime Minister: We have been very clear about the process that we are going through and we have been very clear about when the vote will be brought back to this House. Of course the details of that debate have to be discussed in the usual channels in the usual way. The right hon. Gentleman made a response when I said that he had a responsibility to deliver on Brexit. Every Member of this House has a responsibility to deliver on Brexit, because 80% of the votes cast for Members of this House were for Members who stood on a manifesto commitment to honour the referendum and deliver on Brexit. What people will say to the right hon. Gentleman if he fails to recognise that he has a duty, as has everybody in this House, to deliver on Brexit, is that once again he has just bottled it.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister did not answer my question about a cast-iron guarantee. She is the one who has denied Parliament the right to vote on this

subject, so please let us have no lectures to Parliament when it is the Prime Minister who is denying MPs the possibility of a vote. We should have had a vote a week ago, and we should now be debating practical alternatives. She is behaving in a disgraceful way that is frankly an outrage. No deal would be a disaster for our country, and no responsible Government would ever allow it. Just two weeks ago the Chancellor said that preparations for leaving with no deal

“could not be done in a matter of months; they would take years to complete.”

No deal is simply not an option, so why does the Prime Minister not stop the pretence and stop wasting £4 billion in a cynical attempt to drive her deeply damaging deal through this House?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman does not want to see money being spent on no deal, he has an easy answer: vote for this deal.

Jeremy Corbyn: What the Prime Minister is doing is a criminal waste of money. She is recklessly running down—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. In this House of Commons, where we are supposed to try to treat each other with respect, no one, under any circumstances, is going to be shouted down, so stop the attempted shouting down, on both sides, abandon the juvenile finger-wagging, which achieves precisely nothing, and let each other be heard. It is called the assertion of democratic principle.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister is recklessly running down the clock, all in a shameful attempt to make her own bad deal look like the lesser of two evils. With rising crime, 20,000 fewer police on our streets, 100,000 vacancies in our national health service, and the worst performance last month of any November on record, how can the Prime Minister justify wasting that money on no deal, which cannot and will not happen?

The Prime Minister: Until a deal has been ratified, the responsible position of Government—of any Government—is to put in place contingency arrangements for no deal. But I repeat that if the right hon. Gentleman wants to ensure that we leave the European Union with a deal, he has to put into practice what he is saying and actually vote for a deal. He talks yet again about the number of police officers and about money going to the police. We made extra money available to the police this year, and what did the Labour party do? It voted against it.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister should stop dithering and put it to a vote of the House. Let the House make a decision. Her friend the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) was right, was she not, when she said that the threat of no deal is “an absolute disgrace”? The Prime Minister has thrown away two years on her botched negotiations. She is now recklessly wasting £4 billion of public money. She is holding Parliament and the country to ransom. She is irresponsibly risking jobs, investment and our industries. There have been no changes, so she must put her deal to the vote. Parliament must take back control. There is no majority in this House for no deal. Is this not just a deeply cynical manoeuvre from a failing and utterly reckless Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I have to say that it is a bit rich for the right hon. Gentleman to stand here and talk about dithering. Let us see what the Labour party did this week. They said that they would call a vote of no confidence, and then they said that they would not. Then he said that he would, and then it was not effective—*[Interruption.]* I know that it is Christmas—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must not shout at the Prime Minister. *[Interruption.]* Order. Calm yourselves. Try to get into the Christmas spirit. If you cannot do that, at least listen to the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

They said they would put down a vote of no confidence, then they said they would not, then they said they would, and then they did it but it was not effective. I know it is the Christmas season and the pantomime season, but what do we see from the Labour Front Bench and the Leader of the Opposition? He is going to put a confidence vote. Oh yes he is! [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh no he isn't!"] I have some news for him. I have some advice for the right hon. Gentleman: look behind you. They are not impressed, and neither is the country.

Q10. [908288] **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): May I wish the Prime Minister a well deserved Chequers chillax over Christmas before the start of the new panto season? On the basis that there may be £39 billion going spare in the new year, may I give her my priority Christmas list? Justice for the 1950s WASPI women; genuinely fair funding for hard-pressed schools in West Sussex; addressing the estimated £2 billion shortfall in children's social care; and, for good measure, a vote of absolutely no confidence whatsoever in Her Majesty's Opposition.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his good wishes. In fact, I will not be at Chequers at Christmas, but I will take his good wishes to apply wherever I am at Christmas. As he will know, we are obviously putting more money into social care and the various issues he is concerned about. I do agree that if there is any vote of no confidence in this House it should be in the Leader of the Opposition.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks on the atrocity of Lockerbie. Mr Speaker, I wish you and everybody a merry Christmas. This is a time to be spent with friends and family, and I look forward to spending it on the Isle of Skye.

The British Chambers of Commerce, the CBI, the EEF, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Institute of Directors represent hundreds of thousands of businesses, and today they have said that their members are "watching in horror" the actions of this Government—watching in horror. This Prime Minister and the Conservative party are not fit for government. With 100 days left on the clock, this Government have failed businesses, failed Members of this House and failed citizens right across the UK. Will the Prime Minister move aside and put a vote to the people?

The Prime Minister: First, what is causing concern for businesses is the fact that Parliament has not been able to come to a decision because people—*[Interruption.]* It is no good Opposition Members, including SNP

Members, pointing across the Chamber. They have a responsibility to deliver on Brexit for the British people as well, and it is high time they took that responsibility seriously. A deal that works for the UK, a deal that works for Scotland—that is what we are offering. It is supported by techUK, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, the Scotch Whisky Association, the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and Oil & Gas UK. They are supporting the deal, why isn't he?

Ian Blackford: If the Prime Minister thinks the deal is worth putting to the House, why did she pull the vote? The SNP will not stand by and watch this Prime Minister wreck our economy and rob our citizens of their rights.

Yesterday, alongside other Opposition party leaders, the SNP tabled a motion of no confidence in this shambolic Government. When the official Opposition fail to step up, the real opposition to this Tory Government will step in. The Prime Minister is now running scared and denying time for our motion for fear of the result. Is the Prime Minister so frightened of defeat that she will deny Parliament another vote?

The Prime Minister: We have been clear that Parliament will have a meaningful vote on the deal, and we have set out when that will be. The right hon. Gentleman talks about the Scottish economy. If he is concerned about the Scottish economy, why have the Scottish Government taken measures that mean people in Scotland earning £27,000 or more will be paying more tax than they would in the rest of the UK? That is not good for the Scottish economy, and it is not good for the people concerned.

Q11. [908289] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The Prime Minister was completely correct to castigate the Labour party for its deeply flawed plan to snatch shares in private companies. Will she join me in also condemning the South African Parliament, which is currently taking powers to seize land from its own citizens, without compensation and solely based on the colour of their skin? Not only is that wrong, but it risks turning another African country from a breadbasket into a basket case.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern that my hon. Friend has expressed about this issue. The question of land reform was one I raised with President Ramaphosa when I visited South Africa in August. We recognise the concern there is and the need there is for land reform, but President Ramaphosa has consistently stated that violent and illegal land seizures will not be tolerated and that the process should be orderly within South African laws and take into consideration both the social and economic impact. We want to see a process that is fair and, while it recognises the need to deliver on land reform, does that in a way that is fair to all South African citizens.

Q2. [908280] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): It is only a few short months since the Prime Minister promised us an end to austerity. So why, at a time when demands on council resources in deprived areas such as mine are increasing and health inequalities are widening, does she believe it is right to cut the public health budget for County Durham by £19 million and increase the public health budget in affluent Surrey by £14 million?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, there are funding arrangements that apply across in terms of the decisions on these sums of money. The hon. Gentleman talks about disparities that occur. Of course funding per dwelling for the local authority in Durham is more than it is in other areas—it is more than it is in my Maidenhead constituency. So there are proper ways of looking at these issues and ensuring, as we are by putting more money into our local authorities, that the money is there for them to do the job they need to do.

Q13. [908291] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Senior managers at Lloyds and HBOS were convicted of a disgraceful fraud against their own business customers. Now there is compelling evidence of a cover-up at the highest level, including a recent admission of the disgraceful mistreatment of a whistleblower. This week, the compensation scheme for victims was described by Jonathan Laidlaw, QC, as “partial” to the bank’s interests. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the chief executive, Antonio Horta-Osorio, should now consider his position and that the compensation scheme should be replaced by an independent process of arbitration?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, and I know that he has consistently campaigned on it. I understand that he raised it yesterday in a debate in Westminster Hall. As he said in his question, the events at HBOS Reading—at that branch—constituted criminal activity, and it is right that those responsible were brought to justice. Decisions about whether to launch financial services conduct investigations are the responsibility of the Financial Conduct Authority, as the independent regulator for the sector. I understand that it is currently conducting two investigations into the events at HBOS Reading, including into the bank’s communications with regulators following the discovery of the misconduct. Obviously, we look forward to the conclusions of those investigations. I know that my hon. Friend will continue to champion the needs and concerns of all those who found themselves recipients and victims of what was identified as criminal activity.

Q3. [908281] **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): For almost 400 years, this country, almost uniquely in the world, has been a place of safety and security, and a place where Jewish communities have thrived. In 2018, many in the Jewish community are questioning whether that will be the case into the future. A disturbingly large number of young Jewish people are questioning whether they should remain in this country. Does the Prime Minister agree that 2019 has to be a year when we all stand up and be counted, to ensure that those young Jewish people believe in and stay in this country, wishing to contribute and no longer fearing for their future?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Jewish people should be able to feel safe and secure in this country. I never thought I would see the day when Jewish people living in this country questioned whether they should stay in this country. This is a terrible state of affairs that we have come to. There is no place for racial hatred in our society and it is important that we all take every step to tackle it. I was very pleased to host the reception for the recent groundbreaking Sara conference, organised by the hon. Gentleman and the all-party group on antisemitism, along with the

Antisemitism Policy Trust, which looked at the twin evils of misogyny and antisemitism. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to talk about the need for us all—every one of us—to stand up as we go into the new year and say that 2019 will be the year when we stand up and say there is no place for antisemitism or racial hatred in our society.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Most Members of this House, on both sides, are likely to spend much of the recess working, as I know my right hon. Friend herself will. Given the cost of staffing and security, can my right hon. Friend think of any reason at all, other than grandstanding, for the early recall of Parliament? Will she, with our good wishes, continue her endeavours to seek a solution to what we all know is a very intractable problem?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important that we are able to conduct the discussions that are taking place with the European Union. We have been clear that we will bring the meaningful vote back to the House, and it is right that we have set out the timing on which that will be done. I thank my hon. Friend for pointing out that when Members of this House leave Parliament as we go into recess, they do not just go away; they go to their constituencies and work in their constituencies and for their constituents. That is all too frequently forgotten by many, so I thank my hon. Friend for raising it and reminding us of it.

Q4. [908282] **Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Homelessness in the UK is now a national emergency and a national disgrace. How can it be, in a country of our resources, our talents and our wealth, that this year 320,000 British people have been classed as being homeless? Don’t listen to your Ministers, Prime Minister; you only need to go to any British city centre this Christmas to see just how bad this problem has become since 2010. Whatever the Government think they are doing, it is not enough. Prime Minister, please, will you try to do better next year?

The Prime Minister: First, in the way that the hon. Gentleman put his question he is confusing or putting together homelessness and rough sleeping. These are different issues. Nobody should have to sleep rough on the streets of this country, which is why we are taking action against it. The hon. Gentleman raises the wider issue of homelessness. Why is it that we have this wider issue? It is because Governments, year after year, failed to build enough homes in this country. We need to ensure that we are building those homes. That is what this Government are doing. Last year we saw the number of homes being built at the highest level for any but one of the last 31 years. If the hon. Gentleman wants to ensure that there is a variety of housing available to people in this country, it is this Government who have ensured that councils can borrow more to build more houses, and what did he and the Labour party do? They voted against it.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Twelve young people die each week in this country from sudden cardiac arrest, and that figure could be reduced significantly by the availability of more defibrillators. Will the Prime Minister therefore support my ten-minute rule Bill,

which I will present to Parliament this afternoon, and which will require the mandatory installation of defibrillators in all schools, leisure centres and public buildings so that we can end this needless loss of life?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue, which we take extremely seriously. We are certainly committed to encouraging all schools to acquire defibrillators as part of their first aid equipment. The Department for Education has been working with the NHS to make these life-saving devices more affordable. They have also become easier to use in recent times. I pay tribute not only to my hon. Friend for raising this issue, but to those many people up and down the country who are campaigning and raising funds to ensure that there are defibrillators not just in schools but in other places, such as outside the hall in Holyport in my constituency. The defibrillator there was paid for by money raised by people in that village. We should commend such people for what they are doing, and we will continue to work to ensure that defibrillators are available.

Q5. [908283] **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The Office for National Statistics excess winter mortality figures show that, in our country over the past 10 years, 313,000 people have died because of the cold. Last winter, 50,000 died, the highest number of winter casualties since 1976. It is a shameful indictment of our ability as a country to protect our most elderly and vulnerable residents, so may I ask the Prime Minister to say specifically what she will do this winter to prevent thousands of people from dying needlessly?

The Prime Minister: There are many actions that the Government are taking in relation to the wider issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised about people saving lives over the winter—action is being taken in the NHS and elsewhere. Of course, for people to be able to heat their homes and to have confidence that they can afford to heat their homes, it is important that we help those who find themselves stuck on tariffs that are not right for them—that are higher than they should be. That is why our energy price cap is an important step in this. It will help 11 million households. On average, £76 a year will be saved and for some £130.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that demand for special educational needs provision is increasing throughout the country and that resources are thinly spread. Will she undertake in 2019 to make it an even higher priority for our Government to provide generous support for these very special children?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right. The need to ensure that we are providing for children with special educational needs is very important. We are already seeing £6 billion this year going towards children with complex special educational needs; that is the highest level on record. We are also investing £265 million through to 2021 to create new school places and improve the existing facilities for children with special educational needs and those with disabilities. But it is also about the programme we have with our free schools: 34 special schools have opened so far with

a further 55 in the pipeline. That is providing for children with special educational needs and we will continue to do so.

Q6. [908284] **Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, within hours of the Prime Minister greenlighting the no-deal preparations, a constituent contacted me to say that he had been sent a redundancy notice by his work directly as a result of the chaos that this will cause. Her own figures show that any Brexit deal will leave us poorer, but no deal means a £24 billion hit to our public finances. [Interruption.] The Chancellor barracks—these are his own figures. Can the Prime Minister tell my now unemployed constituent what public services she is going to cut, or what taxes she is planning to raise to deal with that hole? Or is she just going to leave it to one of her successors to deal with these problems?

The Prime Minister: While the Government are making contingency arrangements for no deal, of course, what they are working for is to get the agreement on the deal that has been negotiated with the European Union such that we leave with a good deal for the United Kingdom that ensures that jobs are increased in this country, as they have been over the last eight years under a Conservative Government.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking all NHS, social care and emergency services staff who will be working over Christmas and the new year? Imagine how many more of them could be employed if we were not haemorrhaging billions preparing for a disastrous no deal. Could the Prime Minister end the uncertainty by ruling out no deal and will she also end the uncertainty please by publishing the long-term 10-year plan for the NHS before we break for Christmas?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend and indeed a number of others have raised this question of no deal and not wanting to have no deal. As I said earlier in answer to questions, there is a simple way to ensure that we do not leave with no deal, and that is to back the deal.

Q7. [908285] **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): Motor neurone disease is terminal but, under this Government, people who are diagnosed with this dreadful disease have to prove that they have a reasonable expectation of death within six months, or go through a process of assessment. Will the Prime Minister show some empathy, show some compassion and take action with her new Secretary of State to end this dreadful state of affairs which she is presiding over?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue about people with motor neurone disease. I note his point and will inquire about these issues with the Department for Work and Pensions. I will look into the issue and respond to the hon. Gentleman in writing.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The Prime Minister is sending Parliament off for a two-week break at the very moment that we have a Brexit crisis and no decisions. Our communities want us here, representing them in Parliament. If we are not even back until 7 January,

how can she possibly say that we are doing our job? Is not the message to the British people, “Crisis? What crisis?”

The Prime Minister: We are in a very simple situation, as I am sure my right hon. Friend understands. Members across the House raised some concerns specifically in relation to the Northern Ireland backstop in the withdrawal agreement. We are having further discussions with the European Union on that matter to achieve the political and legal assurances that will assuage those concerns, and then we will bring the vote back to this House.

Q9. [908287] **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): As the Home Secretary will not answer a rather straightforward question, will the Prime Minister tell us whether it is still her intention that her Government will reduce immigration to the tens of thousands? Yes or no?

The Prime Minister: Yes. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us have a bit of hush for a midlands Dame—Dame Caroline Spelman.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): The Prime Minister was sent a letter on a cross-party basis from those of us who have manufacturing workers and those who support them in our constituencies, who are deeply concerned about the impact of Brexit on their jobs. Does she agree that the best way to avoid the unnecessary economic damage of leaving with no deal is to leave with a deal and protect those jobs?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The manufacturing industry has been clear with us that it wants the country to leave the European Union with a deal that helps to protect those jobs. That is exactly what we want to do, and that is the decision that Parliament will be faced with when we bring the meaningful vote back.

Q12. [908290] **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Almost 1,000 Nottingham South residents have already responded to my Brexit survey. Only 7% back the Prime Minister’s deal and more than three quarters want to vote on Brexit if MPs cannot agree. She will not let Parliament have a vote and she opposes letting the people have a vote. Are not her attempts to dodge and delay simply costly and reckless?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is wrong. She says that I will not let Parliament have a vote; Parliament will have a vote when we have conducted those further discussions with the EU.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I am afraid that the Prime Minister is wrong when she says that the choice that will eventually face this House is the choice between her deal and no deal. I gently say that no responsible Conservative Prime Minister—we are, after all, the party of business—would be so reckless as to take us out of the European Union without a deal. Will the Prime Minister now commit to this—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Some junior Minister presumes to try to shout down the right hon. Lady. Not only unethical, Mr Opperman, but always—everywhere, without exception—doomed to fail.

Anna Soubry: It is a little dangerous as well, if I may say so.

When the Prime Minister’s deal fails, as we all know it will, will she then commit to allowing this House to consider all the various options that exist, other than her deal, by way of proper meaningful votes, as a matter of urgency, given that the clock is ticking down?

The Prime Minister: The House will be having the meaningful vote that it asked for. That meaningful vote will be on the deal that has been agreed and negotiated with the European Union, subject to the further work that is being undertaken in relation to the assurances. I recognise the concern about no deal raised by my right hon. Friend and other Members. I come back to the point that the only way to ensure that we do not leave with no deal is to ensure that we leave with a deal.

Q14. [908292] **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister quickly intervene to overcome the difficulties at the Home Office which are obstructing my constituent, Lara Smith, from accessing her vital medication, Dronabinol, and which may mean that she will have to face unaffordable procurement costs, plus hundreds of pounds for the drug itself?

The Prime Minister: The Home Secretary is obviously on the Front Bench and has heard the hon. Lady’s question. I will ask him to respond to her.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Prime Minister originally said that if we left the EU without a deal we would not pay it any money. She has more recently said that if we leave without a deal we would have to pay it some money. She must have taken some legal advice on this issue, as no British Prime Minister would commit billions of pounds of British taxpayers’ money without finding out what our strict legal financial liability is. Given that, can she set out exactly what the legal advice is on how much money we would have to give the EU if we left without a deal, which sections of the EU treaties those financial liabilities stem from, and how much she would give over to the EU if we were to leave without a deal, as this is information that this House needs to know and the EU needs to know? I am a generous man—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not having the hon. Gentleman shouted down; he will complete his question.

Philip Davies: I am a reasonable and generous man, so if the Prime Minister does not have that information to hand, then perhaps she would write to me after this session with the answers to those specific questions.

The Prime Minister: I do not have the answers to all of those questions straight to hand, and I will indeed write to my hon. Friend.

Q15. [908293] **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): Immigration from the European Union has significantly benefited my constituency economically, socially and culturally, as it has benefited all 650 constituencies in these four nations. The Government’s own analysis shows that cutting immigration from the European Union hurts our economy, and that is precisely what the immigration White Paper about to be published aims to do. Can the

Prime Minister identify a single tangible benefit that my constituents will notice that could possibly compensate for lower earnings, lower standards of living and desperate staff shortages in our public services?

The Prime Minister: I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he looks at previous research that has been done by the Migration Advisory Committee that shows that in certain economic circumstances the numbers of people coming to the United Kingdom from the European Union, and overall migration into the United Kingdom, did have an effect on people here already resident in the United Kingdom and their ability to get into the jobs market.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Mr Speaker, you have helpfully circulated an update on behaviour in this place. This year, when we have been celebrating 100 years of women getting the vote, does my right hon. Friend think it is appropriate language to call people stupid women in this Chamber?

The Prime Minister: I think that everybody in this House, particularly on the 100th anniversary of women getting the vote, should be aiming to encourage women to come into this Chamber and to stand in this Chamber, and should therefore use appropriate language in this Chamber when they are referring to female Members.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I join with others in wishing everybody a very happy Christmas and a peaceful new year? As the Prime Minister ponders over Christmas what might be done to get her withdrawal agreement through this House, can I urge her to consider the necessary changes that need to be made—not just assurances—in order to get somewhere with any realistic prospect of actually winning that vote?

The Prime Minister: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I say that I would like to give him the reassurance that we will of course look at all the options that are available for dealing with the issues that have been raised.

Points of Order

12.48 pm

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No, points of order come after statements, as the right hon. Gentleman is well aware. *[Interruption.]* Order. *[Interruption.]* Calm down! I do not need any advice from the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). I understand that the point of order flows from the exchanges, and in those circumstances, as I have done on previous occasions, I will take the point of order—*[Interruption.]* No, I am taking the point of order from the right hon. Gentleman. I will be the judge of these matters.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Mr Speaker, you may not have seen it, but during the exchanges in Prime Minister's questions, when the Leader of the Opposition sat down, he muttered words that were quite clearly visible, accusing the Prime Minister of being a "stupid woman". [HON. MEMBERS: "Shame!"] Bearing in mind the booklet that you issued this week, and the words that the Leader of the Opposition said last September, would it not be appropriate for him to come back to the Chamber and apologise?

Mr Speaker: I am pleased to respond to the right hon. Gentleman's point of order. As he rightly surmised at the start of it, I saw no such thing. I am not making an allegation, and I am not denying or seeking to refute that of the right hon. Gentleman. I cannot be expected to pronounce upon that which I did not see, which I did not hear and which was not witnessed by my advisers. *[Interruption.]* Order. I do not need any advice on how to respond to a point of order from the right hon. Gentleman, which is what I am doing.

What I say in response, with all courtesy to the right hon. Gentleman, who is perfectly entitled to have raised that point of order, is that it is incumbent upon all Members of this House to operate in accordance with its best conventions and to follow the conventions and courtesies. If a Member has failed to do so, that Member has a responsibility to apologise. The right hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that. What he cannot, and I am sure does not, expect me to do is pronounce a verdict in a circumstance which I did not witness, in terms of either seeing anything or hearing anything, and neither did my advisers. I will leave it there. It is perfectly proper that the right hon. Gentleman raised the matter. I have responded to it, and there can be no "further to that point of order," because I have—*[Interruption.]* Order.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: There can be no "further to that point of order" on that matter, for the simple reason—as the right hon. Gentleman acknowledges, with his nod of assent—that he has raised it with me, and I have responded to it.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it on an unrelated matter?

Andrea Leadsom: No, it is on this.

Mr Speaker: No. *[Interruption.]* I am not going to take lectures from Members. It is normal convention in this place and part of the conventions and courtesies of this House that when a matter has been addressed, we do not have repeat points of order on exactly the same—*[Interruption.]* Order. We do not have repeat points of order on exactly the same matter. *[Interruption.]* Order. I am perfectly prepared to take a point of order on the matter from the Leader of the House. We have heavy business today, some of which is Government statements, and with which we will in due course—preferably reasonably soon—need to proceed. I will happily take the right hon. Lady's point of order.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would just like to ask, after your finding that individuals who are found to have made unwelcome remarks should apologise, why it is that when an Opposition Member found that you had called me a "stupid woman", you did not apologise in this Chamber.

Mr Speaker: No, no. *[Interruption.]* I will deal with the point. *[Interruption.]* I dealt with that matter months ago in remarks that I made to the House of Commons, to which the right hon. Lady in our various meetings since has made no reference, and which requires from the Chair today no elaboration whatsoever. She has asked the question. I dealt with it months ago. I have reiterated the rationale for the way in which I responded. The matter has been treated of, and I am leaving it there.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. With great respect to you, I have to say this. If it was one of my male colleagues on the Government Benches who had used that expression against a woman on the Opposition Front Bench, you would take action immediately. This is not acceptable. Please will you deal with it as you often do—in a fair way—but also from the point of view of women in this House, who are fed up with being abused by men over decades?

Mr Speaker: I am very happy to deal with it. The right hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that if I witnessed an instance of the kind that has been alleged, I would deprecate it unreservedly. *[Interruption.]* It is no good people shaking their heads. I received assent to the proposition, which I think would command widespread assent, simply and logically that I cannot be expected to deprecate the behaviour of an individual that I did not witness. *[Interruption.]* Order. If the right hon. Lady—*[Interruption.]* If the right hon. Lady is asking me whether I deprecate without reservation the use of such language, yes, obviously I do, without any hesitation, but I cannot be expected to pronounce judgment in a particular case on a given individual when I was not privy to the circumstances. If she is asking me whether that language is unacceptable, it is.

Anna Soubry: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I can see Members' phones—clearly the evidence exists. If we bring it to you within the next two minutes, will you then take action? Again, I make the point that if a male on this side of the House had said this about a woman on the other side, I think you would.

Mr Speaker: The answer is—forgive me—that it is incumbent upon a Member who has erred and who has used inappropriate language and behaved improperly to come to the House—*[Interruption.]* Order. *[Interruption.]* It is incumbent upon that person to recognise the misconduct and to apologise for it. *[Interruption.]* Order. If Members produce what they regard as evidence, of course it is reasonable—*[Interruption.]* If Members produce what they regard as evidence—*[Interruption.]* I am in the middle of responding.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Our word is evidence!

Mr Speaker: I ask the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) to have the courtesy to allow me to respond to the right hon. Lady's point of order. If evidence is produced, it will be considered, and I will take professional advice, as fair-minded people would expect me to do.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Could you confirm that it is not acceptable parliamentary language to call a woman a “stupid woman” in this House? As regards the point of order from the Leader of the House, may I add the words “Me too”?

Mr Speaker: The answer is that I have already made the response to that point perfectly clear. Forgive me—I treat the hon. Lady with courtesy and respect, and she is perfectly entitled to raise a point of order, but of that point I have already treated.

James Cleverly: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In the leaflet you distributed, you make the point, rightly, that we are all honourable Members. Our word is therefore evidence. I saw it, Sir—I saw him say it.

Mr Speaker: All I—*[Interruption.]* Order. *[Interruption.]* Order. I am not seeking to refute what the hon. Gentleman is saying—*[Interruption.]* Order. I am simply saying I did not witness it. The Clerk of the House and the other Clerks at the Table did not witness it—*[Interruption.]* Order. I am sorry, I cannot be expected immediately—*[Interruption.]* Order. It is no good somebody waving something at me. I cannot be expected immediately to pronounce guilt or innocence. *[Interruption.]* No, no I cannot be expected—*[Interruption.]* What I reiterate to the hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* Order. I will deal with it in a moment. What I reiterate to the hon. Gentleman is that Members are responsible for their own conduct and should apologise if they have committed a misdemeanour—*[Interruption.]* It is no good a Member standing by the Chair and trying to show me something. I would say—*[Interruption.]* What I say to the hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* Order. What I say to the hon. Gentleman is that the Leader of the Opposition will have heard of the allegations that have been made—*[Interruption.]* He will have heard the allegations—*[Interruption.]* Order. If the right hon. Gentleman, in the light of those, chose to come to the House and to respond, I am sure that would be appreciated by the House.

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand the observations made by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), and I hope I bow to no one in my wish

to see the courtesies of this House observed, but do you believe that it is in order for what appears to be becoming almost an orchestrated riot to take place? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. No, I am sorry. Hon. and—*[Interruption.]* Order. Hon. and right hon. Members have raised points of order, and they have been heard and they have been answered. The notion that the right hon. Lady stands to raise a point of order and is then shouted down—*[Interruption.]* Don't “no” to me. That is exactly what an attempt was being made to achieve and it is not going to work.

Margaret Beckett: Certainly, Mr Speaker, it does seem to me—and I have been in this House for some many years—that an attempt is presently being made to shout you down. There is much serious business before this House and I would be astonished if a single one of our constituents does not view these scenes with utter contempt.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for what she has said.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Yes, of course I will come to the other Members.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is clear that this has raised some significant upset, certainly on the Government side and, I suspect, among some women—*[Interruption.]* The issue of the Leader of the Opposition being alleged to have called someone a “stupid woman”—to have called the Prime Minister of our country a “stupid woman”—has clearly caused high feeling. It is also clear that many hon. and right hon. Members have evidence to show you. I am really grateful that you are willing to look at that and then to take the advice that you need before coming back to the House. Can I ask within what timeframe you expect to be able to do so?

Mr Speaker: Yes. *[Interruption.]* Order. That is a very reasonable point of order. The answer is that I reiterate that I am happy to look at that evidence, if that evidence exists.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Oh, it does.

Mr Speaker: I do not need the hon. Gentleman to chunter—*[Interruption.]* I do not need the intervention of the hon. Gentleman, which does not advance matters. What I say to the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), with courtesy, is that I have heard her point of order. I am willing to consider that evidence and I would come back on the matter, as advised by the Clerk, after the two statements to the House. That seems perfectly reasonable. We have two statements to follow. If the evidence exists, it can be looked at, and a response can be provided and we can take the matter from there, but it can perfectly reasonably wait and should sensibly do so until the two statements have been delivered to the House and questioning has taken place on them.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to you for looking at the evidence—I think they call it VAR in football—but when you come back, would it be possible for the House authorities to have contacted the office of the Leader of the Opposition to make sure that he is present to hear your ruling?

Mr Speaker: Let us wait to see. If I have a ruling, it would be a great courtesy if the Leader of the Opposition were here, and I very much hope that he will be. I note what the right hon. and learned Gentleman has said.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Calling anybody a “stupid woman” is not acceptable. Can I endorse the words of the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson)—that also what is important, if we want to encourage a wide range of people to get involved in politics, is that we have cool heads, accessible processes and an honest way of proceeding? Right now, the most important thing for this House is to be able to go away and look at the evidence and get on with doing our job, so Mr Speaker, please can you tell us how we move on to the next bit of business?

Mr Speaker: The answer is—*[Interruption.]* Order. I do not need the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) continually ranting—*[Interruption.]* Order. Don’t argue the toss with me, Mr Hoare. I will call the points of order when I am —*[Interruption.]* I will call them when I am ready. What I say to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) is that the best way in which to proceed is to move to the statements, and I will treat of further points of order in the circumstances. Do not forget, I was not aware of this alleged evidence, and it has been brought to light by points of order, but the sooner the points of order come to an end, the sooner we can proceed with the next business of the House of Commons.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You used the word—perfectly properly—“evidence” on a number of occasions. Certainly, I think a number of us will have seen clips—on a variety of Twitter feeds—and anybody who has a basic lip-reading skill will understand what the Labour leader had to say about my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. Sir, will you undertake to take into evidence things which people have tweeted out to show that—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: I will certainly take—*[Interruption.]* No, no, I have got the point.

Simon Hoare: And to show—

Mr Speaker: Come on, quickly.

Simon Hoare: And indeed to take the television footage taken by the officials of this place.

Mr Speaker: Yes. I do not honestly think that added much, frankly. I think the commitment was pretty clear, but yes, I am very happy to provide the hon. Gentleman with the assurance that he seeks.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have the utmost respect for your position and the Chair. If you look at what has been put forward in evidence and you come back with a judgment, would you please call the Leader of the Opposition back to the Chamber so that we can hear the full evidence of what has been put forward?

Mr Speaker: I think I rather indicated that I expected that to happen, so if the hon. Gentleman seeks the assurance that I would expect the Leader of the Opposition to be here, the answer is yes.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: I am saving the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford up—it would be a pity to squander him.

Mr Seely: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. When you have seen the video replay—and thank God for video replays—and you decide to come back to the House, do you have the power to call the Leader of the Opposition back to make sure that he is here to face us?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that, technically, I do not have that power, but I think it reasonable to suppose in the circumstances that the Leader of the Opposition would return to the Chamber. I think that is an entirely reasonable assumption—*[Interruption.]* It is not for me to get into that until the evidence has been assessed, but it is reasonable to suppose that the right hon. Gentleman would return to the Chamber.

Mr Francois: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. For the avoidance of doubt, I am not taking part in an “orchestrated riot”, but I would like politely to ask a question. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) was quite right that in these circumstances you should consult the video referee, and I think you will find that the video evidence is overwhelming. Earlier, the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) made a very powerful point at Prime Minister’s questions about antisemitism, and there was a great “Hear, hear!” around the Chamber. None of us in any part of the House would countenance an antisemitic statement—particularly made at the Dispatch Box of the Commons. If we are not going to have antisemitic statements, we cannot have misogynistic statements either.

Mr Speaker: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman 100%. I agree with him—for the avoidance of doubt and benefiting by repetition—100%.

If we have concluded the points of order, of which it is pretty clear that I have attempted to treat in detail, we come now to the first of the two ministerial statements.

Future Immigration

1.9 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the UK's future border and immigration system after we leave the EU.

We all heard the public's concerns about immigration in the run-up to the EU referendum. These were concerns held by many voters on both sides of the debate. The result of that referendum was clear: the UK will be leaving the European Union on the 29 March 2019. This means we can end freedom of movement so that, for the first time for more than 40 years, we will be able to say who can and who cannot come into this country.

This is an historic moment, but let us be clear. The United Kingdom has a proud history of being an open and welcoming nation, and this will not change. As the son of immigrant parents, I know full well the contribution they, like many other migrants, made to the community I grew up in. We recognise and value the contribution of immigration and the contribution it has made to our society, our culture, our economy and our communities, and this cannot be over-stressed. For example, there is how it has helped to deliver vital public services. It has brought new perspectives, expertise and knowledge, stimulating growth and making us all the more the tolerant, outward-looking nation that we are today.

Britain is going to stay open for business. We will continue to welcome talented migrants from every corner of the globe. We have been clear in saying to the 3 million EU nationals already here, "We value hugely the contribution that you have made to this country. Deal or no deal, we want you to stay, and we will protect your rights." The future system is about making sure immigration works in the best interests of the UK. We are absolutely not closing our doors. We are simply making sure that we have control over who comes through them, ensuring, as we committed to do in our manifesto, that we are able to bring annual net migration down to more sustainable levels.

Today, we have published a White Paper setting out the Government's proposals for doing this through a single, skills-based immigration system that will seize the unique opportunities enabled by the end of free movement. Copies are available for right hon. and hon. Members in the Vote Office. I would like to highlight to the House the key proposals and principles in it.

First, free movement will come to an end. Tomorrow, we will introduce the immigration and social security co-ordination (EU withdrawal) Bill to implement this. It will make European economic area and Swiss nationals and their family members subject to UK immigration control, and it will protect the status of Irish nationals. This means that in the future everyone other than British and Irish citizens will need to get UK permission before they can come here.

Secondly, there will be a single immigration system for all nationalities. The existing automatic preference for EU citizens will end. This approach will give everyone the same chance, regardless of where they are from—levelling the playing field to welcome the most talented workers from anywhere in the world.

Thirdly, this will be a skills-based system, giving priority to those with the skills we need. We are taking this approach to ensure that we can attract the brightest

and the best people to the UK—those who will help our economy flourish. This follows advice that has been commissioned by the Government from the independent Migration Advisory Committee on the impact of European migration on the UK economy and society. We believe this is fair, and it will help drive up wages and productivity across our economy.

Following these three principles, we are acting to make the future immigration system work for those coming to our country, for businesses, for our public services and for the UK as a whole. Our approach will maintain protections for British workers while cutting bureaucracy. Fundamental to this will be a new route for skilled workers to ensure that employers can access the talent that they need to compete on the world stage. There will be no cap on numbers and no requirement for the highest skilled workers to undertake a resident labour market test, and there will be a minimum salary threshold.

We are also creating a time-limited short-term workers route to ensure businesses have the staff that they need to fill jobs, as they adapt to a new immigration system. We will ask the MAC to keep this scheme under review, so that it ensures a smooth transition. This route will be open to seasonal and low-skilled workers, along with high-skilled workers who need to come to the UK for longer than the current business visitor visa rules allow. Those who arrive under this scheme will have no rights to access public funds, to settle or to bring in dependants. The White Paper sets out our initial proposals to allow these short-term workers to come to the UK for 12 months at a time, followed by a year-long cooling-off period to prevent long-term working. We will be engaging extensively with businesses and with stakeholders on the length of the stay and the cooling-off period to make sure that we get this right.

These proposals will give protection to British workers, but we have recognised that immigration alone cannot be the solution, so we will continue as a Government, working in partnership with business, to invest in and to improve the productivity and skills of the UK workforce.

Our world-class universities will also benefit from the proposed new system. There will be no limits on the number of international students who will come here, and we continue to encourage them to come and study here. We will make it easier for graduates to stay and to work. This will widen the talent pool for businesses and boost economic growth.

Our plans are about opening Britain up for business, rather than creating new red tape. The future immigration system will be quick and easy to use. We will introduce a streamlined application process for those who are visiting, coming to work or coming to study, and this will use the very latest technology. This will improve the experience visitors and travellers have when they are crossing the border. We will also make it possible for more people to use e-gates. At the same time, we will improve security at the border by introducing an electronic travel authorisation scheme and phasing out the use of insecure national identity cards.

We are proposing a single, skills-based immigration system that will be fit for the future—one that is flexible to accommodate the trade deals that we agree with the EU and with other countries. It will operate from 2021, and it will be phased in to give individuals, businesses and the Government the time needed to adapt. This

means that individuals do not need to make immediate changes and that businesses do not need to rush through plans based on guesswork about the future system.

The immigration White Paper outlines the proposals for the biggest change to our immigration system in a generation. However, it is important to note that it is not the final word; rather, it is the starting point of a national conversation on a future immigration system. I am pleased to announce that the Government will be launching a year-long programme of engagement across the UK to ensure that a wide range of views are heard.

I am confident all the measures that have been outlined today will ensure that the UK continues to flourish outside the EU; that the future immigration system is geared towards controlling who can come here and for what purpose, reducing net migration, while ensuring the brightest and the best can work and study here; and that it will boost our economy and benefit the British people. We are building a fair and sustainable immigration system that answers the concerns people have rightly had about free movement—an immigration system that is designed in Britain, made in Britain and serves our national interest. I commend this statement to the House.

1.18 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for early sight of the statement.

As the whole House knows, since the 2016 referendum politics has been convulsed by the debate about Brexit, and we have seen ever more heightened convulsions in recent days. At the heart of the debate, as far as many of our constituents are concerned, have been migration issues. That is why it is a disgrace that it has taken the Government so long to produce this long-promised White Paper. It is almost a year late, and this is entirely because of internal disputes in the Cabinet.

The whole House knows that when we leave the single market, freedom of movement falls. The Labour party set that out in our manifesto, and it remains our position. Then there will be an urgent need to fashion a new and, we hope, fairer immigration system, but the important thing is that, going forward, we do not base the new immigration system on some of the myths of the past. The whole House heard the Prime Minister say that the Government were still committed to reducing migration to tens of thousands—a target that has never been met, will never be met, and is a pretext for anti-immigrant measures—but many Members will have heard the Home Secretary on the radio today, repeatedly refusing to commit himself to the tens of thousands target. So which is it? Where do the Government stand? Will they continue with a bogus and unachievable target, or will they genuinely try to shape an immigration system that meets the needs of the society?

If the Home Secretary is allowed to abandon the commitment to a formal target in the tens of thousands, that would be welcome. That target was a purely political device, designed to stress the Government's intent to crack down on immigration when the Conservatives felt under pressure from UKIP, but the House will wait to see what his attitude to targets means in practice. The danger is that he will abandon formal adherence to targets in principle, but that the Home Office—particularly hearing, as it will have done, what the Prime Minister

has to say—will continue to function in the same way, with all the distortions, all the unfairness and all the inefficiencies that arbitrary targets lead to.

I support a single immigration system for all nationalities. To my certain knowledge, nothing drove pro-leave sentiment among voters of Commonwealth origin more than the sense that they were disadvantaged in relation to immigration compared with EU nationals. So, if Brexit produces nothing else, it ought to produce a system that moves away from that unfairness. We should be a country that treats the doctor from Poland in the same way as a doctor from Pakistan.

Is the Home Secretary aware of the concern that the uncertainty about the Government's intentions and the delays in producing a White Paper have produced among EU citizens, their friends, their families and their employers? Is he able to tell us when we will know what the minimum salary threshold will be? There is much concern that the minimum salary threshold will be at £30,000, which would actually rule out healthcare workers, social care workers and technicians, and be very damaging to both the private and public sector. When will we know what that threshold will be?

As for the arrangement that the Home Secretary set out in the statement about time-limited temporary short-term workers who have no rights to access public funds, settle or bring dependants—they would come for 12 months at a time, followed by a year-long cooling-off period—that might suit some sectors, notably agriculture, but it is a very alarming prospect for most employers because it will not allow them to establish the continuity of employment that is vital for delivering their services, whether in the private or the public sector.

Does the Home Secretary really think that the Home Office has the capacity to change its established ways of working and its unofficial targets, which it was clearly working towards and helped contribute to the Windrush scandal? Does he accept that on immigration, he cannot have it both ways? He cannot talk about an outward-looking, global Britain and meeting the needs of society and employers, while being part of a Government with a rhetoric of cracking down on migration—a rhetoric that, I might add, implicitly denigrates the parents of many of us in this House. He cannot be part of a Government with photocalls at airports to stress how they are cracking down on migrants. He cannot have it both ways. If he wishes to speak for a Government who are genuinely outward-looking, genuinely global in their outlook, he needs to move away definitively from that anti-migrant rhetoric and he needs to take steps to dismantle the hostile environment, much of which was implemented under this Government.

Conservative Members may say that the Labour party in government sometimes brought forward immigration legislation that was unfair and unsustainable. I should know—I voted against all of it. So please do not come to the Dispatch Box and make that point. Many of us who sit on the Front Bench voted against those items of legislation again and again. The question for this Government is not what previous Governments did, but what they are going to do. On immigration, rhetoric about global Britain is not enough; they need to dismantle the hostile environment, and they need to create a system that is at the same time fair to migrants, fair to employers and fair to the society.

[Ms Diane Abbott]

The Windrush scandal upset society as a whole and Members on both sides of the House, but it was not an aberration; it was a consequence of a way to look at migrants that was essentially negative, which was reflected, sadly, in legislation passed under more than one Government. The system that the Home Secretary has set out in his statement will not meet the needs of migrants for certainty. It will not meet the needs of employers for a stable, skilled workforce. Above all, this statement, although it may read well to people who want to see migration cracked down on, does not meet the need of the hour. Brexit offers, if it offers nothing else, the chance to put in place an efficient—no one that deals with the Home Office nowadays can say that it is universally efficient—fair and non-discriminatory immigration system that meets the needs of the society. We should seize that opportunity. I believe that this White Paper statement falls far short of that.

Sajid Javid: First, I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments and for the conversation that we had earlier in the day. We might not always agree on issues, including the approach to immigration that is set out in the White Paper, but she has always approached these issues and debate with courtesy and respect. That is great to see and, sadly, not an attitude shown by every member of the Opposition Front-Bench team, as we saw a moment ago, but certainly she has always shown that. I may not see her again across the Dispatch Box before the end of the year, so I wish her and her team a happy Christmas.

The right hon. Lady asks a number of important questions. First, she rightly emphasises that we should make it clear that, whatever happens when it comes to immigration, it is fair to say that all parties are united in trying in their way to make sure that we remain an open and welcoming country to migrants from across the world who come to the UK to work, to study or to visit, and it is great to have a Parliament that almost universally accepts that. She, like me, is the child of first-generation migrants. Her parents, like mine and countless others, have made a huge contribution to this country and making it what it is, and we should all celebrate that and try to demonstrate that more as the kind of thing that we want to see in our country. I hope that, as the right hon. Lady and her colleagues have time to digest what is in the White Paper—I appreciate that it has just been published—they have the time to look at it in a way that convinces them that it demonstrates that openness.

The right hon. Lady raised a number of other issues. She used a phrase about slaying the myths of the past. One important aspect of the White Paper is that we have listened to the evidence. There is still more listening to do, which is why I said at the end of my statement that there is work to be done over the coming year to ensure that we engage with other political parties, devolved authorities, businesses and others. The starting point for that evidence was the work done by the Migration Advisory Committee, which is completely independent of Government. The MAC undertook a detailed report. It went to every part of the UK to listen and listen hard. It presented its evidence and we published that in full in September. Much of that—not exclusively—is reflected in the White Paper.

The right hon. Lady asked specifically about targets. We are committed to the Conservative party manifesto for this Parliament, but let me be clear: this is about the future immigration system. It is about emphasising control, but bringing net migration down to more sustainable levels. There are no targets in the White Paper.

I very much welcome the right hon. Lady's support for the principle at the heart of the new system, which is that it is about an individual's skills and what they have to contribute, not their nationality. There will be no preference to any particular nationality. To take her example, if a doctor or an engineer is coming to the UK it should not matter to us if that doctor or engineer is from India or France. What matters is what they have to contribute. That is at the heart of the proposals and she is right to highlight that principle.

The right hon. Lady asked me about salary thresholds. This is for the high-skilled worker route. The independent Migration Advisory Committee, based on its evidence, suggests a salary threshold of £30,000. What we have said is that we have listened, but that we need to do more work and have more extensive engagement before we come to a final figure. It will not be set in stone at £30,000 at this point. We will have to have more engagement to ensure that we get it right and come up with a threshold that we believe works for all parts of the UK.

The right hon. Lady asked me about the short-term workers route. One reason we included that in the White Paper is a recognition that, as we move away from freedom of movement, which I think all colleagues see as a very easy system to use with hardly any paperwork or bureaucracy involved, to a new system where everyone requires permission, it is right that we have a transition. The short-term workers scheme is a part of that transition, having a more balanced approach and recognising the needs of businesses across the country.

Lastly, the right hon. Lady talked about being open and welcoming, and about the Home Office learning lessons and changing its approach where appropriate. She will know that earlier this year we made changes to the tier 2 system, under the current immigration system, to remove doctors and nurses from the cap. She also rightly raised the Windrush crisis. All year, there has been a process to learn lessons from what went wrong. She is right to highlight that the Windrush problems began under a previous Government and continued under this Government. They should not have happened under any Government. It is right that we learn the lessons. Wendy Williams is working on an independent report. It will be a thorough independent report and she will go wherever she needs to to get to the evidence. That will be an important moment for us to all learn lessons.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Obviously, I have not had a chance to read the White Paper, but much of what he said today is moving in the right direction. I hope he agrees with me that one of the problems with discussing migration over the past two decades has been that any time it is mentioned, people immediately accuse those who ask about reducing it of being racist. We have to bring an end to that level of debate, which has led to much of the frustration to which the right hon. Member for Hackney North and

Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) referred earlier, about the way the debate has been conducted. As one of those who voted leave, it was clear to me throughout that people did not want an end to migration; what they wanted was controlled migration. That is what I hope my right hon. Friend delivers today.

As far as I can see, the core bit that has caused the greatest problem has been the immediate access to social security benefits for people coming from the European Union. That has caused a big problem. Many businesses have, I am afraid, abused the process, getting them to come in and live in often quite squalid conditions, driving wages down for those who have much higher costs. Is my right hon. Friend prepared to deal with that issue to make sure that that is not a way of bringing in cheap labour? When he gets lectured by businesses and by others who say the health service cannot cope, will he remind them that for the past two decades—*[Interruption.]* This is a very important point.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman's point may be important, but it does need to be framed in the form of a question—briefly.

Mr Duncan Smith: Does my right hon. Friend accept that businesses have failed to invest in training and skilling the domestic population, with the result that only 15% of those who start life at entry level work will ever move beyond entry level work?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for the points he raises. First, he is absolutely right to emphasise the need for control. That was clearly one of the messages of the referendum result. It is about control. Like any other major developed economy, there is no reason why Britain should not have control while also being fair in its approach to immigration. On access to benefits, the White Paper sets out—I appreciate he has not had the opportunity to look at it in any detail yet—that on the short-term workers route, for example, there will be no right to public benefits and no dependants' rights. This is a system that many other countries have followed. It is a fair approach both to people who come to our country to work and to the domestic population.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of his statement and the Immigration Minister for taking the time to speak to me earlier today.

The proposals will make us all poorer economically, socially and in terms of opportunity. They signify not a “global Britain”, but an inward-looking Government and a Prime Minister still obsessed with net migration targets. When the Government talk about taking back control of our borders, what they mean is ripping up mutual rights to live, study, work and enjoy family life across Europe, depriving future generations of the amazing opportunities that our generations have enjoyed. Free movement has been brilliant for our people, and brilliant for Scotland and the UK, too.

When the Government talk about a skills-based system, they mean nothing of the sort. It is, to all intents and purposes, a salary-based system. We are talking about the carers, key NHS workers, lab technicians, researchers, bricklayers, and many other essential workers that this

country needs. So why are the Government intent on slashing the family, social security and settlement rights of workers coming here under that income threshold? The proposals are degrading for workers, bad for employers and bad for community cohesion.

Why is the Home Secretary intent on forcing businesses to endure the expense, red tape and dubious reliability of a Home Office immigration system, when free movement has worked perfectly well? This is the opposite of cutting bureaucracy. Will the Home Secretary confirm the revenue that this will cost the Treasury? Will he confirm what the analysis shows about lost growth to the economy?

Finally, these announcements will be utterly disastrous for Scotland—socially and economically. Has the Home Office modelled the effect they will have on Scotland's population, economy and public finances? Does the Home Secretary seriously think that reducing EU migration to Scotland, possibly by over 80%, is a good thing? If this is the best the Government can do, there is no better illustration of why we need decisions on immigration to be in Scotland's hands.

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Gentleman claims that having one's own immigration system and ending freedom of movement will make the country poorer. He should perhaps focus his attention on the number of other large developed countries—Australia, Canada, United States—that have their own independent immigration system. They are not poorer because of that. I do not think his logic follows at all.

The hon. Gentleman argues for continuing freedom of movement. He should cast his mind back to just over two years ago when the people of the United Kingdom voted to end it. Scottish citizens are members of the United Kingdom. They voted to end it. Lastly, he raises the issue of the salary threshold. When determining skill levels, it is perfectly reasonable that one of the factors to be taken into account is salary. It should not be based exclusively on that. If he cares to read the Migration Advisory Committee's report from September, it will provide him with a lot more evidence for why this is a perfectly reasonable approach.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. He has addressed the central conundrum of immigration policy, which is how to ensure the necessary controls on the numbers while also attracting not just our fair share, but—preferably—more than our fair share of the brightest and the best from around the world to help our economy and our communities. One issue, however, which I hope he will address, is that some of the brightest and the best are not necessarily in high-paid professions. How will his new system deal with that? I am thinking in particular of sectors such as social care. We want the best and brightest people from around the world, but many in those sectors will probably not be earning over the salary threshold. How will we continue to attract those people?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend, who speaks from experience as a former Immigration Minister. He asks a perfectly good question about how we can continue to attract the best and the brightest, especially if we are focused too rigidly on salary. One way we intend to do that in the new system is by taking a recommendation

[Sajid Javid]

from the Migration Advisory Committee on shortage occupation lists. We will take that further, make it more dynamic and responsive, and review it more regularly. That will allow us, as it does in the current non-EEA immigration system, but much more effectively, to set lower salary thresholds for shortage occupations.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I will look very closely at what the Home Secretary has set out in the Immigration White Paper. We have heard many different stories about what it will include, but I am not sure we can entirely believe all of them, given the disputes we have seen between him and the Prime Minister.

I want to ask the Home Secretary a very specific question about immigration enforcement at our border in relation to no-deal planning. The permanent secretary of his Department told us on the Home Affairs Committee just a few weeks ago:

“It is not part of our contingency planning to deploy the armed forces.”

I pressed him on this, and he said again:

“It is not part of our no-deal planning that we would deploy the armed forces, for example, at the border.”

Was the permanent secretary misleading the Committee, or was it a surprise to the Department this morning when it was told that the Army could be deployed at the border for immigration enforcement and other purposes?

Sajid Javid: Of course, there is no-deal planning going on in the Home Office, as there is in every other Department. We do not expect it, but we need to plan for all contingencies. We are hiring more Border Force officers, and there will also be a taskforce, which is already being set up, and some of the new funding for those Border Force officers has already been announced. As for the use of soldiers, whether reservists or regulars, there is a broader plan—it is not part of the Home Office’s plan—to have up to 3,500 soldiers available for civil work as and when they are needed.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): In my judgment, there is a great deal to welcome in the Home Secretary’s statement, but will he bear in mind that it is completely inappropriate to pinch doctors and medical staff from developing countries? It is a form of reverse aid and it is quite wrong. When it does happen, will he discuss with the International Development Secretary using part of the development budget to replace such staff on a two for one basis, and should we not grow the doctors and medical staff we need in Britain in Britain? In that context, should we not welcome the increase in the last year in the number of doctors trained from 6,000 to 7,500?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend, who speaks from experience, raises a very important point. Of course, we cannot control who makes an application to come to the UK, or who sponsors them, but still he raises a very important point about other ways of helping or reducing concern in this area. One way is certainly through our international aid budget. He raises a second issue about doing everything we can to train more doctors and nurses here in the UK.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Home Secretary accept that the Home Office and Border Force already struggle to cope and that over the next three years they will have to deal with 3 million extra cases of EU citizens? How does he expect them to cope with this new temporary worker visa scheme, which will involve tens of thousands of employers, many of them contacting the Home Office for the first time, with a 12-month churn of staff? Far from bringing back control, will this not bring chaos?

Sajid Javid: I will give three answers to the right hon. Gentleman. First, the settlement scheme for the 3 million-plus EU citizens, which he mentions, is being separately staffed—more staff will be hired as the scheme properly rolls out—and much of the extra funding has already been allocated. Secondly, we will make the best use of technology—for example, we are expanding e-gate usage to eight other nations, which will help a lot. Lastly, the new system does not actually come into place until 2021, which gives us more than enough time to prepare.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I seek clarification on three points. First, the Home Secretary talked about this coming in from 2021. When exactly does he mean? Does he mean January? Secondly, can he confirm to employers in my constituency that in the meantime there will be no change to the existing processes, systems and forms they have to use for non-UK workers, whether under the EU or the non-EU worker schemes? Finally, if he is to have a year-long public consultation, that will take us into 2019, and then obviously the Government will want time to look at the results in 2020. Can he assure me that businesses in my community will not suddenly be given a cut-off point on the salary just months before a new system is introduced in 2021?

Sajid Javid: First, the plan is to introduce the new system from January 2021—so from the end of the implementation period. Of course, if that period is extended—this assumes a deal scenario—it could be later. My right hon. Friend asked for an assurance that there will not be any change to employer checks between now and when the system comes in. The changes here will only come in from 2021, so there will be no changes to employer checks, including for EU citizens. She also asked for an assurance that the salary threshold will not be set suddenly. We will make sure in our work that it is not a sudden change and that businesses have time to prepare.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Home Secretary was right to pay tribute to his parents. His father, a bus driver, and my mother, who worked at Camden Town tube station, belong to a generation that took so little and gave so much. They were like today’s careworkers, security guards and fruit pickers. He knows that they did not earn anything like £30,000 in the prices of the ’70s and ’80s. How will he look his children in the eyes and say he slammed behind him the door of opportunity that enabled him and me to sit in our seats today?

Sajid Javid: The door was closed on my parents and people from those Commonwealth countries in 1968 by a Commonwealth citizenship Act brought in by a Labour Government—so it was a Labour Government who

closed that door. [*Interruption.*] This is important. It is important that the right hon. Gentleman has all the facts in front of him. Going forward, it is important that we continue to provide opportunities for people with multi-skill levels to come and help in the UK, to settle and to study, which is why we have presented a system here that is focused on high-skilled workers but which, as he will have heard me say earlier, also includes a short-term workers scheme, and there will be other routes as well.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I understand my right hon. Friend's emphasis on attracting high-skilled workers, but is it not true that in recent years the British economy has been thirsty for new labour at all skills levels and that we want that to continue? This is particularly true for those parts of the UK where the local population is getting older and where freedom of movement has been a really good and important thing. Will he please make an effort to take evidence from all parts of the UK so as to understand how the local skills and labour markets operate and to strike the right balance with our new policy?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend has emphasised the importance of listening to those in all parts of the United Kingdom and ensuring that the new system works for them all. In that regard, there is a commitment in the White Paper to consider, for example, extending the shortage occupation list to Wales. Scotland already has one, but Wales does not. That is just one demonstration of how we can ensure that the system works for every part of the UK.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Home Secretary mentioned a streamlined application process for visitors. Can he confirm that the millions of visitors who come to this country from the EU every year will in future have to apply for, and receive, a visa or a visa waiver? If so, how much will it cost them?

Sajid Javid: Under the new system, all people entering the United Kingdom will require a form of visa or visa waiver. That will probably not start in 2021, because it will take longer to develop the system fully and introduce it. However, the electronic travel authorisation scheme, which I also mentioned in my statement, will apply to all visitors. The right hon. Gentleman asked about cost; we have not yet determined what the cost of the ETA scheme would be.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): As a first-generation immigrant, I welcome the Home Secretary's statement. I feel that the White Paper represents a move from the 20th century to a much better future immigration system. I especially thank the Home Secretary for removing the annual limits on work visas and on international students: I lobbied for both on behalf of the Wellcome Sanger Institute and Anglia Ruskin university, which serve my constituency. Will he elaborate on how removing the work visa cap in particular will give businesses certainty?

Sajid Javid: As my hon. Friend will know, under the current non-EEA system there is a cap of 20,700 a year, with some exemptions. The work of the Migration Advisory Committee has shown that such a cap is not in

our economic interests, and that it is far better to control numbers in other ways that are more reflective of economic needs. I think that removing the cap will lead to an economic boost, while also making it easier for students who have studied at our great universities to stay on if they can find a job at the right level. I think that that is very welcome too.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The Home Secretary says that he will protect the rights of EU citizens who are currently here. Does that include the continued right to work even after they have left the country for a period before returning? The Home Secretary also says that he is against increased red tape. Will he therefore publish, as part of the consultation, a full impact assessment of the cost to the public purse and to businesses of whatever processes he sets up to implement the short-term visas?

Sajid Javid: Under the EU settlement scheme, there will be a requirement for plenty of time—two years—to be provided for individuals to register, however long they have been here. Even if they have been here for only a day, their rights will be guaranteed. My understanding is that once they have registered they will lose their rights if they leave for more than five years, but within that period there is no change.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): This White Paper has been even more delayed than a Southern railway train, but at least it has arrived. I welcome many of the Home Secretary's comments, but can he explain why, in view of the move to a skills-based system and shortage occupation measures, we still need a net migration target below 100,000 or any other figure, given that nothing can be done about one side of the equation in any case? Can he also confirm that he would prefer to remove students from that net migration figure altogether, given his welcome comments about students coming to this country to invent, innovate and employ?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend asked me very recently whether we would publish the White Paper before the meaningful vote, and we have. I think I told him that we would try our best.

My hon. Friend asked about targets. There are no targets in the White Paper; the system is designed to help to bring down net migration overall, but it sets no targets. As for the question of students, we continue to look at it, and I have asked the Migration Advisory Committee to do some more work.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The United Kingdom has a long tradition of observing the 1951 refugee convention. Are the Government currently minded to lift the ban on asylum seekers working in the UK?

Sajid Javid: We are committed to the 1951 convention, and I think that that commitment is shared across the House. As for the specific issue of work, it is one that we have been considering.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What are the implications of the UN agreement on migration that we have signed in Marrakesh?

Sajid Javid: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is taking the lead on that, but as it is a completely non-legally binding agreement, there are no direct implications for the UK.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Immigration has benefited the UK, and the people who have come here, whether from Europe or from the rest of the world, have overwhelmingly come to work hard and make a positive contribution to this country. On the question of numbers, what is the Home Secretary's estimate of the effect on immigration from the rest of the world of restricting immigration from the rest of Europe?

Sajid Javid: I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Gentleman's point about the benefits of immigration for the UK, and I hope he agrees that my statement made that clear, but when we talk about benefits it is important for us to take a more holistic look at the impact on the UK and at what is in our national interest. In some cases, low-wage labour from abroad cannot become a substitute for investment in the upskilling of domestic labour or for improvements in domestic productivity.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Home Secretary will know that there is a dissonance between what liberal political establishments want and what the people want: that was made clear by the result of the referendum and the rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe. Can he convince the people that the subtle change of language from "tens of thousands" to "more sustainable levels" does not mean that he is no longer absolutely committed to controlling immigration? After all, many people wonder why, when he has been in charge of immigration from outside the EU, we have so palpably failed to control it. Does he realise that he must convince people that we have a strong immigration policy, because otherwise we will once again see the rise of a right-wing populist party in this country?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of the importance of control. One of the clear messages from the EU referendum was that people wanted to see control of our borders, and the new system will provide just that. Under this system, everyone who enters the UK will need permission, and that will give us a level of control that we have not had for four decades.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I welcome the announcement of the electronic travel authorisation scheme, because it was suggested by the Labour Front Bench of which I was part in 2011. How much does the Home Secretary believe the development costs of the scheme will be, and will he monitor people who are leaving as well as those who are entering?

Sajid Javid: First, the scheme will give us information about people entering and leaving. As for the costs, we have only just made a decision internally to proceed with the scheme. There will be further information as it becomes available.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As a director—or a member—of the board of a university, I realise how much researchers from around the world contribute,

but their salaries are often relatively low. Will the Home Secretary consider not introducing a salary cap but concentrating on skills, given that skills and salaries do not often equate?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point; my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration was at the Francis Crick Institute this morning, and one of the things she was rightly hearing about was just this issue. In fact the Migration Advisory Committee has identified this issue as well; it has talked also about lab technicians, many of them working in our universities, and many of whom do not earn as much as £30,000. We are taking this point into account.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I find it terribly depressing that the Prime Minister is still sticking with this language of "tens of thousands". It is completely undeliverable in relation to outside the EU let alone within the EU. In particular I am conscious that the Rhondda would never have been built if it had not been for miners coming from Ireland; we would never have had frothy coffee and ice cream if it had not been for the Italians who came to work in the mines; we would not have doctors keeping us healthy if it had not been for the Indian subcontinent; and today we would not have enough careworkers if it were not for people coming from Poland, Latvia, Estonia and Spain. So I hope the Home Secretary will manage to change the whole rhetoric and tone behind the Government's approach to this, and can he also just tell us where exactly we have got to on tier 1 investor visas, which the Government announced they were going to suspend two weeks ago and then announced they were suspending the suspension six days later?

Sajid Javid: First, I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman did not mention in his list pakoras and samosas from India and Pakistan; I would have thought that would have been at the top of his list.

Chris Bryant: I am not a fan.

Sajid Javid: Well, I am. [*Interruption.*] And so are those on the Labour Front Bench. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, however, and I hope that as he has the time to look at the White Paper on the new immigration system he will see that it is still a demonstration of how this country is open to talent from across the world but with more control than we have had before, and of how we can do that in a way that brings net migration down to a more sustainable level, which is good for all our communities. It is important to have public confidence in the level of immigration. The hon. Gentleman also asked about tier 1 visas. They are still available as we speak, but we have set out a number of reforms that we need to put in place to make them more effective.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement today as a sensible approach with a single system based on people's skills. However, does he agree that post-Brexit we will need to attract the brightest and best from across the world to help meet the needs of our country and economy while also always being mindful of the pressures on our public services caused by population numbers?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes an important point: clearly, the higher the population of a country and the more it rises, the more pressure there is on public services. Some communities have seen a very rapid change in population, sometimes to do with high levels of migration to that community. We must keep that in mind; it was one of the reasons why so many people voted to have control of our immigration system, and we must balance that against the economic needs we have to meet through migration.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am heartbroken. This immigration Bill could have been an opportunity to show the world what an outward-looking nation we really are, and the proud tradition that we have of challenging racism in all its forms. Instead, it seems to be taking a very unhappy and unfortunate turn, with language such as “cooling-off” periods for people who come here to work. There is a global forced migration crisis, so why, on top of all the other things hon. Friends have mentioned, has the Home Secretary failed even to consider that this might have been an opportunity to reform the way this country responds to refugees?

Sajid Javid: I am not sure that the hon. Lady has read the same White Paper that I have.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is absolutely right that the people of this country want to see a firm but fair immigration position, so what will my right hon. Friend do to ensure that the rules are operated fairly not only for people coming from the EU, but, more importantly, for our Commonwealth partners, in particular from the Indian subcontinent?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend raises the important issue of fairness based on what someone has to contribute, rather than their nationality. During the referendum campaign many British citizens were concerned that family and friends in the Indian subcontinent and other parts of the British Commonwealth might not be getting the same treatment or access that others were getting because of the preference that existed through the freedom of movement system. That is changing under this new system, and, when all is taken into account, this system is much fairer in its approach by focusing on skills rather than nationality.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The UK fashion and textile industry contributes £32 billion to the economy but it thrives on a global pool of talent. As chair of the all-party group on textile and fashion I have heard concerns from the industry about the impact of any new measures on freedom of movement. I am sure the Home Secretary would suit Katharine Hamnett’s new t-shirt stating “Fashion Hates Brexit”, but what will he do to reassure this valuable industry that it will remain accessible and open to international talent?

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Lady is right to raise the importance of the fashion and textile industry and more generally our creative industries, where the UK is a powerhouse, and one of the things we need to do to keep it that way is make sure it can attract top talent from across the world. There is much in this White Paper

that will help to achieve that, and it is also an area where in some cases in the past we have looked at having special visas for entry, including for exhibitions and visitors, and we will continue to look at such things.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The short-term workers route mentioned in the statement will not address the issue that I and Members across the House have raised about access for non-EEA labour on inshore vessels. I have a constituent, Mr Scott in Lossiemouth, who fears he will have to sell his boat and his business unless the Government address this urgently. What can the Home Secretary do to address this issue for Mr Scott and others in Moray, Scotland and across the UK?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend has perhaps raised two points: one is the future immigration system, where I think—I am happy to speak to him in detail about this afterwards—the short-term route can help address the issue he raises. I also detect a more immediate issue, however, that is not just for post-2021 and later, but is more immediate, because he mentioned non-EEA and I am also happy to discuss that with him, too.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary talks about fairness, but in reality the Home Office displays a combination of hostility and inefficiency. Families are split up because visas have been agreed but not issued, and in my local case a Liverpool doctor who has worked in this country for many years after being trained here is having to go back to her country of origin because of a failure in the Home Office. I am still seeking a meeting with Home Office Ministers on that case. Will the year-long conversation that the Home Secretary spoke about include discussing changing the attitude of the Home Office so people are treated fairly and within the rules?

Sajid Javid: I am pleased that the hon. Lady has raised this important issue of fairness. The Home Office makes millions of immigration decisions, whether on visas or otherwise, each year and we cannot pretend that every single decision is going to be right. Earlier, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) raised the issue of Windrush, which was a problem under successive Governments, and we need to learn the lessons from that, and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) raised a live case from her constituency that the Minister for Immigration will be happy to meet her to discuss.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I welcome the proposal set out by the Home Secretary to have an immigration system that gets the best talent from around the world for our economy and public services. Will he also undertake to cover in this legislation the loophole of descendants from the British Indian Ocean Territory, whose rights have been abused for the best part of half a century?

Sajid Javid: I know that my hon. Friend is passionate about this issue. He has championed it for a while and we have discussed it. It is not specifically addressed in the White Paper in terms of a future immigration system, but he is right to continue to raise the matter, and we are right to continue to work with him and to look at it.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the assurance that those who are already living in the UK will have their rights protected. It is a great pity that the EU was prepared to use those people as a negotiating ploy in the negotiations. Given the cap of £30,000 suggested in the White Paper, what assurances can the Secretary of State give me that areas such as Northern Ireland will have access to labour from outside the United Kingdom if it is required, owing to skills shortages, to keep production going?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for welcoming the scheme for the 3 million-plus EU citizens living here, whether in Northern Ireland or anywhere else in the UK. They are welcome to stay and indeed we need them to stay. I said earlier, and I say again, that whether we have a deal or no deal, that scheme and their rights will be protected. On the specific issue of Northern Ireland and regional shortages, we have in the White Paper committed for the first time to a separate shortage occupation list for Northern Ireland, which I think will make a big difference.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I, too, visited the Crick Institute this morning and I am sure that it will welcome the White Paper, as I do. I particularly welcome the consultation on the minimum salary requirements because, as my right hon. Friend will know, scientists, researchers and particularly technicians, who contribute hugely to our economy, are not always rewarded in the most profitable way. Salary is not a proxy for skills. I know that my right hon. Friend gets that point, but we cannot say it too often.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend has emphasised an important point. The logic of having a salary threshold is strong, but it is also right that we look at cases where that will not quite work. He has given the example of lab technicians, whose salaries can be around £21,000. There are a variety of ways of trying to deal with that in the White Paper and I hope that he will welcome them.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am one of those who has valued free movement, but I welcome what the Home Secretary said today about overseas students. Is he in a position yet to offer any relief to those students—who he knows about—who had their visas cancelled after being accused, often wrongly, by an American firm of having cheated in their English language tests?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. As he has pointed out, the White Paper makes it even easier for students, once they have completed their studies, to stay, to continue to contribute to the UK and to settle in the UK. On the specific issue, which I have discussed with him and other colleagues, we are still looking at this but we are taking it very seriously.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I very much welcome the Secretary of State coming to give us this announcement today. I also welcome the fact that international students will still be allowed to come here to study, but there is no dedicated route for unskilled labour or for those earning below £30,000. How will the Department support employers in Taunton Deane—particularly in agriculture, tourism and the care industry—to get the labour that they need under the new system?

Sajid Javid: There are a couple of things that I can tell my hon. Friend. First, we want to try to get more international students to choose the UK and there are measures in the White Paper to do that. I know that the Department for Education takes this very seriously as well. Secondly, on the need for workers with different skills, especially those who might not be classed as high skills in the White Paper, I believe that the short-term workers route will make a big difference.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): At a quick glance, I can find only two paragraphs, in chapter 6 of the White Paper, on self-employment. The Home Secretary will know how important that is, particularly in the construction sector, for filling gaps involving vital roles such as bricklayers, electricians and carpenters. Will it be possible for the industry or industry bodies to have some sort of umbrella sponsorship scheme to ensure that we can continue to recruit workers to those roles in order to meet the Government's own growth and house building expansion plans?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady has rightly raised this issue because she knows that many of the construction workers who are currently working on house building come under the freedom of movement rules and, once that changes, we will have to find a way to allow such workers still to come in to meet the needs of the economy. She asked specifically about umbrella sponsorship schemes and that is in the White Paper.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I welcome the statement from the Home Secretary. I also welcome this opportunity to set our own immigration policy for the first time in a generation and to ensure that it is fair, compassionate and meets the needs of our economy. However, the needs of our economy will change over time, and from region to region, so will he assure the House that flexibility will be built into our new immigration policy to enable it to respond to the needs of the economy across the whole of the UK, that it will not just be focused on the south-east and that it will meet the needs of places such as Cornwall?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. He rightly says that our needs will change over time and this is an immigration system that will be built for the future. It will have those flexibilities to meet the needs of our economy and our society. I give him one example. When we looked at the short-term workers scheme, we looked at the many needs of the economy, including, in Cornwall, the needs of the hospitality industry and the seasonal nature of much of that demand. So I can happily give him that assurance.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I have the highest immigration caseload in Scotland, and what I see from the Home Office is cruelty, time and time again. Families are being separated, and the relatives of people who have lost babies are not being allowed to come to visit them. A man is working two jobs, as a mortgage adviser and a shelf stacker in Asda, just to meet the minimum income threshold so that his family can come to see him. I have also seen cruelty towards people who are qualified to work in the care industry but not allowed to work by the Home Office and by this Government. Is it not the case that under this policy EU nationals will be treated just as despicably and cruelly as non-EU nationals are at the moment?

Sajid Javid: I do not recognise the picture that the hon. Lady has painted, and the answer is no.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I welcome the statement. Will the Secretary of State explain how his electronic travel authorisation scheme will work in the common travel area, especially where a visitor arrives in Dublin and travels on to the UK from there? Would that visitor need to get authorisation in that situation?

Sajid Javid: This will not apply to Irish citizens and British citizens moving within the common travel area. My hon. Friend will know that the EU is planning to introduce a similar scheme; I think it is called ETIAS—the European travel information and authorisation system. As we develop this, we are looking at ways of working together.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm that a chapter is closing during which millions of Britons have been able to live freely across Europe and to work, start businesses and begin relationships there, in the same way that European citizens have been able to do in this country? I speak as someone whose constituency has one of the highest proportions of EU citizens. The British Government will want to negotiate a comprehensive free trade agreement with Europe, which is our largest and closest trading partner, so does he agree that there will need to be further concessions on migration, or is the White Paper establishing a set of red lines that will also determine our trade policy?

Sajid Javid: In the White Paper, we have set out flexibility for the UK in terms of mobility to strike trade deals around the world. With many countries, including the EU, there is often a need to look at mobility arrangements, especially for the service industries, and what we have set out here is perfectly compatible with the future political framework document that has been set out by the Government. Also, as we look to do trade deals with other countries further afield, this document will provide the flexibility that we need.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Largely unskilled agricultural migration has seen Boston's population change by about a third in the past 10 years, but we have been unable to attract the doctors and professionals we need to cope with increased demand, and the consequences for community cohesion have been genuinely tragic. It led directly to the highest vote to leave the European Union in the referendum. When we get immigration policy wrong, it is a disaster for communities and individuals, so this new policy is long overdue. I ask the Home Secretary to take the year that he has built in to ensure that we get it right, because that is the only way we will undo some of the damage that has been done by the policies of previous Government, of all colours.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, highlighting that when we make immigration policy we must consider not just economic need, but the pace and volume of immigration. He gives an excellent example of a community that has seen dramatic change in a short period, and of the impact on local infrastructure and public services. It is very important to get the balance right.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Many Black Country foundries, which are crucial to the supply chains for civil aviation and the motor industry, are sustained by EU recruits, because they have an ageing workforce and cannot recruit locally. What conversations has the Home Secretary had with the industry on the impact of the short-term visa requirements on the future availability of EU migrants and the potential impact on businesses?

Sajid Javid: I will make two points in answer to that. First, all the EU citizens who are already here, whether they work in those foundries or elsewhere, will be able to stay—and we want them to stay—so there should be no change in the current EU workforce. Secondly, with regard to the high-skilled workers scheme and the short-term workers scheme set out in the White Paper, we have already engaged with business groups, but I have set out today that there will be much more such engagement, with business in every region across the country, before the schemes are finalised, especially in relation to thresholds and cooling-off periods.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitment to giving priority to those workers who have the skills we need. I also welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement today of a year-long programme of engagement across the UK. May I therefore extend an invitation to him, and indeed to my right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister, to visit Banff and Buchan, an area of very low unemployment, to talk to businesses to see for themselves the specific skills that are much needed in the fisheries sector, both for catching offshore and for processing onshore, and that can be sourced not just from the EU, of course, but from across the world, including Africa and east Asia?

Sajid Javid: I am sure that the Immigration Minister and I would both like to visit, although not necessarily at the same time, so we are happy to receive that invitation. My hon. Friend makes an important point that relates to many parts of the UK, but particularly to Scotland—many other colleagues from Scotland have raised it—and it is important to look at that. I think that the system we have set out today will have the flexibility to meet those needs, but I am happy to discuss those with him further.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Immigration, whether from Europe or from right around the world, has made an enormously positive difference to my community and to our country, making us rich in every way imaginable. However, given that the Prime Minister and the Cabinet are evident proof that being highly paid and highly skilled are not the same thing, why do the Government persist with this nonsense of a £30,000 cap to define what constitutes highly skilled? Plenty of people in this country are paid far less than the Home Secretary, and far less than £30,000, and it would be an absolute tragedy to pull up the drawbridge for them, not just denying them opportunity, but denying our country the skills and prosperity we need.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is clearly lobbying for a pay rise for all members of the Cabinet—I will leave that to him, but it is not something the Cabinet is asking for. It is important that the threshold for the highly skilled visa route set out in the White Paper is

[Sajid Javid]

based on evidence and works for each part of the country. The MAC has suggested—I emphasise that this is based on its own independent research—that the threshold should be £30,000, but further work and extensive engagement with businesses, devolved authorities, Members of Parliament and others is required to determine what that should actually be.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) actually wanted a pay cut for members of the Cabinet. I had thought that the Home Secretary was a free marketeer, but what he has given us today is a bureaucrats charter to increase paperwork and red tape around business. The White Paper states, on page 47:

“The MAC has recommended lowering the skills threshold for the new skilled workers...while maintaining the minimum salary threshold of £30,000.”

This is clearly not a skills-based immigration policy, but a money-based immigration policy. Will he therefore explain how on earth he thinks our country plans to deal with its demographic challenge?

Sajid Javid: I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Lady’s assertions. She suggests that somehow this will lead to more bureaucracy and red tape, but having no cap and no resident labour market test for high-skilled workers and more use of e-gates are all examples of where there will be less bureaucracy and less red tape.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): This is just a Faragist blueprint for drawbridge Britain, a grotesque plan simply to keep people out of this country. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to be absolutely straight with the British people that their freedom of movement will come to an end? What we do to the EU, it will do to us, and all the unrestricted rights that we have had, to live, work and love across a community of 27 nations, will be lost to our young people forever. Is that not an absolute tragedy and shame?

Sajid Javid: The people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. That means the end of freedom of movement.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Home Secretary rightly said in his statement that the UK has a proud history of being an open and welcoming country, so it must sadden him, as it saddens me, that that reputation is being consigned to history by his Government. This White Paper is one further policy that will damage that reputation. He also said that this policy will boost our economy, but that seems deeply implausible, given that EU migrants made a net contribution to this country, and a total contribution of almost £5 billion last year. If it is true, he must have worked it out, so can he tell us by exactly how much he think this will boost our economy?

Sajid Javid: I do not accept that analysis. What the White Paper does is ensure that we will remain an open and welcoming country to talent and people, for whatever reason they choose to come to the UK, from around the world. The proof of that is that we are, for example, removing caps, making it easier for students to stay and

work in the UK, and making it easier for people from around the world to visit the UK. That is an example of an open and welcoming country.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): More than 20% of my constituents are EU27 citizens and more than 40% were born outside the UK. I value their contribution to the economic, social and cultural life of Hammersmith, of London and of the UK. I would like to hear the Secretary of State join me in saying that, because the hostile environment fostered by his Government and by the coalition Government has created alienation, fear and distrust for very many migrants.

Sajid Javid: I am very happy to join the hon. Gentleman in welcoming and commending all the EU citizens in his constituency, in my constituency and throughout the United Kingdom. I have said a number of times, and it is self-evident, that they have made a huge contribution to the success of our country not just economically, but in our society and our communities. In many cases they are members of our family. That is why I would like them all to stay.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The proposed salary threshold is £30,000. Average annual pay in Wales is £27,000, compared with £37,000 in London. Wales will be left with a skills crisis that is impossible to remedy unaided. Can the Home Secretary assure Welsh businesses and communities by confirming now that Wales deserves a specific shortage occupation list and by saying when it will come into effect?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of regional differences. The system will take account of that in various ways. One example specific to Wales is a commitment in the White Paper to look at a shortage occupation list for Wales.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Home Secretary owes my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) an apology for the way in which he brushed aside her question. He made no reference to refugees in his statement. I have now had an opportunity to scan the relevant section of the White Paper, and it is peppered with words such as “maintain,” “continue” and “no change.” If my hon. Friend is wrong, will the Home Secretary spell out exactly how this White Paper proposes to improve the way we receive and treat refugees?

Sajid Javid: The White Paper is a result of the referendum result, which means no to freedom of movement.

Paul Blomfield: Answer the question.

Sajid Javid: If the hon. Gentleman gives me a chance, I will answer his question. The vote to leave means that we will have a new immigration system. The Government commissioned work from the Migration Advisory Committee to consider what the system should look like, by removing freedom of movement, and how we will get the skills we need. It is very focused on skills; it is not focused on the issue of refugees and any changes. Nor do we have to wait for any changes that may or may not be made in terms of refugees. For example, there have been a number of changes in recent months and

years on unaccompanied children and other cases, such as the Syrian White Helmets. Such decisions do not have to wait for a new immigration system. We are perfectly capable of making those decisions now under the current system.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary for listening to the representations that I have made on behalf of my party as its home affairs spokesperson, and that my party's leader and parliamentary leader have made, in respect of the income threshold. Just as average pay in Wales is £27,000, in Northern Ireland it is £24,500. The MAC report is wrong to suggest that there should be a one-size-fits-all income threshold. In going to consultation, it sounds as if the Home Secretary agrees with it, but will he give serious consideration, during the consultation and following the outcome of the process, to regional variations that reflect our regional differences?

Sajid Javid: As the hon. Gentleman highlights, it is important that we look at regional differences. One way of trying to accommodate such differences is through a shortage occupation list, and we have committed here today that Northern Ireland will have its own shortage occupation list. As we have referenced in the White Paper, I am also conscious that Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that has a land border with the EU, which causes other issues that also need to be looked at. We will certainly take that into account, too.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Page 8 of the White Paper retains the notion that there should be targets in our immigration system, including an objective number of people who can come, rather than recognising the need to look at skills. I encourage the Home Secretary to resist continuing this pointless exercise in targets and, instead, to look at issues in our public services and our NHS.

We have a nursing shortage of 100,000, and the nursing starting salary is £23,000. Since the Government cancelled the nursing bursary, the number of people training to be nurses in this country has dropped by 13%. When he looks at immigration and at salary levels, will he look at them in the round of our economy and our public services, and not take lessons from Conservative Members and the cutting of our international aid agencies? Will he instead recognise that a country that is spending £1.4 billion on agency fees for nurses within the NHS really needs to rethink how it treats the people who treat us best?

Sajid Javid: I always listen carefully to what hon. Members, businesses, hospitals and others have to say. The hon. Lady mentions nurses, and an example in relation to nurses—and doctors, for that matter—is the change we made earlier this year to the current tier 2 scheme to take doctors and nurses out of the cap altogether. That decision was welcomed by the sector. She may also know that nurses are currently on the shortage occupation list, which shows just how seriously the Government take this issue.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmire (Chris Elmore) asked the Prime Minister directly at Prime Minister's questions if she still stands behind the ludicrous policy of cutting

net migration to the tens of thousands. If the White Paper—admittedly it is a White Paper—is fully implemented in legislation, what conclusions has the Home Office come to on the resulting level of net migration?

Sajid Javid: The commitment of the White Paper and of the system it represents is to bring net migration down to a more sustainable level.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Average earnings in Wales are, in fact, less than £26,500 a year, so does the Home Secretary recognise the damage that his policy will do to the Welsh economy? I ask him please not to tell me about a shortage occupation list, because that list will extend from one end of this Chamber to the other.

Sajid Javid: I believe the system will work for all parts of the UK. I do not recognise the point that it will do damage to the Welsh economy, which would be the wrong conclusion to draw from the system. I had a discussion this morning with the First Minister of Wales in which we went through the White Paper in a bit more detail. Obviously the First Minister needs to look at it more carefully, and I am happy to sit down with him and with hon. Members who represent Wales to discuss it further.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Will the Home Secretary confirm that, in preparing this White Paper, careful cognisance was given to the needs of every part of the United Kingdom? That being so, can he explain exactly what part the rural west of Scotland—a fragile, low-wage economy in an area that desperately needs more people—played in shaping his thinking?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about making sure the White Paper works for all parts of the UK, which is why in preparing it my right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister held roundtables with business, for example, and had other forms of engagement in every part of the UK, including Scotland. I have had extensive engagement with Scottish Conservative Members, who have taken a deep interest in this. *[Interruption.]* I am happy to listen to the hon. Gentleman and others, and together we can make sure that, as we finalise them, the plans set out in the White Paper work for all parts of the UK.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am sure the Home Secretary is fully aware of the recruitment crisis and the huge number of shortages in many of our schools. I am sure he is also fully aware that the starting salary for teachers is only £23,000, so will he look at lowering the £30,000 threshold to ensure that our children have the expert teachers they desperately need?

Sajid Javid: The White Paper makes it clear that we have committed to ensuring that, when it is set, the threshold is right for the needs of all parts of the country, whether it is our schools or otherwise. It is also important we make sure we have an immigration system that also incentivises domestic employers to invest in the skills of local people. Immigration should never be thought of as a substitute for investment in local people.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Home Secretary's boss, the Prime Minister, talks proudly of ending free movement once and for all, in complete denial of the fact that free movement has been one of the biggest sources of opportunity for UK citizens in the past quarter of a century. Let us be in no doubt: this White Paper is not being taken forward in Scotland's name. This statement highlights exactly why we have asked, time and again, for immigration powers to be devolved. Will the Government have a rethink and devolve immigration powers to the Scottish Parliament? We voted to remain, and we want no piece of this whatsoever.

Sajid Javid: Scotland is part of the United Kingdom and we have a single immigration policy for the entire UK.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The majority of my constituency casework is about immigration. People are experiencing so many different levels and different types of delays, and I am not convinced that through this White Paper we will be able to deal with the level of bureaucracy involved in managing the resulting immigration. I am also very concerned about the one-year visas, as well as about the five-year visas, because they will affect the workforce who are here and will affect people's livelihoods in terms of their security and investing in the UK.

Sajid Javid: On bureaucracy and red tape, we have tried to develop an immigration system that takes advantage of the latest technology—it is much more digital. We have taken a much closer look at how other countries that have long had a completely independent immigration system have done that. We have also made a commitment to reduce the overall net burden on all businesses, taken together. By having this approach, we will end up reducing red tape, not increasing it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): As for many Members of this House, the majority of my casework is taken up with immigration matters. I was alarmed that the Secretary of State did not mention anything about the appalling practice of indefinite immigration detention in his statement. That practice is a shameful stain on our country's reputation; the UK is the only country in Europe that does it without limit. It is appalling and it should be ended immediately, without any sort of reservation. We need to stop it. My constituent Duc Nguyen was detained, despite being a trafficking victim, and was moved arbitrarily around the UK to avoid his obtaining proper legal representation and legal aid. It is not right. It is shameful. It is an affront to every sense of justice and mercy in this country. Will the Home Secretary commit to ending the arbitrary, indefinite immigration detention system in this country immediately?

Sajid Javid: We should always be looking to make sure we are doing everything we can to improve how we approach detention in this country. We do not have a policy of indefinite detention; no one can be detained unless there is a reasonable prospect of a removal in a reasonable time. Some 90% of people who are detained are released or removed within four months. One reason we have now commissioned two independent reports on the detention system is to look at ways in which we can

make improvements. For example, one of the recent things I have started is a pilot scheme to look at alternatives to detention for people who otherwise would have been kept at Yarl's Wood.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I think we all know that the £30,000 salary cap fudge is just a political cop-out. The message from the science and research sector around Cambridge could not be clearer: please do not use salary levels as a proxy for skills. The University of Cambridge has warned that extending the non-EEA system would significantly harm the UK's competitiveness. I realise that the Home Secretary is constrained by the intransigence in the Downing Street bunker, but could he at least, as Home Secretary, recognise just how important this issue is to the science and research sector?

Sajid Javid: One reason why Britain is outstanding at science and research is that we welcome talent from across the world, and that will not change with the new immigration system. When it comes to talent employed in our universities—I used the example of lab technicians earlier, because it was one that the MAC used in its report—it is important to recognise that salary does not always determine skill level, and that will be taken into account in the new system. Many students who come to study at our great universities study sciences, engineering and other subjects, where we have a shortage in this country, and we should be making it easier for them to stay and work in the UK if that is what they choose to do. This White Paper does just that.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): First, I wish to say that immigration has been fabulous for Scotland. The Home Secretary has said repeatedly that this White Paper is skills-based. Could he therefore give us a definition of what "high-skilled," "medium-skilled" and "low-skilled" occupations are, possibly with an example to illustrate each?

Sajid Javid: In looking at skills we have been led by the evidence and an objective analysis, and the MAC has set that out. Skill levels have been defined, having looked at the regulated qualifications framework levels of skill, which are well defined already. The MAC has also suggested, rightly, that we take other factors into account, and we have had discussion in the House today about salary thresholds and how we will look at that issue further. There is also a multi-skilled route, so it is not linked to any qualification or salary, and that is the short-term workers scheme.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): People from non-EU countries and their families, including many of my constituents, have borne the brunt of the Home Office's hostile environment, so they were very receptive to the targeted message to them from the leave campaign in the referendum saying that if we left the EU, the UK would free up non-EU immigration. Naturally, many local people bought that message. So was there any truth in that message? Or will there be just as many unreasonable refusals for EU citizens in the future as there have been up to now for non-EU citizens?

Sajid Javid: First, may I gently remind the hon. Lady that the term “hostile environment” in the Home Office was coined by Labour Ministers. It was a Labour Government policy, to the extent that it was ever a policy. I would be interested to see what she had to say about the policy at that time. She has asked me specifically about non-EU migration. What this White Paper does with the new system is achieve a much fairer view of that and a much better balance, levelling the playing field by looking at people’s skills and what they have to offer this country, rather than at their nationality.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I hope this point of order relates directly to the statement from the Home Secretary. Otherwise, it should come after the statement on Yemen.

Rachel Maclean: It relates directly to exchanges in the Chamber from very much earlier. It is a matter of extreme urgency—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I will take those points of order afterwards. The course of action being taken has been made clear, so I ask the hon. Lady to make her point of order after the next statement.

Yemen

2.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Mr Speaker, with permission, I will make a statement on the quest for a political settlement to the war in Yemen.

Last week, the Houthi rebels and the Government of Yemen held their first direct peace talks since 2016. The negotiations in Stockholm reached agreement on a ceasefire in the port city of Hodeidah and a mutual redeployment of forces, monitored by the United Nations. As we look forward to Christmas, the people of Yemen are enduring one of the gravest humanitarian crises in the world. Hunger and disease are ravaging large areas of the country: 420,000 children have been treated for malnutrition; as many as 85,000 have starved to death. Today, 24 million Yemenis, more than 85% of the population, need help. Behind these stark, impersonal numbers lie real people—individual men, women and children—with hopes and aspirations no different from our own. Their ordeal is not the result of natural disaster or misfortune; this is a man-made calamity, imposed by a war that has torn the country apart and reduced its people to penury, hence the imperative need to resolve this conflict as rapidly as possible.

From the beginning, Britain has made every effort to promote a political solution. Last month, I travelled to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which lead the coalition fighting to restore Yemen’s legitimate Government. I later visited Iran, which supports the Houthi rebels. In every capital, I urged my counterparts to use all their influence to help bring their parties to the negotiating table. After my visit to the region, agreement was reached for 50 wounded Houthis to be evacuated from Yemen to Oman, a confidence-building measure intended to pave the way for peace talks. On 19 November, I instructed our mission at the United Nations to circulate a draft resolution to the Security Council, reinforcing the need for a political settlement and demanding the unhindered flow of food and medicine throughout Yemen.

On 6 December, the peace talks began in Stockholm, mediated by Martin Griffiths, the UN special envoy. Last Wednesday, I went to Stockholm, and the following day I met the leaders of both delegations. I was the first British Minister to meet representatives of the Houthis. I urged the parties to seize the opportunity to reach agreements that would ease the suffering of the Yemeni people and move closer to the goal of ending the war. Last Thursday, the talks concluded with an agreement for the parties to meet again in January and to build trust by releasing thousands of prisoners.

Members will note the importance of the agreement on a ceasefire and redeployment in Hodeidah. The port is a lifeline for Yemen and the channel for at least 70% of the country’s food imports. The ceasefire in Hodeidah port and city came into effect at midnight yesterday, and the UN special envoy has reported that it seems to be working. If the ceasefire continues to hold and the UN succeeds in increasing the volume of traffic through the port, that should reduce the level of suffering. I have urged all parties to stick to the terms agreed last week in Stockholm so that we can find a lasting political solution to this devastating conflict.

[Mr Jeremy Hunt]

After the talks, I spoke about the next steps to the UN Secretary-General António Guterres and the Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Earlier, I discussed the situation with Secretary Pompeo of the United States. Based on those consultations and the success of the peace talks, I have instructed our mission in New York to resume work on a draft resolution with our Security Council partners, with a view to adopting it later this week. We will ask the Security Council to vote on the draft within the next 48 hours. The UK text aims to build on the momentum generated in Stockholm by endorsing the agreements reached between the parties, authorising the UN to monitor their implementation and setting out urgent steps to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. Our aim is to mobilise the collective weight of the UN behind the progress that that been made.

I am grateful to Martin Griffiths for his dogged efforts, which are nothing short of heroic. I acknowledge the seriousness of purpose of those in the delegations from both sides whom I met in Stockholm last week. I offer my thanks to the British diplomats, both in the region and at the Foreign Office in London, who have worked assiduously behind the scenes to bring the parties together. Britain has been able to play this role because of our network of friendships—including our partnership with Saudi Arabia and the UAE—and because we are a country that will always step up to its responsibilities.

Although the House can draw encouragement from recent events, I do not wish to give false hope. The positive steps that we have seen could easily be reversed. The ceasefire is highly fragile. Many complex and difficult problems have yet to be addressed, let alone resolved. The people of Yemen still carry an immense burden of suffering, and although we can see some light at the end of the tunnel, we should be in no doubt that Yemen is still very much in the tunnel. For as long as necessary, this country will continue to use all the diplomatic and humanitarian tools at our command to help to settle this terrible conflict. Our values demand no less. I commend this statement to the House.

2.53 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary, not just for advance sight of his statement but for the attention he has devoted to the Yemen cause since he came to office. Many of us have spent countless hours in this House over the past three years debating how to end this dreadful conflict and the appalling suffering of the Yemeni people. We all appreciate the time, effort and focus that the Foreign Secretary has brought to addressing this conflict over the past five months, alongside the Minister for the Middle East. We thank them for that. I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute not only to Martin Griffiths but to Mark Lowcock for the excellent work that they have done, in incredibly difficult circumstances, in trying to forge a path to peace and a path to the end of this humanitarian crisis. They are both living proof of the old truth that our British diplomats do their job not just because it is a career but because it is a vocation. We owe them a great debt for that service.

Over the past three years, there have been precious few moments of hope in relation to Yemen. This is indeed a moment of hope, and one that we must seize, so I want to use the time I have today to ask the Foreign Secretary about the next steps in this process. First, I greatly welcome his confirmation that a resolution is to be tabled this week at the UN Security Council, to underpin this ceasefire and ensure that all necessary steps are taken to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. Will he give us his assessment, based on his talks, of whether the United States stands ready to support the resolution this time around? Will he also address the crucial issue of what mechanisms there will be to monitor compliance by all sides with the terms of the resolution? What penalties or sanctions are proposed for any breach of those terms?

Secondly, I think that we all warmly welcome the appointment of General Cammaert to oversee the logistics and security of the operation in Hodeidah. Someone of his experience and toughness is ideally suited to what we all recognise will be an incredibly difficult task. Will the Foreign Secretary give us more details on how the security operation on the ground will be staffed? What is the thinking behind the decision that it should not be an armed blue-helmets operation? Will that decision be kept under review should General Cammaert decide that that is what is required once he is on the ground?

Thirdly, we have spoken previously about the fact that the ceasefire agreement will apply initially only to Hodeidah. We all understand that that is the most urgent priority in tackling the humanitarian crisis, but will the Foreign Secretary tell us what the proposed next steps are in brokering a wider ceasefire in other areas of the conflict, including Taiz, and, indeed, in brokering a wider political settlement for the whole country, including southern Yemen?

Fourthly, this is another issue that we have discussed previously, but I am sure that we all believe it is an important principle. In Yemen, as in Syria, while the immediate priority is to foster the hope of peace and get humanitarian aid to those in desperate need, we must also ensure that there is proper accountability for all alleged breaches of international humanitarian law committed by both sides in the conflict. That can happen only when we have a comprehensive, independent, UN-led investigation into all those alleged crimes. Will the Foreign Secretary tell us whether such an investigation is proposed in the UN resolution to be tabled this week? If not, what are the proposed next steps on that front?

Finally, there is another important principle that it would be easy to sweep under the carpet at this time, when we are keen to keep Saudi Arabia on board with the ceasefire and get its support for the proposed UN resolution. However, I hope the Foreign Secretary will agree that it would be manifestly wrong if Saudi Arabia were able to trade its compliance with ending the conflict in Yemen for the world turning a blind eye to the question of who was responsible for ordering the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Tomorrow, it will be 80 days since he was murdered. In Washington, the CIA has given evidence to Senators that led those Senators to conclude overwhelmingly that Crown Prince bin Salman ordered the murder of Mr Khashoggi, yet in this Parliament we are still waiting for any official conclusion from the Foreign Office or the security services on who was responsible. Will the Foreign Secretary make it clear

today that the issues of peace in Yemen and accountability for the murder of Mr Khashoggi are entirely separate? Will he tell us when he will present his conclusions on the latter?

Mr Hunt: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for the constructive tone of her comments and for crediting Mark Lowcock and his team at the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for the very important role that they are playing at the moment. Indeed, it is important to say that the draft text of the Security Council resolution that the UK is putting together puts as much emphasis on the humanitarian aspects of this terrible conflict as it does on the peace talks in Stockholm, very much because of Mark Lowcock's specific and important requests.

Let me go through the points that the right hon. Lady makes in order. First, I am confident that we have US co-operation in the process of tabling the Security Council resolution. We have had extensive discussions with the US, as well as with all the other sides in this terrible war. I am speaking to Secretary Pompeo later this afternoon, and this will be one of the things that we discuss in detail.

The right hon. Lady asks about the mechanism to monitor compliance. She is absolutely right that General Cammaert and his team of monitors will be essential. They are due to arrive in Hodeidah on Saturday. Their monitoring of what is going on is only made possible by having a UN Security Council resolution, which is why people have come together to make the passing of the resolution possible.

The draft resolution will require weekly report backs by the Secretary-General to the Security Council based on General Cammaert's evidence as to whether we have compliance with what was agreed in Stockholm. The right honourable Lady is right that that is extremely important. She is also right to say that it is not just Hodeidah. The draft statement talks about the other ports—Saleef and Ras Isa—that are extremely important, but, of course, what we actually need is peace in the whole country. Hodeidah is strategically the most important place to start with, because if we can open up the road between Hodeidah and the capital Sana'a, then we can start to get humanitarian supplies in. The Stockholm talks gave a three-week period, starting from midnight last night, by when that road, the port and the city of Hodeidah have to be cleared of all combatants, and that is what we are holding our breath for.

On accountability, I have the draft wording of the resolution here. First, it underlines the obligation on all parties to act in accordance, at all times, with principles of international humanitarian law. It also underlines the need for transparent, credible and timely investigations into alleged violations of international humanitarian law and for those found responsible to be held to account.

The right hon. Lady also raised the issue of Khashoggi. She is absolutely right that these are separate issues and that they cannot be linked, and I do give her that reassurance. As far as the UK Government are concerned, the issue of Khashoggi is not closed. We do not think that all the facts have been established and we have not seen proper conclusions from the Turkish investigation as to what actually happened. As soon as we have those conclusions, we will share them with the House.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is a real relief in the terrible catastrophe that is the Yemen today to strongly support the actions taken by the Foreign Secretary in going to Stockholm, Tehran and Riyadh and in trying to win the confidence of both sides. May I also thank him for his absolutely accurate remarks about Sir Mark Lowcock, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, who was my permanent secretary, and about the superb work that has been done by Martin Griffiths? There are, of course, 10 million Yemenis on the brink of starvation this Christmas. I urge him to ensure that the new UN resolution is genuinely even-handed and condemns violence from all sides, whether Houthi missiles fired at Riyadh or Saudi bombing of built-up areas. If it is not even-handed, there is a grave danger that it will prejudice the next round of negotiations in January.

Mr Hunt: May I thank my right hon. Friend for his long-standing interest in what has been happening in Yemen? He is one of the few Members of this House who has actually met the Houthi leadership and he has enormous experience. I thank him for continuing to raise this issue even when it was not high up everyone else's agenda. He is absolutely right about the importance of this UN resolution being balanced. It does indeed refer to the issue of Iranian missiles being fired into Saudi Arabia from Yemen. However, the way that we will be able to unite all sides behind this resolution is to focus on what was agreed at Stockholm and also on the humanitarian needs of the people of Yemen. We should not—if I can put it this way—go into too much detail about the causes of the conflict, which inevitably become more controversial. What we are trying to do at this stage is to build up the trust on both sides so that the fighting stops.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I, too, wish to put on record our thanks to him and to his officials for their ongoing work. I know that this a crucial few weeks coming up. I particularly wish to put on record our thanks to Martin Griffiths and Mark Lowcock for their work, which underscores the importance of multilateral agencies such as the United Nations.

I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for his tone, which he has used in previous statements, about the recognition of the acute humanitarian disaster that has unfolded. We must seize the opportunity for peace. Will he tell the House what steps he is taking to ensure that aid reaches those who are most in need and who are worst affected, because that will be important in these coming weeks.

Furthermore, peacebuilding requires long-term investment—I know that he and his officials recognise that—and we know that from conflicts elsewhere. We continue to be concerned that arms sales to combatants in this conflict far outstrip aid. I am also concerned that we often hear from the Foreign Secretary—I hope that he takes this criticism in the tone in which it is meant—that arms sales means influence, but if we look at some of the key influencers elsewhere, they have stopped arms sales. I am talking about Canada, Germany and, more recently, Spain. Will he tell us, as we go into these crucial few weeks, why the UK is different? Will he reassess that approach to arms sales, as the UK is

[Stephen Gethins]

increasingly isolated in this regard? May I finally welcome the wording? The question of accountability is incredibly important, and that wording is good progress. I also welcome his remarks about Khashoggi, but I would like to hear his reflections on the US Senate findings and his reassurances, again, that he will make a full statement to the House when those findings are clear.

Mr Hunt: Let me take those issues. First, on the humanitarian side, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East met the International Committee of the Red Cross yesterday to make sure that we are fully briefed. The hon. Gentleman will know that we are the second largest bilateral donor—I think we gave £170 million in the past year alone to help the conflict in Yemen—so we treat the issue very seriously. In terms of what specifically we are doing, the main issue is opening up the road between Hodeidah and the capital Sana'a. That is why a major focus of these talks has been to get that corridor opened. That is very, very challenging, but we did succeed in that. We did not succeed in getting the airport in Sana'a opened, which was a disappointment, because we could not get agreement on which flights would be allowed to go from that airport, but that is something that we hope to do.

There is something that I did not mention in response to the shadow Foreign Secretary, but that is relevant to the hon. Gentleman's question. The next step is to try to get the parties back round the table for another round of peace talks at the end of January. That will be to discuss the framework for a political settlement. The idea is that this is the first step that builds up confidence between both sides and allows the fighting to stop, and then we can move towards the political settlement.

On the arms embargos, we have a process that was set up by the previous Labour Government in 2000, which I think we have to follow. It is one of the strictest processes in the world and it means that we independently look at whether there is a risk of a violation of international humanitarian law. To reassure the hon. Gentleman, the draft wording of the UN Security Council resolution does emphasise the legally binding obligation on all member states to comply with the arms embargo imposed by resolution 2216, and, as I mentioned before, the obligation on all parties to act at all times in accordance with international humanitarian law.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I pay tribute to the Foreign Office Ministers assembled here today for the amount of work that they have put in? I am talking about not just the Secretary of State himself and the Minister for the Middle East, but the Minister for Europe and the Americas who has done an awful lot of diplomacy here with our allies. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) whose attention to detail in the Yemen matter has been second to none. May I also, unusually, pay tribute to the shadow Foreign Secretary who, again, has conducted herself with dignity and who has been extremely rigorous in her questioning and helpful in her argument? What we are dealing with here is an horrific humanitarian disaster that we have seen emerge over past years. Am I right in saying that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has done an

awful lot of work in getting to the peace talks, but that the next stage is what we are looking at? Yes, of course, there is the monitoring, but then there is also the confidence building, and that will come by the delivery of aid, by the visible progress on the ground and by the actual success that comes to both parties from the achievement of peace. Can my right hon. Friend perhaps say a little bit about that?

Mr Hunt: In terms of visible, confidence-building measures on the ground, one of the most important things is to get money into the Yemen economy through the Central Bank of Yemen in order to strengthen its functioning, and to ensure that pensions and civil servants' salaries are paid. That will bring spending power into the economy and is covered in the draft UN resolution. When it comes to the next steps, the basic issue is that the Houthis, who are around 15% of the population, recognise that they can only have a junior part in a Government of national unity, which has to be the next step, but they need to have confidence that they will be secure in being able to play that part. That is why it is going to be important to build up confidence over the next six weeks. They accept the principle, but they have to be confident that it will be delivered. Of course, given what has happened, there is a huge amount of mistrust.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement and the progress that has been made with the Stockholm talks. I also echo his praise for both Martin Griffiths and Mark Lowcock.

On ceasefire monitoring, the special envoy explicitly requested a robust UN regime, answerable to the UN Security Council. Can the Foreign Secretary assure the House that that is what is provided in the current text? On confidence building, one of the issues that would really secure greater confidence would be agreement on the reopening of Sana'a airport. Is that being considered in the next stage?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman and his Select Committee on International Development for their sustained interest in Yemen; I also thank him for his personal commitment to making progress.

The monitoring mechanism is UN-authorised and will be reporting back to the UN. It is led by a Dutch general and the UN Secretary-General will be requested to report back weekly, so absolutely yes to that question. I raised the question of the airport with both delegations. We were hoping that we could get agreement to reopen Sana'a airport. There are essentially two international flights—I think to Egypt and Jordan—but the Government of Yemen wanted to insist that the international flights first went to Aden, which they control. The Houthis were reluctant to do that, so we were not able to reach an agreement, but it is very much the next step.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Allow me to concentrate on the corridor between Hodeidah and Sana'a, which will be 140 miles long, through very rough country. Whichever peacekeeping or monitoring force goes in has to be of the highest quality because, speaking from my own experience, that is one heck of a distance to monitor. And then, beyond Sana'a—or direct from the port—there will have to be corridors out

to get aid, because this aid will not succeed unless the people who are hungry put it in their mouths. That is the crucial thing that we have got to achieve.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and his own experience of peacekeeping in Bosnia informs his questions, as the whole House will have seen. We do have the commitment from both sides to clear that road of combatants, but we will not succeed unless there is enough trust between both sides actually to sustain it. We are taking this one step at a time. I agree with my hon. Friend that there is a long way ahead to make this happen, but—to reassure him—the UN will be monitoring what happens very closely, and anyone who breaks this agreement will face the full wrath of the UN and the members of the Security Council.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The fact that the Foreign Secretary has been able to report tentative progress to the House today after so much suffering and bloodshed is a reminder of the importance of seizing the moment and of courageous political leadership. I join all the other Members who have expressed their thanks to him, Martin Griffiths, Mark Lowcock and lots of other people who have worked very hard to bring this moment about. He said that Patrick Cammaert and his team may arrive on Saturday. Is it his understanding that the redeployment committee that he is responsible for chairing will have representation from the two warring parties—that they will turn up? On the peace process, it has been reported that the Government of Yemen were unwilling to sign an outline peace plan in Stockholm because they thought it gave too much to the Houthis and not enough to them. Can he confirm whether that is the case, and what does he think now needs to happen in order to win their confidence so that a peace plan can indeed make progress?

Mr Hunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his long-standing interest in this issue. On the second of those two questions, I will find out precisely what I know about it, but I do not think it was the objective to secure the framework in Stockholm; I think that was always thought to be something that would happen in January, at the second stage. On his first question, I will write to him with some details, if I may.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his contribution, as well as that of Martin Griffiths and Foreign Office officials, to the Stockholm ceasefire agreement, which gives a chance for peace and humanitarian relief in Yemen and is perhaps also a boost to multilateral negotiations in general. But does my right hon. Friend agree that for a ceasefire to be permanent, both sides and their backers, despite mistrust, will have to agree that there is no real victory from any further military action, only more human misery?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As a former diplomat, he will know that what has bedevilled this conflict has been the belief on both sides, which I think persisted even when I started as Foreign Secretary just five months ago, that a military victory was possible. The people who have changed the most in this respect—to their credit—are the Saudis, who I think do now genuinely wish to find, and recognise the importance of, a political settlement. We need to continue the pressure on both sides to make sure that this is actually what happens.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary said—I am sure, with sincerity—that, “behind these stark, impersonal numbers lie real people”. He will know, because I have raised this matter in correspondence, in meetings with Ministers and on the Floor of this House, about the case of my constituent Jackie Morgan’s daughter, Safia, who was kidnapped from Cardiff in 1986, brought up in Yemen and has children who are also British citizens. She wants to leave Yemen and travel back to the UK, but she needs to get a British passport. She now apparently has the funds to travel to Cairo to apply for that passport. Will the Foreign Secretary please make sure that his officials and Ministers work with the Home Office to give special attention to this case? These are British citizens and they deserve special attention, given the tragic history of the case.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for championing this very sad case; we know about it extremely well, thanks to the representations that he has made. We are in contact with the Home Office about this matter. Until now, our difficulty has been that we have not had consular representation in Yemen. Obviously, that is something that we hope will change, but we will do everything we can to support his constituent and their family in the way that he wants.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the progress he has made thus far, but clearly this is a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, so could he elaborate on the attitude of both those countries towards this fragile peace negotiation, and on what further steps he can take to encourage them to promote peace, rather than war?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right that this is the biggest geostrategic risk from the conflict in Yemen, but the sense I had when I went to both Riyadh and Tehran is that neither side wants to perpetuate it and both sides would like to see it concluded, if for no other reason than that the appalling humanitarian consequences of this conflict have become all too apparent. I think they feel a sense of responsibility for what is happening to fellow Muslims and want to do something about it.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We are approaching Christmas and I understand that one of the three wise men in the Bible story was the King of Sheba, which is modern Yemen. Christmas is very much a peace story, so it is very significant that we are talking about how we can bring peace to a country that is very disturbed. I thank the Foreign Secretary for his efforts, but I want to ask again, at which point will the Government consider suspending arms trade with Saudi Arabia? The question has been asked before, but I did not really understand exactly what the Government are doing.

Mr Hunt: Let me repeat it, then. We have one of the strictest arms control regimes in the world. We also have an independently run process that assesses the risk of a breach of international humanitarian law, and we follow that process.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given the dreadful news that we have heard from Yemen over the past few years, I very much welcome the news of the ceasefire around

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Hodeidah that will allow humanitarian aid to flow through. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that he has had discussions with his colleagues in the Department for International Development about what role Britain will play in ensuring that there is long-term support to rebuild this country?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely confirm that we have extensive discussions with my right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary. Indeed, we raised the issue of Yemen yesterday at the National Security Council, and we are both in constant contact.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): It is a huge relief that the ceasefire has been implemented, and I endorse all the words of thanks that have gone before. However, does the Foreign Secretary genuinely believe that Iran has changed its view, given that this regime has deliberately increased the suffering and starvation of the Yemeni people that it has purported to be supporting? Does he believe that a peace deal that created an Iran-backed regime in Yemen could be catastrophic to peace in the middle east and must be ruled out at all costs?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There will never be peace unless it guarantees Saudi Arabia, one of Yemen's neighbours, its territorial integrity. Saudi Arabia has had Iranian missiles fired into its capital from Yemen, which is a huge concern to it. Do I genuinely believe that the Iranians have changed? I think the answer is that we would not have got the agreement we got in Stockholm without the support of both Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. So I do think there has been a change, but there is still a long way to go.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): All those in the Chamber will welcome the peace talks recently held in Stockholm and the progress that was indeed made there. Is my right hon. Friend confident that this will prove to be a stepping stone to a desperately needed permanent ceasefire in Yemen?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right that that is the holy grail. If we can get a proper, full, permanent ceasefire for the whole country, then everyone will have a huge sigh of relief. We are taking small steps towards that with the ceasefire in Hodeidah, but the intention is that that builds trust between the parties that allows for the full ceasefire that he rightly calls for.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): First, I thank the Secretary of State for the work that he has done so far: it has been very heartening to see the progress that has been made. Kristine Beckerle from Human Rights Watch has pointed to the significance of prisoner exchange in the agreement, especially as this concerns political prisoners, activists, journalists, people of minority faiths such as the Baha'i, and refugees—men, boys and even women arbitrarily detained through the conflict. What assurances can he give on this, and what support will he give to the International Committee of the Red Cross to ensure that this is closely monitored so that all those arbitrarily or deliberately detained will see freedom, and see it soon?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the issue of prisoner exchanges, because that is pretty much the very first way that we can build trust between both sides. That is what happened at Stockholm—the agreement does that. The UN resolution will be making sure that all the important parts of the Stockholm agreement are properly, independently monitored by the United Nations.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The international condemnation of the Saudi regime is almost unanimous. Many prominent EU member states, most recently Germany and Spain, along with Canada and now the US this week, have taken steps to either condemn the actions of the Saudi regime or suspend arms sales. If the UK wants to recover any semblance of moral leadership, should it not join the US Senate in condemning the regime's illegal conduct and immediately suspend arms sales?

Mr Hunt: I gently point out to the hon. Gentleman that there is no point in setting up an independent process that is one of the strictest in the world if we then do not go on to follow it, and that is what we are doing.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Eighteen thousand children, some as young as 10, have been used as soldiers in this horrific war. They have been forced to torture and to kill with the promise of money for their families, largely by the Houthi rebels. Officially this has been denied, but Associated Press has interviewed no fewer than 18 child soldiers who have been exploited. When the Foreign Secretary met the Houthis, did he raise this matter? What discussions has he had with, and what assurances has he sought from, the UN envoy to Yemen to seek to ensure that the protection of all children is paramount and not an afterthought?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely reassure the hon. Lady that the protection of children, and indeed everyone vulnerable, is on all our minds, but certainly on the minds of the people who are trying to get the two sides together, because it is the escalating humanitarian crisis that has been a real engine for the talks. In terms of when we raise the issue of terrible behaviour with participants on all sides, there is a time and a place to do that, and at Stockholm we were trying to bring everyone together. So while we are setting up accountability mechanisms, we also have to recognise that the primary objective now is to get the fighting to stop.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The use of child soldiers and the deliberate targeting of civilians are just two examples of the types of atrocities we have seen in this terrible war. While I very much appreciate the wording of the draft resolution on those responsible being held to account, will the Foreign Secretary set out how he is going to try to ensure, in practical terms, that investigation of these terrible human rights breaches is entirely independent?

Mr Hunt: We want it to be independent. The word used in the UN resolution is "credible". Unless we have a credible investigation into these atrocities, we will not get closure on the issue, and there will not be justice or confidence.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): May I join Members who have praised the work of our diplomats and Ministers, and those from other countries, who have made this welcome but limited step possible? The Foreign Secretary referred to the political framework that he hopes will be discussed in January. He also mentioned, but did not go into detail on, the idea of a Government of national unity. Is it not a fact that the complexities of Yemen mean that there are not just two sides? Is any thought going into how to engage people in the south and other parts of Yemen in this process, because otherwise a Government of national unity will not work?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman has a lot of experience of this from his time on the Foreign Affairs Committee. He is absolutely right. A Government of national unity has to cover the whole country. It has to give confidence to the Houthis that despite being a minority, their rights are going to be respected, but it also has to give confidence to all minorities, so I agree with him.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Given accusations that gratuitous war crimes have been perpetrated by both Saudi Arabia and Iran, as the key regional proxies in this conflict, and their failure to honestly and openly investigate those accusations, why will the Secretary of State not support an independent UN-backed inquiry into allegations of war crimes perpetrated by all sides in the Yemen conflict? Why is that not included in the United Nations draft resolution?

Mr Hunt: Because the draft resolution has to have the consensus of both sides. I support fully independent investigations into everything that has happened. That is right, and it must happen, but we have to go step by step. At the moment, getting agreement to a ceasefire—the first ceasefire that we have had in the entire history of this terrible conflict—is a huge first step, and we would not want to compromise that.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his thoughtful and measured approach. Has he or the Minister for the Middle East, whose work I also commend, had any discussions with the United Nations high commissioner for refugees about possible consequences for numbers of refugees or internally displaced people and how we will respond?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East says he spoke to Filippo Grandi a couple of weeks ago about that issue.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): May I join other Members in commending the Foreign Secretary and his ministerial team for making this progress—albeit fragile—with regard to Yemen? It is amazing what a Foreign Secretary can achieve in office, regardless of political colour, when the office holder takes the job seriously. What initial reactions has he had from other Security Council members to the draft resolution? What concerns, if any, have they raised? How are Martin Griffiths and his team, along with the Foreign Office team, addressing those concerns?

Mr Hunt: As the hon. Gentleman will know from his work on the Foreign Affairs Committee, there is a range of views on the Security Council. Broadly speaking,

there is a combination of people who are naturally sympathetic to one side or the other and people who think that the most important thing now is to move forward with humanitarian relief, and it is about bringing those people together.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I think every Member of the House is delighted with these first steps in the peace process in Yemen to alleviate this tragic humanitarian crisis, which has gone on for too long. Nothing sums up this crisis more than at the weekend, when a sister and brother aged six and four were shot by Houthi snipers for trying to play out in the street. It is a terrible situation. Will the Foreign Secretary also raise the 1 million landmines left by the Houthis, which is a terrible legacy that will need clearing up in these peace talks? Will his final resolution to the UN include free and fair elections?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman's point about landmines is very important. The UK has a lot of experience and fantastic NGOs that work in that area, and I am sure we would want to make them available to service the people of Yemen. The draft resolution does not talk about the future political framework, important though that is. That is really a stage for the next set of talks, which we hope will happen in January.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I want to add my warm words about this agreement, which is a positive step forward. I am pleased that the Foreign Secretary mentioned not only Hodeidah but Ras Isa, because without opening up that fuel terminal, we will be unable to get food to the rest of the country. However, at Foreign Office questions, Ministers told us that they could not tell the House whether UK-manufactured weapons or planes were involved in the deaths of civilians and possible war crimes. The head of the independent office that he mentioned recommended, in his professional judgment, that arms sales should be suspended, but Ministers overturned that judgment. Will the Foreign Secretary now look again at suspending arms sales?

Mr Hunt: I do not know where the hon. Gentleman gets that information from, but it is not correct.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I would like to thank the Secretary of State and his team for the work they have been doing on this grave issue of the war in Yemen. It has been a war on children and the most vulnerable. Every 10 minutes, a child dies in Yemen. My local churches are desperate to do all they can, and I know that the Minister for the Middle East will be visiting the DFID office in my constituency tomorrow. What more can we do as MPs, communities and constituents to avert the humanitarian disaster that has encompassed Yemen?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The answer is that we can all ensure that our constituents know about the issues in Yemen and encourage people to support the charities and NGOs that are funding the humanitarian work there.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his sterling endeavours, leadership and constructive role on visits to the area over the last few months; it has been much appreciated. Given reports

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that 67% of the Yemen population need urgent action to save lives and livelihoods, 20 million Yemenis are vulnerable to death and a quarter of a million are on the brink of starvation, can he outline the type of aid that has gone from here to there in the last three months and what plans there are to help with equipment and support, to allow people to survive and to work safely?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. With the £170 million that we gave in the last year alone, we are supporting food, water, shelter and other vital relief for people in this desperate situation.

Speaker's Statement

3.34 pm

Mr Speaker: As I promised the House, I have looked at the television footage of the Leader of the Opposition reacting to the Prime Minister, allegedly saying “stupid woman” to those seated next to him. Having heard the allegation against the Leader of the Opposition and having watched the footage, it is easy to see why the Leader of the Opposition’s words might be construed as “stupid woman”. That was also the opinion of lipspeakers—and I emphasise, lipspeakers rather than lipreaders—whose advice was sought and obtained at short notice.

As may be known to Members of the House—it is important in terms of establishing the context—but may not be known to others watching or listening to our proceedings, the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition was seated at the time and not addressing the House, so whatever he said was not, and is not, audible on the House’s audio-visual record. As I have told the House, I neither saw the incident nor heard anything. It was, for the same reasons, neither heard nor seen by the Clerks or by my private secretary, nor was there any immediate reaction in the House.

I believe that the allegation made by a number of hon. and right hon. Members was based upon the visual evidence from Parliament TV. I also have to rely purely on visual evidence. I am not a lipreader, or indeed, a lipspeaker. Nobody can be 100% certain. That includes professional lipreaders, but I will naturally take, and would be expected to take, the word of any right hon. or hon. Member. It is reasonable to expect the House to do the same. I therefore invite the right hon. Gentleman, who has at my request returned to the House for this purpose, to make his explanation to the House, which again, I expect to be heard without interruption.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you for your invitation to come to make a short point to the House, which I am very happy to do, and I have come immediately to do that. During Prime Minister’s Question Time today, I referred to those who I believe were seeking to turn a debate about the national crisis facing our country into a pantomime as “stupid people”. I did not use the words “stupid woman” about the Prime Minister or anyone else and am completely opposed to the use of sexist or misogynist language in absolutely any form at all. I am happy to place that on the record at your request this afternoon. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think that the country and this House will have drawn their own conclusions—[*Interruption.*] I deeply regret that the right hon. Gentleman has not seen fit to apologise to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for what she has said, which requires no comment from the Chair.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. With your guidance, how may I make this orderly? Read my lips: I do not believe him. What can we do to further verify this evidence? What can we do to further ask experts to review this evidence and get the apology from the right hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister deserves?

Mr Speaker: It is not open to a Member to impugn the integrity of another Member. That is—*[Interruption.]* Order, please. That is a violation of the established—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Lady will permit me. She has raised a point of order, perfectly reasonably, and I am responding to her. It is not in order to impute dishonour to another Member. That is a very long established convention of this House, so it is not orderly to accuse another Member of dishonesty.

When the hon. Lady inquires what further may be done, the answer to her is that people can seek to solicit opinions on this matter, including of a professional character. I have offered, at short notice, as I thought was my duty, the fruits of the professional advice that I have received and I have shared that very openly with the House. It is not for the Chair to pronounce judgment—guilty or innocent—upon a Member. It is well established that a Member is to be taken at his or her word. If the matter is to be further discussed, debated or commented on, that is to be expected, but it is not a matter of order for the Chair now. That is as full and, I hope the hon. Lady will agree, as courteous a response as I could possibly be expected to provide.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have heard the words “stupid woman” being used in this Chamber about myself, and I am afraid to say I have heard it from yourself in the Speaker's Chair. So please can we have an apology, draw a line under this and move on?

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I understood that she had made this observation outside the House. What I want to say to the hon. Lady, whom I always treat with great respect in this Chamber, is the following. The hon. Lady has at no time previously—that is to say, prior to today—made that allegation against me. The hon. Lady has not come to me and said that, and to my knowledge—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Lady will do me the courtesy of allowing me to respond to her point of order, as she has raised it. To my knowledge, I am not in receipt of a letter alleging that. If there is such an allegation, I refute it 100%.

I have received a letter from the hon. Lady, as she knows, within I think the last 24 hours, on an unrelated matter—specifically to do with proxy voting and baby leave—and I believe I am right in saying—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the hon. Lady will do me the courtesy of allowing me to respond. I believe I am right in saying that she wrote to me on that matter, at least in part, in her capacity as chair of the all-party group on women in Parliament. To that letter, she will of course receive a response.

That contention has not previously been made, but if it is now made, I say with absolute certainty, it is not correct. I have not said that to or about the hon. Lady. That is my response to the hon. Lady.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to say it is nice to be back. I just wonder what conclusion members of the public will draw from the Chamber being used in this way. My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has made his point. I have heard from my constituency office today that residents in my constituency have had to have present parcels delivered to them because they cannot afford to buy their children presents and they have not got the money for food. The Chamber being used in this way is absolutely pathetic.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has made her own point in her own way. It is on the record, and I thank her for taking part in these proceedings.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I will come to other Members—preferably to people who have not already raised points of order. I call Helen Whately.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think, actually, it is important what language is used in this Chamber. In this centenary year, a large number of us on both sides of the House have made huge efforts to encourage more women to stand for Parliament. Many of them have been successful: I believe women are coming forward. It is a great shame that we seem to be nearing the end of the year on such a sour note. May I urge you, Mr Speaker, to do more to make sure that the tone of this Chamber is better next year—not just to draw a line under this, but to make sure that next year is better on these points?

Mr Speaker: May I say to the hon. Lady, I think that is an entirely reasonable point of order. I am happy to do my bit, and everybody else should do their bit as well. I have the highest regard for the hon. Lady, whose commitment on these issues is well known to me. I hope she and others will take it in the right spirit if I say that throughout my nine and a half years in the Chair to date, I have devoted myself to the cause of trying to open up this place. I have sought to do everything I can to promote a progressive approach in the Chamber, in the calling of Members, in the functions that I host in Speaker's House, and in the approach to facilities on the estate, which did not previously exist. That is all part of the record. It is manifest, it is observable and it is incontrovertible. Can we all do better? We can. Should we? We should. Will we? I hope that we will. So I am agreeing with the hon. Lady, and I am sure that that will please her.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think everybody in the House would know of the well respected and much admired deaf musician, Dame Evelyn Glennie, the world-famous percussionist. On live television this afternoon, she was shown by the presenter of that television programme the clip of the Leader of the Opposition and was asked what he had said, and she said, “He said, ‘Stupid woman.’” Is there any way I can put it on the record that, with that tone of apology from the right hon. Gentleman, it would have been better if he hadn't bothered?

Mr Speaker: I do not honestly think, and I say this in all courtesy to the hon. Gentleman, whom I have known for three decades, that he is really very interested in anything I have to say in response to him.

Simon Hoare: I am.

Mr Speaker: No, and I am not even complaining. I am not criticising the hon. Gentleman, and I am grateful for his good humour. The hon. Gentleman wanted to make his own point and he has made it. I stand by what I previously said. He has made an important point, but it is not a contradiction of what I have said about the impossibility of certainty, nor is it inconsistent with the spontaneous interpretation which I myself offered. But I repeat: it was my interpretation—I am not a lipreader, I am not a lipspeaker, and it is not for me to cast judgment in this matter. Fair-minded people, who are interested in the merits of the issue—and I am sure that includes the hon. Gentleman—will know that what I say is true.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I also agree that we have a responsibility, as Members of this House, to uphold the very highest standards in language about each other, but also about each other's integrity, and I do hope that we will be able to see a renewed commitment to that next year. Mr Speaker, I have been proud to sit on your Committee for enhancing equality and diversity in this House since very soon after I was elected, and to put on the record my thanks to you for your commitment to equality and diversity in this House in so many different matters.

My point of order is on a slightly different topic, however. According to press reports of a leaked Department for Work and Pensions document, "EU Exit Planning—Economic Downturn", the Government, as part of their long-term contingency planning in the event of no deal, suggested they would create a strategy with other Departments for handling the negative impacts, such as homelessness, poverty and suicide. If that is true, these are extremely serious allegations or matters, and should be brought explicitly to this House, so that we may have access to Government analysis as to who they expect to fall into poverty, where homelessness could rise, and who they see as being at risk of suicide.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her initial remarks and for her subsequent point of order, to which my response is that there may be an opportunity for those concerns to be aired during the course of the afternoon.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can I declare an interest, as someone who has a bad habit of making utterances under my breath in this Chamber? My point of order to you, Sir, is, had you received different advice from the lipspeakers, giving incontrovertible evidence as to what the Leader of the Opposition had said, what would have been the result? I am deeply concerned about the fact that if Members are to be upbraided for what they might say under their breath, we are in the realms of thought crime, and this is the madness that is sweeping universities. What was said was not on the record.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I think I have already pointed to the impossibility of certainty in these matters. I repeat that I think most people would accept the reasonableness of my point. I note, with interest and respect, the point the right hon.

Gentleman, who is an extremely experienced and distinguished parliamentarian, has made.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I fully accept what you have said. You were not in the eyeline of the Leader of the Opposition. Sitting where I was sitting, I was in the eyeline of the Leader of the Opposition. I have to accept what he has said at the Dispatch Box, because I do not think he would deliberately lie to the House, but other people will be able to draw their own conclusions.

Mr Speaker: May I, off the top of my head, thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he has said and for the understated terms in which he has said it? People can form their own judgment, but I appreciate the fact that the right hon. Gentleman is not seeking to prolong the argument further—at any rate, on the evidence of what he has just said. That, I think, is respected. He is a very senior Member of this House with long experience.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I thank you, Mr Speaker? You said you would go away, look at the video evidence and make your mind up. You did that and I am very grateful. But it is for my constituents to make their own mind up when they look at the footage. It is for them to decide if the Leader of the Opposition—or anyone else—is indeed a misogynist or antisemitic, not us.

Mr Speaker: With great respect, I heard the hon. Gentleman out and it was right to do so. He has made his own point, including a point that was not germane to these exchanges or this controversy, but it stands on the record. I said I would look into it. I have looked into it. I have come back to the House and I have said what I have said. The Leader of the Opposition has said what he has said. I do not honestly think I can be expected to add to that, but I thank the hon. Gentleman.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), may I say to you, with the greatest of respect, Mr Speaker, that there are occasions when people do leave the Chamber feeling that they have been offended by yourself? The fact that the hon. Member felt that way, yet did not feel that there was an appropriate process in place to make that complaint or concern felt, probably suggests we still have work to do in terms of raising issues and concerns in this place.

Mr Speaker: There is always work to do. Progress is not a matter of an isolated Act or a single initiative, but rather of a continuous process. I accept the significance of what the hon. Gentleman says in that regard, which seems to me to be unexceptionable.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As somebody who is still a relatively new Member of this House, I wonder if you could advise me on how I can explain to my constituents the level of party politics that is being played out—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. That observation from the beginning of that point of order has met with much criticism, but I would very gently say to Members that they cannot have it both ways. They cannot on the one hand talk

about wanting respect for their own right to speak and their own opinion, but not accord a comparable level of respect to someone who happens to express a view that differs from their own.

Laura Smith: You hit on the end of my point, Mr Speaker. The level of hypocrisy in this place is quite astounding. On the Opposition Benches, we have to put up with the most disgraceful insults thrown at us, nobody more so than the Leader of the Opposition, who has to put up with it day in, day out.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has made her point with force and in her own way, and I thank her for doing so; she is perfectly in order, and it is now on the record.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The guidance that you issued to Members earlier in the week drew attention to both the need for temperate language and the provisions around misogynistic language as part of the respect policy. If these rules do not apply to the Leader of the Opposition, what protection can Members' staff and staff of the House expect where behaviour is not broadcast live on international television?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The simple answer is that the rules apply to every right hon. and hon. Member of the House. That is the factual answer. I can do nothing other than provide the factual answer, but I thank him for what he has said.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Yes, I will take the remaining points of order, but I do ask the House to consider the other business to which we need to proceed.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On a different note, and one for which I hope a point of order should be used, I seek your advice—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is not a moment for levity; I want to hear what the hon. Gentleman has to say.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I seek your advice, Mr Speaker, on how I could get clarification of the answer that I received from the Foreign Secretary in the Yemen statement. I said that the senior civil servant in the arms control unit had advised against sales and that Ministers had overturned that. The Foreign Secretary declared that that was not true. The Foreign Secretary and the International Trade Secretary both refused to attend the hearing of the Committees on Arms Export Controls this year and have both said that they will not attend next year. How can we get them to come before the CAEC to answer these questions?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman can request attendance. Insofar as he inquires about other recourse open to him, my advice to the hon. Gentleman, who is a resourceful individual, is that he should make the short journey from the Chamber to the Table Office to table questions on this matter. It may be that he will feel inclined to table more than one question. He may table several. He may do so on a repeated basis. There is no prohibition on repetition in the House of Commons.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to your remarks earlier about impugning another Member's honour and integrity, I distinctly heard during Prime Minister's questions the Leader of the Opposition refer to my right hon. Friend's actions as criminal. I have checked *Hansard*, and that is on the record. Is that in order?

Mr Speaker: It is perfectly in order to offer that expression of opinion, and I say that on advice from the Clerk. I did not witness that exchange.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): He said it.

Mr Speaker: I am not asking the Minister of State what she thinks he said; I am responding to the hon. Lady's point of order. People are entitled to offer their own views within the rules of order, and to the best of my knowledge, nothing disorderly was said. I am happy to look at the record and consult further, but the advice I have received is that nothing disorderly was said.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I suspect that most of us are in the Chamber to hear a very important application for an emergency debate on the single most important issue that has faced our country in peacetime, and the public looking in will find this spectacle completely ludicrous. Can we please move on to the important business of the House?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. I hope he will understand if I say that it is not possible in these matters to please everyone. I am trying to do the right thing by listening to, taking account of and offering a response to points of order, but I am conscious, as the House will be, that we have important business to which to proceed, and I intend that we shall do so. I politely suggest that if people have already made points of order, they should not treat them as an ongoing debate. If somebody raises a point of order, and I respond to it, it is reasonable to proceed to the next person and then to a conclusion of those points of order.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Trust in politics is very important. The vast majority of us have now seen the video. Members on both sides of the House have commented that they thought the words used were "stupid woman". Members of the public have commented on Twitter and elsewhere that they thought the words were "stupid woman". If I understand you correctly, Mr Speaker, your own interpretation of the video was that the words used were "stupid woman", and that your lipspeaker and the lipreader of my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) have said the same.

I take the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) at his word, because I am sure that—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) said—he would not lie in the Chamber. However, I am very concerned about the possibility that incongruity between the different statements will affect trust in politics, and I want to know how you could use your good offices, Mr Speaker, to ensure that

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

it is not affected adversely by the incongruity between what has been said by the right hon. Gentleman and the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Mr Speaker: The answer is, by behaving well on a regular basis and by attending to our responsibilities in the House. That, encapsulated in a sentence, is my response to the hon. Lady's point of order, and I think it is fair and reasonable.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) was right in saying that whatever the Leader of the Opposition said was not said on the record; the Leader of the Opposition, however, has now put it on the record by coming to the Dispatch Box and making his statement. Anyone—and I mean anyone, not just those in the Chamber—who has a complaint to make about that has recourse to the proper procedures involving the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. Surely at this time of all times, Mr Speaker, it is important that we use the proper procedures, rather than proceeding to trial by points of order in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that we do not have, or we should not have, trial by points of order. That is not consistent with any due process. I hope the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I say to him that, as far as I understand it, conduct in the Chamber does not fall within the purview of the Commissioner for Parliamentary Standards, so I do not think that an allegation of misconduct on that front in this situation could be adjudicated by the Commissioner. I do not think that that is correct. What I will say is that there are opportunities for Members to continue this argument and debate if they so wish, but I genuinely ask the House, how does it avail our deliberations on public policy to proceed indefinitely with points of order on the same subject? Manifestly, it does not.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con) *rose*—

James Heapey (Wells) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I will take two more points of order, and then I really do think that we should draw the matter to a close.

Paul Scully: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I should like to bring it to a close, in asking you whether, in order to enable Members in this place and members of the public to make up their own minds, you might publish the advice that you received. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: I am advised “No”, and I stick to the advice “No”. I must say to the hon. Gentleman that I consulted. There was no written advice from the lipspeakers; this was done at very short notice, and I was given a view by them. It was not without qualification. I will not go into the detail of it—I gave the essence of it—but it was not without qualification or caveat. There is, however, no written advice from the lipspeakers. I hope that I have not misunderstood the hon. Gentleman. I do not think that there is merit in persisting with this exchange, but that is my response to him.

James Heapey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I change the subject, and return to the issue raised by the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw)?

There has been a series of Standing Order No. 24 debates recently. On Monday, more than 50 Opposition Members rose, and barely a dozen or so spoke. The previous week, the Opposition Benches were full at the point of application, and barely 20 Opposition Members spoke thereafter. In your reviewing of *Hansard*, Mr Speaker, have you noticed any inconsistency between the urgency shown in applying for Standing Order No. 24 debates and participation thereafter, and in your review of the content of the speeches in those debates, have you noticed any difference between that content and the content of our more routine discourse on Brexit?

Finally, Mr Speaker, as Opposition Members may shortly rise to support such a debate tomorrow, have you any expectation of how many of them will then attend to speak in it?

Mr Speaker: My answer to the last point is no, and my response to the hon. Gentleman—I thank him for his multi-faceted point of order—is as follows: there is absolutely no inconsistency whatsoever between Members rising to support the granting of a debate on the one hand and not choosing to participate in it on the other. There is no incongruity, there is no incompatibility, there is no inconsistency, there is no contradiction. I hope the hon. Gentleman, who is a most courteous and assiduous Member of this House, will accept that I am well familiar with the procedures of this House and I know of what I speak. The hon. Gentleman might think that that is odd or peculiar or that it offends his sensibilities in some way—and I am sorry if that is the case—but there is nothing wrong or procedurally improper about that at all. I am asked if I have an estimate of the number of Members: no, I am extraordinarily grateful to the hon. Gentleman for attributing to me powers that I do not possess, but I am not psychic.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This morning there was a knife attack in a surgery in my constituency and three people were attacked. Do you agree that instead of debating points of order about what was said earlier, we should draw a line under that and move on to the substantive issues that affect our constituencies, because otherwise people will rightly think that collective stupidity has taken hold of this House?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for what she has said and the sincerity with which I know she said it—I know all Members speak with sincerity. I hope we can shortly move on.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: But not until we have heard from, I think, two other Members. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is a national institution and I want to save him until the end. I call Catherine West.

Catherine West: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have saved this point of order until now as it is not to do with our earlier debate. On 28 November I tabled a

named day question to the Home Secretary regarded LGBT asylum cases, and three weeks have now passed but, sadly, no answer to the question has materialised. I understand that the Government are in complete meltdown over Brexit, but can you, Mr Speaker, offer any guidance as to what parliamentary mechanisms are available to compel the Home Secretary to answer these important inquiries?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of this matter. Responsibility for answering parliamentary questions lies with the departmental Ministers concerned. I certainly agree that it is unsatisfactory if Ministers do not respond to questions in the expected timescale, and to be so late in responding to a named day question would appear to be particularly unacceptable. Successive Leaders of the House have also accepted a responsibility to take up such tardiness of reply, or indeed non-reply, with departmental Ministers.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom)
indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for signalling from a sedentary position that she, too, does so and takes such matters seriously.

I would further suggest to the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) that she write to the Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), who is in our midst, as his Committee takes an active part in monitoring the timeliness of Government answers to parliamentary questions. Meanwhile, no doubt her concern has been noted on the Treasury Bench.

Lastly, I think, on the Opposition Benches I want to hear the point of order from the hon. Member for Huddersfield, who was first elected to the House 39 years, seven months and 16 days ago.

Mr Sheerman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I was going to start my remarks by saying that I have been in the House longer than you, and that is true. I am also well known to be a bit of a chunterer; I often turn to the person next to me and say quite rude things—not dreadful, but rude—about something I disagree with. This is a serious point of order: I cannot believe that this House is going to get to the stage where these events happen when someone says something under their breath—“What a silly sod”, for instance, which I say very often, quite loudly, under my breath. We cannot have a system here where we start lipreading something someone has said to their next-door neighbour when passions are high in this House. It is supposed to be a place of high passions, but it is also a place where we treat people like adults, and today we have been like badly behaved children. We are in a crucial time in the history of our country—the most delicate and worrying time in my time in the House—and we have spent all these hours on this matter. I believe the Leader of the Opposition said what he said; let us draw a line under it and get on and act like grown-ups.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. Before we proceed, all I would like to do is to plant in the minds of hon. and right hon. Members one simple fact, which is that a number of very senior Members with long experience of this House, and coming from both sides of it, have in recent months made a very similar point. Today, the hon. Gentleman has made that point, and I do not think that the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) will take exception or cavil if I say that she made a similar point at an earlier stage in our proceedings. It is a point that has also been previously made by the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). They do have long experience, they do know what they are talking about, and it might be a good idea to have a degree of calm and a readiness to heed their wise advice.

Leaving the EU: No Deal

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

Mr Speaker: I now call Keir Starmer to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

4.10 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing time to hear this application for an emergency debate on a specific and important matter—namely, that this House has considered the matter of the Cabinet’s decision to accelerate preparations for a no-deal outcome to Brexit following the Prime Minister’s failure to allow this House promptly to express its view on the Government’s deal in the light of the significant public expenditure involved.

Yesterday, the Government announced an additional £2 billion of spending to prepare for leaving the European Union without a withdrawal agreement. They have done so after denying the House the opportunity to express its view on the Government’s deal or its view on leaving the European Union without a deal, by deferring the meaningful vote originally scheduled for Tuesday 11 December. If that vote had been held, I have no doubt that the Government’s deal would have been roundly rejected, as would any proposal that we leave with no deal. No Government have the right to risk the wellbeing of the United Kingdom because of their own failed negotiations, and it is vital that the Government are held to account for their spending of public money, especially when the sums involved are so large and the stakes are so high. I therefore ask for this emergency debate to be held.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24—namely, the matter of the Cabinet’s decision to accelerate preparations for a no-deal outcome to Brexit following the Prime Minister’s failure to allow this House promptly to express its view

on the Government’s deal in the light of the significant public expenditure involved. I do not think that the right hon. and learned Gentleman quoted this, but it is right for me to quote it. I have listened carefully to the application from the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the right hon. and learned Gentleman the leave of the House?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): No! No! No!

Mr Speaker: The objection has been raised by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), which is in conformity with our procedures. In those circumstances, if there is an objection it is necessary for at least 40 Members to rise in their places in the House in order to facilitate such a debate. It is I think clear that somewhat in excess of 40 Members are standing in the House.

Application agreed to (not fewer than 40 Members standing in support).

I thank the hon. Member for Wellingborough, who has faithfully complied with our procedures, but the fact is that the House has, under our rules, decided that the debate is sought. I thank Members for doing so. The debate will take place immediately, and it would ordinarily do so for up to three hours but, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman will know, it has to conclude by the moment of interruption, so it will be a little less than three hours. It is right that he should now open the debate—*[Interruption.]* In fact, this will happen after we have heard the 10-minute rule motion, so it will be somewhat shorter. This will be a second go of the day, and a fuller opportunity for the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) to speak on this important matter.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Pound, calm yourself, man. I am sure that you have some witticism to share with a colleague, which will be of great interest to the said Member, but it could usefully be done outside the curtilage of the Chamber. The hon. Lady deserves the courtesy of the attention of the House, so I ask Members who wish to discuss other matters to do so elsewhere. We have just been talking about the need for respect. Let us show the hon. Lady respect as she introduces her ten-minute rule motion.

Defibrillators (Availability)

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

4.15 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the provision of defibrillators in education establishments, and in leisure, sports and certain other public facilities; to make provision for training persons to operate defibrillators; to make provision for funding the acquisition, installation, use and maintenance of defibrillators; and for connected purposes.

This is my second attempt to bring in this Bill, as it fell last year when the general election was called. It is imperative that we push for the mandatory installation of these life-saving devices in our public buildings. As I said during Prime Minister's questions, each and every week 12 young people die as a result of a sudden cardiac arrest. If they are in a shockable rhythm, around 80% of them could be saved by the use of a defibrillator.

The purpose of the Bill is therefore to increase rates of survival from cardiac arrest, as currently the UK's record is dismal. According to the British Heart Foundation, almost 30,000 cardiac arrests a year happen outside hospitals, and less than 10% of those people survive. In fact, in some parts of England, the survival rate is as low as 2%. Behind each of those statistics are people, families and communities.

A cardiac arrest can happen for many reasons, from trauma right through to congenital heart defects, but if a person is in a shockable rhythm, using a defibrillator can increase their chances of survival by as much as 80%. However, for a defibrillator to be successful, quick access to it is essential, because minutes count. If too much time elapses, a shockable rhythm turns to a non-shockable rhythm and the chances of survival decrease rapidly. If a person's heart is not restarted within four minutes, their chances of living are reduced by almost 80%. Even the speediest paramedic in the country would struggle to get to someone in four minutes. That is why having easy, accessible defibrillators is so crucial.

Across the UK, we have laws mandating the availability of other life-saving equipment, such as seatbelts, fire extinguishers and smoke alarms, but there is not a single piece of legislation requiring defibrillators, which could restart the hearts of 12 young people each week.

My passion for this subject was started by Jessica Batchelor, the former Young Mayor of Seaford in my constituency. At the age of 15, she witnessed at first hand a close family friend die of a sudden cardiac arrest, and no defibrillator was available. As the town's Young Mayor, she raised thousands of pounds to ensure that there are defibrillators in Seaford, and she lobbied me as the local MP to do something about a change in the law. Councillor Merle Phillips in my other town of Polegate is currently raising thousands of pounds, because the town is divided by a level crossing and only one side has a defibrillator.

The aim of the Bill is to ensure that schools, sports facilities and public buildings, in every town and village in the country, all have defibrillators as standard that can be accessed 24 hours a day. As the Prime Minister said during Question Time, not every village has a school or leisure centre, but they do all need a designated defibrillator, and it is important that people know where the equipment is.

Currently, there is a postcode lottery, because even in schools, despite the Department for Education's efforts, we know of only 1,389 defibrillators in schools in England. We know of one in Northern Ireland, and we do not know of any in Scotland. That is not to say they do not exist, but without this register, we are none the wiser where this life-saving equipment is.

The Bill also aims to increase the use of defibrillators, because it is important not just to have defibrillators but to make sure they are used when they are needed. Residents in my villages tell me that they would be afraid to use a defibrillator and that they think they need training to do so, although nothing could be further from the truth. All a person has to do is to stick the two pads on someone's chest and turn the machine on. The machine will tell them exactly what to do, without training, but people are afraid to use them. The Bill's aim is not to state that only trained people should use defibrillators but to mandate training for local communities with every installation so that people feel confident to use them.

I wonder how many Members of Parliament here today know how many defibrillators are on the parliamentary estate. There are 28 in total, in the House of Lords, the House of Commons, Norman Shaw North, Portcullis House and two in the Elizabeth Tower, but do Members know where the nearest defibrillator is to us right now? According to the intranet, it is in Member's Lobby, but it took me, a Doorkeeper and a member of security four minutes to find it this morning. It is in a cupboard with no sign, and no one knew it was there. Those four minutes could cost someone's life.

I will share the difference a defibrillator can make. This morning, I heard from Stuart Freeman, a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), whose daughter, aged just 18, suffered a cardiac arrest in March. She was given cardiopulmonary resuscitation and a defibrillator was available, and it saved her life. Serena has met my hon. Friend to plead the case for better training and for more access to defibrillators, and she is a great example of the difference defibrillators can make.

I therefore move that the Bill be introduced so we can mandate that defibrillators are installed across the whole UK in publicly accessible places and that training is available so that people know what to do in the event of a cardiac arrest and are not afraid to use defibrillators if they are needed. It is crucial to support the work of our many charities, such as the British Heart Foundation and St John Ambulance, to ensure we save as many lives as possible.

This week, 12 young people will die from a cardiac arrest, and 28,000 people will die from a cardiac arrest this year. Those lives could have been saved by the Bill, and I urge Members to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Jim Shannon, Stephen Twigg, Mr Edward Vaizey, Chris Green, Dr Philippa Whitford, Peter Aldous, Dr Lisa Cameron and Maria Caulfield present the Bill.

Maria Caulfield accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019, and to be printed (Bill 308).

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we proceed to the Standing Order No. 24 debate, I have now to announce the result of today's deferred Divisions. In respect of the question relating to markets in financial instruments, the Ayes were 307 and the Noes were 215, so the Question was agreed to. In respect of the question relating to accounts and reports, the Ayes were 305 and the Noes were 216, so the Question was agreed to.

Leaving the EU: No Deal

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

4.24 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the Cabinet's decision to accelerate preparations for a no-deal outcome to Brexit, following the Prime Minister's failure to allow this House promptly to express its views on the Government's deal, in the light of the significant public expenditure involved.

The background to this debate is well known. This House was due to vote on the Government's deal on 11 December. The day before that vote, the Prime Minister pulled the vote, recognising that she was going to lose the vote, as she said, by "a significant margin" and saying that she wanted more time to "secure further assurances" on the backstop. I was in the House when the Prime Minister made her statement on 10 December, and in my view the majority were clearly against deferring the vote. No doubt for that reason the Prime Minister did not have the courage to put her decision to defer the meaningful vote to a vote, preferring instead for the Government not to move their own business.

The problem with the Prime Minister's approach is obvious, which is why the majority were against deferring the vote. First, the Prime Minister is highly unlikely to get meaningful changes to the withdrawal agreement. Secondly, unless meaningful changes to the withdrawal agreement are made, the majority in this House are not likely to support her deal, whenever it gets put. That is a point bluntly accepted by the International Trade Secretary, who said recently:

"It is very difficult to support the deal if we don't get changes to the backstop. I don't think it will get through."

The first problem about getting meaningful changes to the withdrawal agreement was laid bare last week. After informal talks on Monday and Tuesday of last week between the Prime Minister and other leaders, and then the EU summit on Thursday and Friday, the EU made its position clear. The President of the Commission said that there is

"no room whatsoever for renegotiation".

The Commission spokesperson said:

"The European Council has given the clarifications that were possible at this stage, so no further meetings with the UK are foreseen."

The EU Council also made it clear that the withdrawal agreement is "not open for renegotiation". That is why there have been such strong calls this week for the vote to be put back to this House this week.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Many of us, right hon. and hon. Members in this House, are becoming increasingly suspicious that the reason why this Brexit can is being kicked further and further down the road by the Prime Minister is to take us to the eleventh hour, and then hold the British public and parliamentarians in this House to ransom, saying, "It is my deal or no deal." Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that that is a disastrous and reckless policy, which is not in our national interest?"

Keir Starmer: I do agree and I will elaborate on that in just a moment. The strong calls this week for the vote to be put this week are so that, the deal having been

defeated, as it inevitably will be, this House can get on with assessing what then are the available and achievable options for the future.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that if this were a company and we were living outside the Westminster bubble, in the real world, we would not be allowed to take Christmas holidays while such an existential crisis is happening to our country? Does he agree that we should all be put on standby by this Government so that at the first available minute we can have a vote on this important matter?

Keir Starmer: I certainly agree that we need the vote as soon as possible, and I really do think it should have been on 11 December—if not then, it should have been this week. To elaborate on the point just made, the only purpose now in deferring the vote until 14 January is to run the clock down, and to attempt to present the vote as a binary choice between the Prime Minister's deal and no deal.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is deeply dangerous to use the sort of scare tactics we saw being briefed out from No. 10 this morning, when it was said that somehow 3,500 troops were going to be put on the street? I asked the Home Secretary repeatedly about that after his own permanent secretary had told me that there were no such plans for troops to be used at our borders. Somebody is not telling the truth here—it is either the briefings coming out of No. 10 or somebody else.

Keir Starmer: I share my hon. Friend's concern and will elaborate on that point in just a minute. To build on that comment, as I have been saying for some time, I do not think for one moment that this House is going to accept the binary choice that the Prime Minister will attempt to put before us. A choice between bad and even worse is not a meaningful choice. Nor is leaving the EU on 29 March next year without a deal viable. It has never been viable, and as every day goes past it becomes less and less viable.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend is going to do this in his speech, but one thing that would greatly reassure not only the public but businesses and some of our public services, which are now being forced to spend unnecessarily billions of pounds that would be best spent on other things, would be if he could talk through how Parliament will ensure that no deal cannot happen.

Keir Starmer: I really think it is the duty of the Government and the Prime Minister to stand at the Dispatch Box and rule out no deal. That is the first thing, and that is the easiest way, because I think the vast majority of Members of the House would agree with it. If the Government will not do that, I am absolutely sure that this House will take the first opportunity to express its view. Whether by way of amendments to the motion in January, through other amendments, or by whatever means, the voice of this House and the majority who will not countenance no deal must be heard and will be heard. I have said it before, but I say it again: I think that deep down this Government and this

Prime Minister know jolly well that no deal is not viable. That calls into question the expenditure that has been announced as additional expenditure, not the only expenditure.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman accept that there is not a no deal, because if we leave without signing the withdrawal agreement, there will be various deals? Would he welcome the agreement on the common transit convention? Would he welcome the air services agreement? Would he welcome the facilitation of trade agreement? There are going to be plenty of agreements so that we can trade perfectly successfully—will he stop his scaremongering?

Keir Starmer: I shall come to that point in a minute, but simply listing all the things that need to happen between now and 29 March to get to a so-called managed no deal only makes the point: it is not going to happen in the three months available.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the clock is now ticking and the Government need seriously to start to think about extending article 50 so that they can send in some decent negotiators to negotiate a deal? Or we can put this back to the British people in an election.

Keir Starmer: I do agree that serious consideration needs to be given to the timetable now set by article 50, because by 14 January we will be just nine weeks away from the proposed date of leaving the EU. On any view, the Government will then have to make a choice about what to do next. No plan B has ever been forthcoming. In the week or so before the deferral of the vote last week, the question everybody was asking was, "What is the Prime Minister's plan B?" When she pulled the vote and ran away, we learned that she does not have a plan B. The Prime Minister will have to come to the Dispatch Box and make a statement about what she proposes happens next. If she stands at that Dispatch Box and says that she intends to take the UK out of the EU without a deal, I genuinely believe that Parliament—this House—will do everything that it can to stop that course of action.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Given that it is the only route that gives legal certainty to be able to stop no deal, can I take it from what my right hon. and learned Friend is saying that if we get to the end and the only thing to do is revoke article 50, the official Opposition would support that, alongside Government Members?

Keir Starmer: What I have said is that I genuinely think that the majority in this House is against no deal. One reason why I feel strongly that the vote should be put as soon as possible is that the discussion and the debate about what happens next need to happen sooner rather than later because they will take time. We need then to assess what the options are and to see where the consensus of the House is. All that is happening in this deferment of the vote for weeks is wasting the time of the House that should be spent on the question of how we prevent leaving without a deal.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will give way, but then I will make some progress.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. Let me congratulate him on achieving this important debate this afternoon. On the question of the extension of article 50, is he, like me, not hearing from interlocutors in the EU that the EU would be unlikely to grant an extension of the article 50 period for further negotiation, but that it would grant an extension of the article 50 period for either a general election or a people's vote?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. As the hon. and learned Lady knows, I have had a number of discussions about the issue of extension with the Commission, the Council and various EU countries. The clear message from them is that the only basis for an extension would be if it was coupled with a good reason for the extension. Therefore, again, that is why we need to get on to the debate about what happens if and when this deal is voted down because these are very serious considerations.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that it is grotesque and obscene that we have a homelessness crisis in this country, which is visible right outside this building; elderly people not getting the care they need; special needs children not getting proper support; people waiting far too long for mental health support; and hospitals full up—all burning injustices—and this Conservative Government are spending billions of pounds preparing for a no deal, which is not necessary?

Keir Starmer: I do agree. I will be corrected if I am wrong, but I am given to understand that, tragically, one of those sleeping just outside the entrance and exit to this place died in the past 24 hours, and that underscores the point that has just been made.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The words of the right hon. and learned Gentleman are that it is highly unlikely that there will be meaningful changes to this deal. If that is right, does he agree that it is vanishingly unlikely that a completely new deal along the lines that Labour, or indeed anyone else, might propose would also be agreed by the 29 March timetable? If that is right, and if it is also right that the EU would not extend article 50 to renegotiate a new deal, it effectively means that, by not supporting this deal, the Labour party risks becoming the handmaiden to no deal, and that is a real concern, does he not agree?

Keir Starmer: No, I do not accept that. I have had more conversations with people in Brussels than probably most people in this House about the question—the very important question—of what the position would be if the red lines that the Prime Minister laid down were different. The EU's position in private is confidential. Its position in public has been repeated over and over again. It has said that if the red lines had been different, a different negotiation could have happened. If the logical conclusion to the hon. Gentleman's point is that we on these Benches must simply support whatever the Prime Minister brings back because no deal is worse, then that is an extraordinary position. It means that there is no

critical analysis and no challenge even if it is a bad deal, or the wrong deal for the country, and that, somehow, we must support it because of this binary choice, and we will not do so.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. and learned Friend is making a very powerful speech about the absurd lack of leadership from the Government on this critical issue facing our country. Does he recognise that a cross-party letter, which was published on Monday and organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), has confirmed that, indeed, 19 Members on the Government Benches support ruling out a no-deal option in the national interest? Therefore, it is a matter of mere arithmetic that there is certainly no support for a no-deal crash out of the European option in this House. It is the duty of this Government to come to this House immediately and reflect the wishes of Parliament.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention, and I agree with it.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab) *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I am not sure that I am making a speech; I think that I am responding to interventions. I will take one more and then I really will make some progress.

Wayne David: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend. Does he agree that it is significant that, this morning, the new First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, had a meeting with the Prime Minister and told her very clearly that she had a moral obligation to make sure that this country did not leave the EU without a deal?

Keir Starmer: I agree with my hon. Friend. I will take further interventions when I have made some progress.

The point that I am really making is that leaving the EU on 29 March next year without a deal is simply not viable, and I do not think that any responsible Government would do it.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Keir Starmer: I will give way in a moment.

Treasury estimates of a no-deal outcome would mean a 9.3% decline in GDP over 15 years. That would be an act of economic self-harm that no responsible Government should take. It would see every region of the UK worse off and would mean that there would be no common security arrangements in place and, of course, a hard border in Northern Ireland. In any event, the truth is that the Government simply have not prepared for it and it is now too late.

Let me give two very specific but obvious examples. Over the summer, the previous Brexit Secretary published 106 technical notices—the Government's view of what needed to be done in order to prepare for no deal. What comes out of those 106 documents is that, taken together, they commit the Government to the creation or expansion of 15 quangos, further legislation in 51 areas, the negotiation of 40 new international agreements with the EU or

others, and the introduction of 55 new systems and processes. That is the Government's own analysis of what they need to do to prepare for no deal. Let us just stand back and consider that. The meaningful vote is scheduled for the week of 14 January. It is then just over nine weeks to 29 March. It is simply not credible to pretend that even the bare minimum in the Government's own technical notices can be delivered in that nine weeks.

The second example is just so powerful. Two weeks ago today, the Chancellor answered a question from the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) about preparations at Dover, which is a pretty busy port—the busiest. Some of us have been down there a number of times to talk to the staff and management about what needs to be done, and they are very worried. This is what the Chancellor said:

“if we were to end up having a WTO-type trading arrangement with the European Union”,

that

“would involve some very significant infrastructure works that could not be done in a matter of months; they would take years to complete.”

However much money we throw at it now, how can we get over that problem—that the infrastructure at Dover will take years, not months? The Chancellor did not say that it would take months if there was more money; he said years, not months. The idea that we could somehow manage a no deal nine weeks after the meaningful vote only has to be put against that example to be seen to be ridiculous. This was confirmed by the National Audit Office, which said bluntly in October:

“The government does not have enough time to put in place all of the infrastructure, systems and people required for fully effective border operations on day one”.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman aware that the non-disclosure agreements that were stopping officials sharing with business the Government's plans for no deal were lifted—I think it was only last week—to enable businesses to be aware of what the Government were planning for in relation to no deal?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that point. I think that businesses have begun to make their voice heard in the last day or two, expressing their concerns about a no-deal exit.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): On 6 December in Exiting the European Union questions, when we were supposedly still in the middle of the debate on the deal, I sought reassurance about the supply of medical radioisotopes, which simply cannot be stockpiled because they have a half-life of hours. I was told to google what the French Government were doing. Well, in googling “radioisotopes” and “no deal”, I have found no reassurance. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that this pantomime around no deal is frightening patients, doctors and people who run the NHS, and that it is a disgrace?

Keir Starmer: I agree wholeheartedly and thank the hon. Lady for making that point. We need only mention the reports—of course, we do not know—that there were discussions in Cabinet about medicines being supplied by ferries to show why this is not viable.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Indeed, we have heard evidence in the Exiting the EU Committee that we could see a delay of two to three years in new medicines coming to the UK if the Government proceed as they intend. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that while the cost to businesses is now being talked about far more openly, there is a real cost to our citizens, with a leaked Department for Work and Pensions report suggesting that the Government are planning a strategy to deal with potential rising homelessness, poverty and suicide? Is this not a horrific place for our country to have reached, and far removed from what people thought they were voting for?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention; I heard that point made earlier in a point of order. My hon. Friend underscores not just the concern about that very issue but the fact that the Government should have made a statement today about no-deal preparations. It is unsatisfactory that we have had to go through this process just to get a debate. There should have been a statement so that Members could then ask specific questions of the Government about exactly those sorts of issues.

If anyone thinks that the EU is going to ride to the rescue and put in place a raft of reciprocal side deals, or waive their rules and laws for the UK, I would encourage them to read the EU's plans for no deal, which were updated and published only at lunchtime today. On contingency measures, the EU says that they will only be taken where strictly necessary and in the interests of the EU, they should not replicate the benefits of membership of the Union, and they can be revoked by the EU at any time. This is what a no-deal exit looks like. On information and data exchange, it says that work strands are in place such as the disconnection and adaptation of databases and IT systems and other platforms for communication and information exchange to which the United Kingdom should no longer have access. On air transport, it says that UK air carriers will not be able to conduct EU-to-EU flights. On road haulage, it says that a permit system would allow for considerably less traffic than currently takes place between the Union and the United Kingdom. On goods, it says that all relevant EU legislation on imported goods and exported goods will apply after 29 March. That means customs checks, declarations, and origin tests. It means a raft of checks on agriculture. It means severe friction, and it comes nine weeks after the meaningful vote.

Rushanara Ali: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is utterly irresponsible of the Prime Minister to threaten Members of Parliament into a deal or a no-deal situation, given what is happening, and given the dangers and risks? She is playing Russian roulette with people's lives and livelihoods, and she will be responsible for causing chaos in this country if she does not rule it out right now, before we go into recess.

Keir Starmer: I agree wholeheartedly. I cannot believe that the analysis that the Opposition have undertaken is not the same as that undertaken by the Government. They know very well that no deal is not viable and they know very well the risks involved, and that calls into question the decisions that were made yesterday.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spennings) (Lab/Co-op): Coming towards Christmas, I am sure that Members across the House will have people coming into their surgeries, as I have: the mum and son who lost their jobs because of Brexit and were referred to the food bank; the dad who came on another issue, breaking down, weeping and saying, “I’m having counselling, I’m on anti-depressants”, because of a no deal Brexit—he is paying workers and he is worried about their mortgages and their Christmas. When we start worrying about stockpiling food, we know that only the poorest suffer who cannot afford to stockpile and cannot afford the most expensive food. I am sure that does not happen in the restaurants in Mayfair. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree?

Keir Starmer: I do agree. I am sure that Members across the House have had concerned constituents coming up to them in advice surgeries, or on buses and trains and in the street, expressing their concern about the state of politics, the place we have got to in these negotiations, and the prospect of no deal. It is not often that members of the public talk about politics in the way that they are doing at the moment. They are talking about it in a very anxious state because they realise just how badly these negotiations have gone.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I do not think the Government accept the level of chaos that this will provide. My Ford factory has 24 deliveries of parts a day. If one of those lorries does not arrive, the factory will have to stop production for a day, which means a loss of half a million pounds. Zimmer Biomet makes knee and hip replacements and sends all its products from the Netherlands, which arrive in our hospitals on the day of surgery. It cannot guarantee that if the lorries are not coming through. There will be chaos in every aspect of life in this country.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that powerful point, and it applies to the whole of manufacturing. In the last two years, I have tried to visit all the major manufacturers across the UK and see for myself the systems they are running. Automobile manufacturing is a classic example, with goods coming in from the EU all the time. Those goods are tracked, so that it is known to the hour when they will arrive. In some operations, the components arrive four hours before they go on the production line. That is why any interruption of the current arrangements poses a real threat to manufacturing and why what is said about Dover not being ready for years, not months, is significant for manufacturing.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): My right hon. and learned Friend is making an extremely powerful case. Does he share my puzzlement—nay, exasperation—that some people in government and on the Government Benches appear to think that they know more and better about the implications of no deal than the businesses that make things, export things, import things and transport things? Those businesses have formed a queue to meet all of us, and no doubt Ministers, to express their concern about what this will mean. Does that not show just how irresponsible it is of the Government to suggest that this could happen?

Keir Starmer: I could not agree more. I have spoken to hundreds of businesses across the whole of the UK, either one on one or in small groups—I am not talking

about halls full of businesses—and I have not come across any business that says that no deal could be a satisfactory outcome. Anybody who suggests that businesses in some way would support that approach needs to point me to the businesses they have been talking to, because I have obviously been talking to lots of businesses that they are not talking to. In every case, when they lay out their concerns to me, I faithfully ask them whether they have said the same to the Government, and I ask them to say the same to me as they say to the Government. On a number of occasions, I have made it my business, in a friendly way, to point the Brexit Secretary to businesses that have talked to me and suggest he has a conversation with them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will make some progress, because I have given way many times.

The point is this, and it has come out through all the interventions: there is no such thing as a managed no deal. That is why I have repeatedly said that no deal is not credible and not viable. It is a political hoax intended only to put pressure on Members of this House to back the Prime Minister’s deal.

Yesterday, instead of trying to find a viable way of getting a deal through the House, the Cabinet agreed to ramp up no-deal preparations, notwithstanding all the valid points that have been made. An additional £2 billion of taxpayers’ money has been allocated to that, which includes half a billion pounds to the Home Office, £400 million to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and £200 million for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. That funding will be welcomed by some in the European Research Group.

However, let us look at the reaction of businesses. The biggest customs firm inside Dover told “Channel 4 News” yesterday that crashing out of the EU without a deal would create “Armageddon” for the UK. That is business speaking. That is what it said to “Channel 4 News”. It is not me or anybody in this House; it is businesses that are running Dover telling us what they think the outcome would be. Five British business groups, including the Confederation of British Industry, said this morning:

“it is clear there is simply not enough time to prevent severe dislocation and disruption in just 100 days.”

That is the voice of business.

No wonder it is reported that there was considerable conflict of views around the Cabinet table. The Justice Secretary is reported to have told the Cabinet that a managed no deal is not a viable option. He apparently added that

“the responsibility of Cabinet ministers is not to propagate unicorns but to slay them.”

The Work and Pensions Secretary is reported to have told the Cabinet:

“Just because you’ve put a seatbelt on, it doesn’t mean you should crash the car.”

I agree with them. The first duty of the Government is to protect the public, and a no-deal Brexit would put the public at risk. That is not scaremongering; it is reality.

Even if the Government did choose to push ahead with a no deal, I am convinced that Parliament would stand in their way. The overwhelming majority of Members

in this House would not countenance a no deal Brexit. I pay tribute to the, I think, now three hon. Members opposite who have already said that they would quit the Conservative party if the Government pressed ahead with no deal. I suspect that they are not alone. No Government have the right to plunge the country into chaos because of their own failure, and this Parliament will not let them.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am not so sure that the Government grasp the seriousness of this situation. There are 800,000 jobs in the automobile industry alone at stake and about 300,000 in the west midlands, so we have to get some sort of deal, but not the deal that these are proposing. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree about that?

Keir Starmer: I do agree, and at this stage of the negotiations, what I think should happen is that the deal should be put to a vote and the vote taken, and then we should have a grown-up conversation about what the real options are and stop pretending that some sort of managed no deal is the default position. It is not, and this House will never accept that it is the default position.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): My right hon. and learned Friend has said several times—and I understand why—that this House will not allow the Government to proceed on the basis of no deal, but one of the difficulties that we have, as we have seen over the last fortnight, is that the power of the Government to manage the business and completely ignore any motions of this House that are not legally binding is quite phenomenal. Do we not need to address that inherent problem in our system if we are really going to have a chance of success?

Keir Starmer: That is a very powerful point, and what the last few weeks have shown are some of the inadequacies in the procedures of this House. The idea that the Government can simply not move their business and do not have to have a vote on it is not acceptable. The fact that we have to have an SO 24 debate on an issue of this significance, because we cannot force a statement, shows the inadequacies.

The only other thing I would say on that very important point is this: given that there have to be at least 51 changes to legislation—even on the Government's own analysis—under the 106 technical notices, there will be opportunities for amendments in this House, unless the Prime Minister says, "I am simply not going to take any business until April, of any sort whatsoever." I do not think that this Prime Minister would do that. I knew her when she was Home Secretary and I was Director of Public Prosecutions. I know how seriously she takes security and counter-terrorism issues. I do not think that this Prime Minister would try to force no deal on this House without the necessary precautions—even on her own case—with legislation.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Given the experience that we had just over a week ago, what guarantees do we have that the Prime Minister will not, on 10 or 11 January, decide that she has some sign from the European Union that might mean that she will get the better deal at that point that she has not managed to get in the meantime, and then pull the vote yet again?

Keir Starmer: Well, we have no guarantees. Like everybody else, I heard various Members of the Prime Minister's Cabinet on the radio on the morning of 10 December assuring all listeners and viewers that the vote was 100% guaranteed for the next day, only for it to be pulled at the last minute.

Having shadowed three Brexit Secretaries this year alone, I know as well as anyone that the House has been consumed by Brexit. However, at the end of the year, let us look at where we are. We have a Prime Minister unable to put her deal to the vote and no prospect of further renegotiation. Rather than trying to reach across Parliament to break the deadlock, we have a Government who are now actively pursuing a policy that is not supported by the Cabinet, not supported by Parliament and not supported by the country. It is reckless and irresponsible. It is an indictment of a wasted year. Even now, I urge the Government to take no deal off the table and find a sensible way forward.

4.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): From the start, this Government have been clear that we do not expect or want a no-deal scenario. Delivering the deal negotiated with the European Union remains our top priority. It is also the best way to deliver on the democratic choice of the British people and the best way to deliver certainty to businesses and the people of our country.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will make some progress, but then I will give way.

Our efforts to get this deal have not changed. However, with 100 days until we leave the European Union, the Government's continued duty is to prepare for every eventuality, including a no-deal scenario. This is because—like it or not—no deal remains a risk if this House does not support the Prime Minister's deal.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Does the Minister not accept, having heard in recent days from so many businesses and organisations around the UK, that they speak with a unified voice? Whether it be the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Engineering Employers Federation, the British Chambers of Commerce or the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, they are all unified in their position, which is that no deal is not acceptable and we cannot plan it. Does he not therefore accept that this is just a negotiating ploy—a charade that the Prime Minister is leading us on—and that all the time this is costing our businesses greatly and leading to uncertainty and to a loss of jobs?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I have to say that the businesses I have visited all wanted people in this House to vote for the Prime Minister's deal because that gives them the certainty that they require.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Is it not true, however, that if businesses were given a real choice, they would actually prefer to stay in the European Union altogether? The only argument that the Prime Minister is putting forward is that the people have voted but, in that

[Wera Hobhouse]

majority vote of 17.4 million, a considerable number of people voted to leave the European Union without any deal. If the Government are finally to put that fantasy to bed, it would look entirely different if we put the vote back to the people, which is what we should do anyway.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I get the feeling that the hon. Lady would not accept the result of a referendum that went against her in any shape or form. I am afraid I just say that the Prime Minister has negotiated a very good deal for this country, so the best way to guarantee certainty to businesses and the people of our country is to vote for that deal.

Ruth George: The businesses I have spoken to in Brexit summits in my constituency have said that the deal on the table from the Prime Minister gives no certainty whatsoever. It is simply a stopgap until the end of 2020. After that, the future declaration is not legally binding and we will not even have the same Prime Minister in place to negotiate and deliver it. It is the worst of all possible worlds.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have to disagree with the hon. Lady. I have met plenty of businesses. Indeed, the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) on the Opposition Front Bench and I share a very big manufacturing business called Cummins, which is a very strong advocate for certainty in this area and has written to hon. Members asking us to vote for the deal.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister mentions the need for certainty. Let us create some degree of certainty now and rule out the disastrous proposition of a no deal. Under no circumstances can the Government allow it. At least 19 of his Tory colleagues agree that no deal cannot be a proposition that can ever be enacted by this Government. Therefore, just rule it out now and provide some degree of certainty to business at least.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The best way to rule out a no deal is to vote for the deal we have on the table.

Extensive work to prepare for this has been under way for over two years. It was commenced by my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) when he was in my role.

Dr Whitford: I have to say that the Minister was quite cheeky to me, on 6 December, in telling me to google the French Government's plans. Will he take the opportunity now to reassure the president and the deputy president of the Royal College of Radiologists, and indeed radiologists, cancer specialists and their patients up and down the UK on the provision of a safe supply of medical radioisotopes, which simply cannot be stockpiled?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and I apologise to her if I was cheeky on that particular day, but I understood that she would not believe a Minister of the Crown at this Dispatch Box when articulating what is going to happen to mitigate any problems with flow on the French side of the short straits.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab) *rose*—

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) *rose*—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will give way in a second. The reason for saying, "Would she google?" was that the French Assembly passed a law on the Monday before. There is a host of issues. The hon. Lady can look up what they are going to do to mitigate the problems with flow, but equally the Government have a host of mitigation solutions for this problem.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I give way to the hon. Member for Darlington, whom I mentioned.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to intervene after he mentioned the factory in my constituency. I visited that factory and met staff on Friday. I wonder whether he would share with the House what Cummins said to him about the prospect of no deal.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, I certainly can. They do not want a no deal; they want a negotiated deal and they have written to Members of this House, asking them to accept the deal that is on the table.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I give way to the Chair of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union.

Hilary Benn: I thank the Minister for giving way. Members of the Committee are looking forward to taking evidence from him on no-deal planning on the Wednesday after we get back from recess. May I ask him a question about facts? No deal will mean that we lose preferential access to our nearest, largest and most important trading partners—the other countries of the EU, and the 70 countries to which we have access because of the 40 deals that the EU has negotiated. What assessment have the Government made of the additional cost to businesses of the customs declarations and rules of origin certificates that those businesses that export at the moment under that preferential access do not even have to think about, but will have to start making arrangements for the day after 29 March? How much will it cost them and what will it do to their viability?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I very much look forward to coming before the right hon. Gentleman's Committee in the early part of the new year. I would refer him to the partnership pack. It is online, on gov.uk. There are 100 pages of what businesses need to do to make sure that they conform with any new processes that might be required in a no-deal circumstance and the elements of cost that are associated with them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Chris Heaton-Harris: May I continue for one moment? Then I will happily give way to everyone.

Seema Malhotra *rose*—

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Lady is a very persistent member of the Committee.

Seema Malhotra: Further to that point on the 40-plus trade deals that the EU has with 70 other countries, which many of our businesses will be trading with currently under preferential terms, accounting for about £150 billion of trade each year, those are set to fall straight after we leave the European Union, particularly if there is no deal, and their future is uncertain even if we have a deal. What advice is the Minister giving those businesses about how they will be trading in future?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The Government are actually working to roll over all those deals, and the hon. Lady will see announcements in the coming days to deal with some of those points.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Have the Government looked at the costs that will result from our leaving the EU, whether in terms of commodities, pharmaceuticals or farming? Specifically, food prices are a big issue for the National Farmers Union, which I met a couple of weeks ago.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that he has long-standing concerns about what would happen in the case of a no deal, but I can honestly say to him that the best way to mitigate, to stop that problem happening, is to vote for the deal that is on the table.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Heaton-Harris: No. I shall continue with my speech for a moment, if I may.

As I said about 20 interventions ago, extensive work to prepare for a no-deal scenario has been under way for two years; it commenced under the stewardship of my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe. For instance, we have already successfully passed critical legislation, signed international agreements, and guaranteed certain EU funding in a no-deal scenario. Further milestones will be reached and achieved in the coming days. Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker: this work continues, even during the recess period. Cabinet has now agreed to proceed with the Government's next phase of no-deal planning. We have reached the point where we need to accelerate and intensify preparations, and this means we will set in motion our remaining no-deal plans, including finalising the international agreements and delivering the legislation we need.

Owen Smith: The Minister talks about accelerating the plans. Why does he not just acknowledge to the House that this is a £2 billion PR stunt? This has been completely exposed by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on the Opposition Front Bench as a hoax: a sham exercise trying to blackmail this House. The Minister knows—his own Government have acknowledged it—that it would cost our country 10% of GDP, or £200 billion a year, if we proceeded down this route. He does not want to be a part of a Government doing that to our country, does he?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. On the £2 billion he talks about, that is preparing for both leaving with a deal and without a deal. The Government have to prepare for both eventualities and plans are well developed.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Is he trying to tell us that there are no extra costs in the preparations for no deal? Furthermore, can he confirm to the House today that none of the permanent secretaries, who are the accounting officers, at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Transport, the Department of Health and Social Care, HMRC, the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have said to Ministers that they require special authorisation, because Ministers are asking them to spend money that is not even in line with Government policy?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I did not say that none of the £2 billion was going to no deal in that situation, and I have not heard any claims relating to what the hon. Lady said in the second part of her intervention.

The Government's plans are well developed and have been designed—

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am most grateful to the Minister. I just wondered whether he would answer the point from my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith). Does the Minister admit that there is no majority in this House for no deal, that that is not going to pass and that, therefore, all he is doing is scaring businesses and scaring 5 million people, the EU citizens living in this country and UK citizens living in UK countries? Is that not political gamesmanship and an appalling way to treat people?

Chris Heaton-Harris: No. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I humbly point out to him that the House has passed legislation in this area and the best way to avoid no deal is to vote for the Prime Minister's deal. If anybody is trying to scare people it would be people who are raising the fear in not voting for this deal.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will happily give way to my friend, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

Chris Bryant: That's me done for, isn't it?

I honestly do not see how there is time enough, even if the Prime Minister's deal were agreed on 14, 15 or 16 January, to get the implementation Bill in place in time for 29 March, so I am sure the Government are going to have to revoke article 50. My biggest anxiety, however, is that, if there is no deal, am I right in saying that we will, from the day after 29 March, no longer be a member of the European arrest warrant? We will, therefore, have no extradition agreement with any of the other countries in Europe from that day. Is that not putting this country's security at risk?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman raises sensible points, but I can say to him that the best way to mitigate all those things is to vote for the deal that is on the table.

Our plans are well developed and have been designed to provide flexibility to respond to a negotiated agreement, as well as preparing us for the eventuality of leaving without a deal.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will just carry on for a couple more minutes and then I will happily give way to all those standing.

At the heart of the Government's approach to preparing for a no-deal scenario is a commitment to prioritise stability for citizens, consumers and business, to ensure smooth operations of business infrastructure and public services, and to minimise any disruption to the economy. As we said on 6 December, we have made a unilateral commitment to how citizens' rights would work in a no-deal scenario. All European Union citizens who are resident in the UK by 29 March 2019 will be eligible to apply for settled status. They will be able to live, work and study as they do today. The basis for qualifying for status would be the same as proposed in a deal scenario. EU citizens would have until 31 December 2020 to obtain a status under the scheme. Once granted a status, EU citizens would be able to leave the UK for up to five consecutive years without losing their right to return.

We are pleased that the EU has today encouraged member states also to make a generous offer on citizens' rights—this is a step in the right direction—but we hope that member states will now go forward and guarantee this and that the EU will now open up engagement with us on other important issues. Let me be clear: a no-deal outcome and move to WTO terms, which some hon. Members have suggested would be preferable to a deal, would lead to disruption and potential harm to critical industries in the short term. We cannot solve the issues that may arise in a no-deal scenario, but we can, as a Government, mitigate them by prioritising continuity where possible. Indeed, continuity is a thread that runs through our no-deal plans.

Tom Brake: The Minister has just outlined all the risks associated with no deal. He needs now to discount and rule out no deal. No one on the Opposition Benches believes the Government will push that forward, and the Government will not succeed in convincing any Opposition Member that, because their no-deal option is so bad, the Prime Minister's option is attractive. It is not, and we all know that.

Chris Heaton-Harris: As the right hon. Gentleman might have heard me say before, the best way to mitigate no deal is to vote for the deal on the table.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): We have said that the Minister must rule out no deal. Members across the Chamber from all parts of the UK are mindful of the devastating impact of Tory austerity on public services, and at this time he wants to spend billions more on no deal. He knows that no deal would devastate our public services even further. On that basis, will he rule out no deal?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The best way to mitigate no deal is to vote for the only deal on the table.

Stephen Kinnock: The key point about preparations for no deal is that it clearly takes two to tango. For example, we need to know what the French Government are doing about the port in Calais. The head of HMRC told the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union recently that the French Government were categorically not talking to him about Calais because

they could not do so under the terms of article 50—bilateral contacts are not allowed—and the French Government have legislation stating that, in the case of the UK withdrawing from the EU without an agreement, British nationals and their family members residing in France would be staying illegally. Will the Minister please explain what he is doing to get the French Government to participate in his no-deal preparations?

Chris Heaton-Harris: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to the debate in the French Assembly only last week, he would have heard a French Minister say that the package to UK citizens living in France would be the most generous possible—[*Interruption.*] No, Madame Loiseau has said that on the record. He would also have heard that the number of border checkpoints at Calais would increase from two to 10, that a border inspection post would be built and that technology would also be used, with the sole purpose of ensuring the flow of goods on the Calais side of the short strait.

It has always been our intention to accelerate no-deal preparations if needed as we neared Brexit day, although our hope has always been that we leave with a deal and that they will not be needed. Our communication with businesses and the wider public about a no-deal scenario will likewise increase as we approach our exit from the EU, until such time as we can be confident that planning for no deal is no longer needed. We now recommend that businesses also ensure they are prepared and enact their own no-deal plans as they judge necessary. In the coming weeks, and until the deal is secured and ratified by the House, we will also publish further advice on the steps that people, including UK nationals living in the EU and EU citizens living here in the UK, may need to take to prepare for our exit from the EU.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says that no one wants no deal. I think that that is generally the considered view of the vast majority of the House, and it is not hard to see why. We see our constituents losing their jobs now. We see the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care spending money on fridges now. We see billions of pounds being spent on arguments about whether we are going to have the Army at the ports. We are in this position because of the way in which the Government have proceeded.

I know that this place is not given to introspection, but does the Minister accept any responsibility—do the Government accept any responsibility—for how it has come to this? Would the Minister care to say what he would have liked the Government to do differently, so that we could have avoided this? I promise him that if he just says that everybody should vote for his deal, people will laugh, but the public will be watching all of us and wondering what 2019 will bring, so will he please give a decent answer to our constituents?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have to say that I think the decent answer is the one that the hon. Lady would expect from me. I hear what she is saying, I really do. I should love to have a moment of introspection—I should have loved to be in the negotiating room—but we now have on the table a very good deal for this country, and the best way to mitigate a no-deal scenario is to vote for that deal.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Government are very short of legislative time to prepare for no deal. Will the Minister outline the process for possibly extending article 50?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is a matter of Government policy that we will not be revoking article 50.

As I said earlier, work preparing for no deal is not just starting now. As a responsible Government, we have spent more than two years making extensive preparations for all scenarios, including no deal. For instance, over the summer we published the 106 technical notices to which the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) referred. They contained, among many other items, guidance for the public on travelling to the EU, covering driving, passports, pet passports and flights; advice for businesses on various changes, including changes relating to data protection, copyright and intellectual property; and guidance for organisations that receive EU funding on how they can continue to receive it in a no-deal scenario.

Since then, we have taken further steps to ensure that people and businesses are ready. That has included publishing more than 100 pages of guidance for businesses on processes and procedures at the border in a no-deal scenario; contacting 145,000 businesses that trade with the EU, telling them to start getting ready for no-deal customs procedures; advising hundreds of ports of entry, traders, pharmaceutical firms and other organisations that use the border about the disruption that they might experience so that they can get their supply chains ready; and producing a paper on citizens' rights, giving people clarity about their future and the fact that they will be able to continue to live their lives as they do now.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the Minister for giving way again. He is being extremely generous in taking interventions. The Speaker said earlier that there was no cap on repetition in the Chamber, but I think that he has won the award today.

My I gently say to the Minister that publishing documents day after day is not preparing this country? We are coming up to Christmas, and in three months we will leave the European Union. Businessmen are busy running their businesses and employing people, and we are approaching the end of the road. The Minister has said that it is not Government policy to extend article 50, but does he agree that it is legally possible to extend or, indeed, revoke it?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Many Members want to speak, and we are running out of time. The debate must finish at 7 pm, so please, let us be courteous to everyone.

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is Government policy that we will not revoke article 50, but I hear what the hon. Lady says. She will hear, in the coming days and weeks, why the Cabinet took the decision to increase the pace of our no-deal preparation, and she will hear a lot more about what the Government are doing, and what we are asking businesses to do, should we reach the unlikely point of a no-deal scenario.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Minister has made it very clear, on several occasions, that he thinks that the best way of avoiding the no-deal

situation that he does not want to see is to vote for the deal. Does he accept that his preferred “best way” may not—indeed, is unlikely to—come to pass? Is he really telling the House that if, in his view, the best is not possible, the extent of his ambition, and the Government's ambition, is to mitigate the disaster of no deal, when he has the option of avoiding it by ruling it out?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman is a sensible and long-standing Member of this House with great connections to the auto trade and many other businesses in his constituency, and I would like to think that he will be listening to them over the course of the next few weeks, and that perhaps he can be persuaded that the deal on the table is the best one for this country, for businesses and for certainty in this area.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am not going to give way again for another few seconds.

To answer a point raised by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras, we have brought forward legislation that takes account of different scenarios, including the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018, the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, and the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Act 2018, and I am sure that a number of Members present today have sat diligently in Committees ensuring that the secondary legislation we require is well scrutinised. We are confident of the UK's long-term prospects in all scenarios, and we will ensure that the public finances and the UK economy remain strong, and we have taken extensive steps to provide businesses and citizens with advice and guidance aimed at helping to mitigate the potential impacts of not having a deal.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister confirm or deny reports put out that the Army is on standby to slaughter thousands of lambs in the event of a no deal? We put that to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at the Select Committee and he said he had no knowledge of this. I therefore wonder whether this is No. 10 putting out scare stories to scare us into this deal.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think it might be the hon. Gentleman who is making things up.

The Government are also ensuring that staff have the correct training and skills to undertake this preparation effectively, and we are confident of the UK's long-term prospects in all scenarios. More than 10,000 civil servants are working on Brexit with a further 5,000 in the pipeline, which will allow us to accelerate our preparation as necessary, and hopefully for a deal.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): General Sir Nick Carter said on “The Andrew Marr Show” on 11 November when asked if the Army would be involved in the distribution of food and medicines:

“We're not involved in that, no. We're involved in thinking hard about what it might involve.”

So will the Minister tell us now what the Government intend to do with the troops they are planning to use?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The Government have no intention of using troops in our no-deal planning at all. To be absolutely clear, our priority remains delivering the deal we have negotiated with our European partners.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The Minister is being very gracious in giving way to a large number of Members. He mentioned many different sectors and has referred to many colleagues' questions about them. My question is about the health service and in particular my local hospital, the Royal Berks in Reading. Some 12.5% of the staff of the hospital come from the EU, including many doctors, nurses and other clinicians. They are seriously concerned about the prospect of no deal, and, at a time when the NHS is losing many valuable staff, recruitment and retention are a serious issue for the service. It is facing its greatest winter crisis for many years. Surely the Minister can look into this issue and provide greater reassurance. Ultimately I believe that it is the most overwhelming argument for the Government to reject the prospect of no deal.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I hear the hon. Gentleman's heartfelt concerns, but I point him to the Government announcement earlier in December that guarantees for the people he is rightly concerned about, and who work so hard for us all in our health service and our other sectors, the rights and assurances they deserve.

Chris Bryant: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am afraid not. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman is the one person in the House I can say that to: no.

We are confident of the UK's long-term prospects in all scenarios, and we will ensure that the public finances and the UK economy remain strong, but with our EU exit approaching, we are accelerating our preparations as planned. It is the responsible thing to do, and we ask and recommend that people and businesses across the UK take the actions they judge to be necessary to be ready for leaving on 29 March next year.

5.28 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on securing this emergency debate, and we are grateful to Mr Speaker for allowing it at such short notice. This is another instance of the parliamentarians of these four nations having the opportunity to debate what is by far the most serious and urgent matter affecting all of our constituents today, yet we debate it not with the support of the Government, but in spite of the Government; not a single Government Back Bencher stood in support of the application earlier.

For more than two years, the Government did next to nothing to plan for a no-deal Brexit, despite constantly telling us that no deal was better than a bad deal. Now, when everybody bar the Prime Minister realises that she has brought back a bad deal, we are suddenly being told that this bad deal is better than no deal after all. Practically the only positive thing that can be said about the Prime Minister's deal is that it is not quite as bad as no deal. The Government are spending a fortune on a massive propaganda campaign to try to get businesses and constituents to put pressure on us to support the deal. They are touring all around the British Isles—the

Prime Minister did not go to Glasgow, but she went to Renfrewshire for 20 minutes—but they are not doing this to talk up the benefits of the Prime Minister's deal, because that would not take very long at all, would it? They are doing it talk up the likelihood of no deal. They are quite deliberately setting out to scare businesses and institutions, in the knowledge that that will encourage them to put pressure on us.

I can give the House an example of how transparent this is. A few weeks ago, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland arranged for a number of businesses and other bodies from Northern Ireland to come over here for a day, and she invited us all to go and speak to them about their concerns over a no-deal Brexit. They were there at the invitation of the Government to talk us out of no deal. I did not have time to speak to them all, but I asked many organisations from Northern Ireland, "If you could have any result you wanted from these negotiations, what would it be?" Every single one of them said, "Don't do Brexit." So when the Prime Minister and the Minister insist that the only way to stop no deal is to support the Prime Minister's deal, I say no it is not. We can stop Brexit altogether. If we do that, the question of no deal and a bad deal can at the very least be put back to the next time the public get the choice to make that decision. Why have the Government suddenly started to put out so much publicity about the harmful impacts of no deal? The consequences of no deal have not changed. They were there for us all to see on the day after the referendum. Let us face it, they were there for all to see on the day before the referendum as well.

I commend the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), for securing this debate, and I earnestly hope that we can work together, along with a number of Government Members and with other parties here, to try to stop this madness altogether, but we cannot forget that the position we are now in was entirely foreseeable when Parliament gave the Prime Minister unconditional authorisation to trigger article 50. Disastrous failing has undoubtedly followed disastrous failing on the part of Her Majesty's Government at every stage in the process, but there has also been a disastrous failing on the part of Her Majesty's loyal Opposition. When they needed to oppose, they singularly failed to do so—with, I stress, some honourable exceptions.

I do not propose to spend much time on a line-by-line analysis of the £4 billion that has already been taken away from our health service, our police, our local authorities and other essential services to pay for the Government's incompetence, because, although that is an eye-watering sum in anyone's book, it is peanuts compared with the true cost of a no-deal Brexit, or indeed any kind of Brexit at all. I just want to draw attention to one line of that departmental allocation. It is not the biggest sum, by any stretch of the imagination, at less than 0.5% of the total, but to me it is the one that should warn us not to go anywhere near a no-deal Brexit in any circumstances. We know that £16 million extra has been allocated to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. I hope that no one in this Chamber can avoid a shudder at hearing that. A no-deal Brexit means that we need an additional £16 million for the Police Service of Northern Ireland. What do the Government think it is for? I can tell the House that it is not for extra traffic wardens.

I am astonished that we should ever need to remind anyone of what is at stake in Northern Ireland if we leave without a deal that secures the permanent status of the peace process, yet only two days ago, the Democratic Unionist party spokesperson on Brexit, the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), asked the Prime Minister:

“Would it not be far better to walk away now with £39 billion in her pocket and with her hands free?”—[*Official Report*, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 548.]

No, it would not. The vast majority of the people in Northern Ireland are saying just now, “Do not walk away with no deal in any circumstances whatsoever.” The price that Northern Ireland would have to pay for a no-deal Brexit cannot be measured in sums of money, but if it could, it would be well in excess of £4 billion.

The Government’s motivation for suddenly turning up the heat on no deal is as transparent as it is manipulative. They know that they cannot get a majority in Parliament for the Prime Minister’s deal. Instead of accepting that and seeking to build a consensus that could get parliamentary support, which incidentally is something the Prime Minister of a minority Government should have been doing from day one, at the last minute the Government are seeking to coerce Parliament—some people might go as far as to say that they are seeking to blackmail Parliament—into voting for the Prime Minister’s deal by making no deal the only other option.

The Prime Minister still insists that no deal is the only alternative, but that is not true, and we know from her own words that it is not true. She has tried the usual negotiating tactics. For example, when someone negotiates with two different sets of people in different directions, they put them in separate rooms and give the first set a scare story to persuade them to move towards them, and then they give the second set a scare story to persuade them to do the same. However, the Prime Minister made the mistake of telling everyone the same scare story at the same time. In the Chamber, when everyone was here, she warned the no-Brexit brigade in her own party, “If you don’t vote for this deal, there will be no deal.” Then she warned the no-deal brigade, “If you don’t vote for this deal, there will be no Brexit.”

The Prime Minister has put three options on the table. When we come to a meaningful vote, whether in this place or whether the public get a say, the third option of not leaving must be put back on the table. If she thought for one second that her deal would get more support in this House, or among the citizens of these four nations, than not leaving at all, she would be the first to put that question to a vote. The reason she will not ask the people again about Brexit is that she knows what the answer would be.

There have always been other options, but the Prime Minister has been too blinkered and dogmatic to recognise that they existed. Compromises were available. Some were offered two years ago by the Scottish Government, but she paid so little attention that I think she has forgotten they even existed. She must have forgotten that they existed, because when she came here to present her deal and said, “Nobody has ever put forward an alternative option,” she of course spoke in good faith—because everybody who speaks in Parliament does so in good faith. The only explanation must be that this document, presented to her by the national Government of one of our four nations, meant so little to her that she forgot it even existed.

Dr Whitford: Was not the Prime Minister’s fatal mistake to have painted herself into a corner with red lines before doing the first impact assessment, because otherwise she could have looked at what the best alternative was?

Peter Grant: I accept that is one of the disastrous mistakes the Prime Minister has made. We must remember that over the past few weeks, while the Government kept telling us, “But everyone in Europe has said that this is the only deal possible,” what they said was, “This is the only deal possible, given the firm negotiating stance that the United Kingdom has set.” That has been made perfectly clear, and I have no doubt that the Government have been told that by their contacts in Europe as well. Had the Prime Minister not painted herself into a corner with the stupid and unnecessary red lines, she would now have a much more workable deal that might well have got the acceptance if not the support of a significantly greater number of Members of this House.

One of the many examples of the almost despotic arrogance that we have seen from the Prime Minister is the fact that she, and she alone, appears to know exactly what was in the minds of the 17.5 million people when they put their mark against “Leave” on the ballot paper. None of us can know that for certain. I would never have the arrogance to say that I know what was in someone else’s mind, which is why I never call into question the motivations or integrity of those who happened to vote a different way from me. None of us can know for certain, but does anyone seriously believe that even a tiny fraction of those 17.5 million people voted for lower living standards, for food shortages, for the possibility that patient safety, and even patients’ lives, will be put at risk as a result of difficulties in getting essential medical supplies to them, for the possibility of troops on the streets to quell violent civil disorder, or for the likelihood of God only knows what for the future of Northern Ireland? I do not know what those 17.5 million people voted for, but I would be astonished if anything more than a tiny fraction voted for that kind of nightmare scenario, all of which is taken either from official Government statements or from unofficial and unattributable Government briefings.

Wera Hobhouse: I have said that again and again. Some 17.4 million people voted to leave the European Union. As we know from Government Members, within that leave vote people are split. So can the Government tell us—I would be interested in the hon. Gentleman’s views—how many of those 17.4 million people voted to leave without a deal and how many voted for the deal that the Prime Minister has brought back? Taken together, when we consider the split in the leave vote, the majority of people are actually for staying in the European Union, which is why we need a people’s vote.

Peter Grant: The referendum was a choice between one very definite answer on one side and an infinite number of possibilities on the other. One of my hon. Friends said at the time, “We know people have voted to leave, but we have no idea where they have voted to go.” The Prime Minister quickly shut down that discussion by defining what people had decided to do, and then she has the cheek to tell us that we are somehow being anti-democratic if we think perhaps the 17.5 million people voted for something else.

Deidre Brock: Does my hon. Friend agree that the first EU referendum was won on a tissue of lies, undeliverable promises and illegalities and that we should undo the rough wooing of the Brexit referendum and rededicate the decision to the people?

Peter Grant: There is no doubt at all that the EU referendum, as well as having the biggest participation of UK citizens in any democratic test, was also the most corrupt and most dishonest there has ever been and, I sincerely hope, we will ever see. Revelations are still coming out, even today, about the illegalities, some of which I suspect will never be brought to account. The penalties imposed on those who corrupt the democratic process are puny compared with what happens to a person who is found to have attempted to corrupt the full course of justice, so there is clearly a question that has to be addressed in future legislation.

We know that the calamitous effects of no deal are not what the majority of leave voters voted for.

Tom Brake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: Not just now.

It is not what they were promised either in the Government's information or by the leave campaign. It is not what they voted for, and I believe it is the absolute duty of this Parliament and of this Government to make sure it is not what they get. It would be an unpardonable dereliction of duty for the Government, or anyone else, deliberately to use the procedures of this House in such a way as to maximise the danger of the worst possible outcome, the least-favoured outcome, simply because it is the only conceivable way to deliver an outcome that the Prime Minister has decided she wants but which practically nobody else in this Parliament wants.

In the past few days, as was mentioned earlier, a number of Conservative MPs have said publicly that they are likely to resign the party Whip if it looks as though the Prime Minister is herding us towards a no-deal Brexit. I would not want to see anyone put in that position.

I have respect for a number of Conservative MPs—for most Conservative MPs, in fact—even though I disagree with them, and I do not think any of them will hand back their party card easily or with a light heart, but think about it. It would not need many more Tory MPs to do that before suddenly, even with the Democratic Unionist party, the Government no longer have a working majority. There is already a motion of no confidence in the Government on the Order Paper, and it would take only one signature on that motion, and a few more people in the Conservative party to decide to put the countries of this Union before narrow party advantage, and suddenly the entire Government, not just the Prime Minister, would find that their jackets were on the shoogliest of shoogly nails. That might be what concentrates minds, which would be welcome, but what does it say about the state of British politics when hundreds of thousands of other people's jobs can be sacrificed by the Cabinet for an ideologically driven hard Brexit but a threat to their own jobs suddenly makes them sit up and take notice?

Ultimately, whatever voting procedure the Government decide to use whenever, if ever, we get to that vote, Parliament will be faced with a choice between two final options, and no deal cannot be one of them. Think about

what happens in, to take a random example, a Conservative party leadership election. I understand that quite a few Conservative Members had reason to check the rules recently. If there are more than two candidates, they go through a series of eliminations, with the least supported candidate dropping off at the end of each round and the election finishing with a run-off between the two most supported candidates.

If that process is good enough to pick a temporary, sometimes extremely temporary, leader of the Conservative party, why cannot we do it for the most important peacetime decision these islands have ever taken? If we did that, no deal would be off the table before we started, which would ease a lot of the concerns that the Government are now quite deliberately fuelling.

Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman then confirm his support for my European Union (Revocation of Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, which I presented yesterday? The Bill would basically rule out no deal, and unless a deal is agreed in a public vote, we would stay in the EU.

Peter Grant: I think the hon. Gentleman knows the answer to that question, because I have co-sponsored his Bill, although if I had realised that that meant I was expected to be here to speak on his Bill on Burns Day next year, I might have thought other about it.

I do not think it is acceptable, and it will be forever held up as a mark of shame on this entire Parliament, that it is left to Opposition Back Benchers to try to use procedural methods to force the Government to allow Parliament to give the decision that Parliament wants to give, rather than trying to force Parliament to give a decision that we really do not want to give in preference to a decision that we really, really do not want to give. When it comes to a decision, by whatever process, it is not acceptable, it is anti-democratic and, in terms of sovereignty of the people of Scotland and the rights of the people of Northern Ireland, it is unconstitutional to force us into a situation where no deal is one of only two deals left on the table. No deal can be ruled out and should be ruled out. For all the parroting of this and other Ministers, it is not up to Parliament to take no deal off the table by accepting an unacceptable deal. It is up to the Government to take it off the table right now by saying that no matter what happens, they will not impose it on us and on everybody else.

When it comes to a final decision, the two options available to us have to be the ones most likely to be accepted by as many MPs as possible, even if they are not supported by as many MPs as possible. I will not support anything that takes us out of the EU, but I might be willing, reluctantly, to accept something that is less disastrous than what we are faced with just now. The final choice cannot be between the Prime Minister's deal and no deal. The combined Parliament of our four nations and the citizens of our four nations must be given a choice, and that choice, if it is to be a fair choice, can only be between the Prime Minister's Brexit and no Brexit.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I am not imposing this, but may I suggest that people speak for about five minutes, as I think we would then get everybody in before the end at 7?

5.46 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The greatest political movement of the 20th century was undoubtedly the Labour party. It transformed that century; it came from nowhere and literally changed the landscape of this country. Its greatest Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, was educated 10 miles from where I live. So I have to ask the Labour party: what on earth is it doing at the moment? What on earth is it doing with the national interest? We have a Prime Minister who is breaking herself, duty bound to get a deal for this country that ensures we leave with a deal, yet the shadow Secretary of State is saying, “No matter what she brings back, the Opposition will reject it, but no deal is not an option.” I know some Labour Members spend a huge amount of time with their constituents, but surely they are hearing their constituents say, “Look, let’s just take what the Prime Minister is bringing back”—*[Interruption.]* That is what they are saying. They are saying, “Let’s take what the Prime Minister is bringing back and let’s move on as a country.” I tell hon. Members that in January, when the Prime Minister presents her deal at the Dispatch Box, one that she has pursued tirelessly on behalf of this country without rest or break, and the Labour party votes against it and then says that no deal is not good enough, the people of this country will work out who is responsible for where we end up. It will not be Conservative Members; there will be a few on our Benches, but it will be Opposition Members, and they will pay the political price.

I have huge respect for the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), but he cannot camouflage his desire to see a second referendum with promises and pledges that say, “I have six tests that need to be met.” He is possibly the only person who knows what those six tests are—the country has not got a clue. We then have this idea that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who leads a peripatetic caravan of chaos on the Opposition Benches, could go to the EU and negotiate a better deal. This is the man who, after the poisonings in Salisbury said, “We need to go and have a chat with Putin to find out what his problems are.” It is just not realistic—and the British public know it. The Labour party is playing fast and loose with this country’s future.

I have not spoken in these debates. As Chairman of the Procedure Committee, I have worked tirelessly for a year and a half to ensure that both sides have a fair rub of the green. I was not going to speak today, but then I heard that there was to be another debate under Standing Order No. 24 so that the right hon. and learned Gentleman could say the same thing over and over again, which is, “Whatever deal the Prime Minister brings back, it will not be good enough, but my word—I am not going to tolerate leaving with no deal!” Why can he not be honest and just say, “I want a second referendum”? That is what he wants. He wants a second referendum. He wants to thwart the will of the people for the people. That is what the people’s vote is: “I will thwart the will of the people for the people.” It is an entirely dishonest position.

Opinion polls go up and down—they fluctuate. It will not have escaped the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s attention that my party has had a huge amount of difficulty over the past week, but this week we are four points ahead of Her Majesty’s Opposition. The reason

is that the public have worked out that the Opposition are being dishonest with the truth. Members should by all means go through the Division Lobby in January and vote against the deal, but the public will not believe for a minute that it was done in the national interest. It will have been done in self-interest. The Labour party no longer cares about or knows about the national interest, and it is a disgrace. I started my speech by saying that the Labour party was the greatest political movement of the 20th century, but it is now beginning to look like a rabble.

5.51 pm

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): I am really sorry and dismayed to have heard what the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) just said, because I have high regard and respect for him. I simply say to him that he could not be more wrong. He talked with great respect of the work that the Prime Minister has put in; she has made one catastrophic misjudgment after another and it is she who is threatening the national interest. Furthermore, she is in gross dereliction of her most serious duties as the Prime Minister. She is playing an extraordinarily dangerous game. There is every possibility that there is a risk that we will stumble into no deal.

Way back in the beginning, when the referendum result first came into being, I had hoped that there might be a deal that we could vote for that would mitigate the damage. I have been driven to the conclusion that that is not the case mostly because of the catastrophic mess that the Prime Minister has made of the negotiations. As the hon. Member for Broxbourne knows, I have conducted many negotiations myself, so I know whereof I speak. She could not have conducted it worse if she had thought for a week. The dangerous game that she is playing means that, as I said, she is risking our stumbling into a no-deal position.

I really felt for the Minister today. I am happy to say that I have never quite been in the position that he was in at the Dispatch Box, but I have been at the Dispatch Box defending a difficult case, and I felt for him because the only answer that he had to any question that anybody asked him was, “All you need to do is vote for the Prime Minister’s deal.” I suggest that he and the hon. Member for Broxbourne put that argument forward with a greater degree of caution than they have so far. My understanding—my perception—is that most people in this House do not think the Prime Minister’s deal delivers on the promises made to those who voted leave. That is one of the reasons why there is so much opposition to it, irrespective of the point of view held by different individuals.

I shall say this briefly, because I am conscious of how many people want to speak. The people who are going to vote for the Prime Minister’s deal—there will be some—are happy because they think that they will be able to go out and say to the British people, “Those of you who voted leave, we delivered on your mandate.” I think they are going to lose, but let us say that I am mistaken and they win, and they get this deal through, or some variety on the theme of this deal. I hear people talk about the Norway option, although it is far from clear to me that the European economic area has any intention of accepting Britain into membership. Let us put that aside for the moment, though, and let us say that either the Prime Minister’s deal or some minor

[Margaret Beckett]

variant of it carries. What happens then? That is why I say to the hon. Member for Broxbourne that he is absolutely wrong about the national interest. What happens then is that people will see that there are still high levels of immigration; they will see that we are still making payments to the European Union; they will see that we still have a link to the European Court; and they will see that we are still bound by the rules and regulations of the European Union, although we no longer have any voice in deciding what they are. Perhaps most of all, they will see that one of the Prime Minister's simplest promises—vote for my deal and it will all be over—could not be less true. It will not be over; it will barely have begun. The worst and the most difficult of the negotiations will still be to come, and that will rumble on for years and years.

I will tell the hon. Gentleman why he is wrong about where the national interest lies. Anybody who thinks longer than perhaps a month or so, or six months, beyond the date of decision should think about this very hard: I suspect that the greatest possible disillusion will come if the Prime Minister's deal, or something like it, goes through, because then people will find out that they are in the circumstances that her deal leaves us in. I cannot think of anything more likely to make people utterly disillusioned with politics and politicians than realising that they have been told, or promised, "Oh, it's alright, we voted for this. We have left the European Union", when it does not mean any of the things that they thought it would mean. I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant). I have been driven to the view that what we should do in the national interest—it is the only thing to do in the national interest—is to delay article 50, to put in place procedures for a people's vote, because it is right for it to go back to the people, and to suggest that we leave it to them but to say that we should stay in the European Union.

The Prime Minister has talked today, as she so often does, of the duty and responsibility of hon. Members when she is in complete dereliction of her own duty. I say that the biggest duty that any of us has is to tell people the truth and it is time that we got on with it.

5.56 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett).

We are living in the most serious of times, and I think that that is very clear to all of us. What we are discussing today is of such great import that there should be a reaching out across the Front Benches, as I have said in this place more than once. It is incumbent on the Government to do that and it is also incumbent on the Opposition to do that.

I will largely restrict my remarks to why I believe that no deal should not and must not happen—indeed, I was one of those who signed the letter co-signed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). A no deal would cause such grave disruption to the businesses in my constituency in the west midlands and further afield.

Let us just look at what no deal means. No deal means going on World Trade Organisation terms. These have been lauded in some quarters. I disagree. I have been involved in international trade for most of my working life. Yes, the WTO provides the lowest common denominator for world trade. It provides for nothing more than that. Those who think that a country such as the United Kingdom will thrive on World Trade Organisation terms, which no other major country thinks are anything like sufficient, are deluded. Indeed, no other country of our size has World Trade Organisation membership without several other additional agreements, whether it is with China, the United States or wherever. They all have agreements with their neighbouring countries for a start.

Let us look at what World Trade Organisation means on a day-to-day basis: it means tariffs. We do not have tariffs with the European Union at the moment, but it will mean tariffs. Much more importantly, it will mean the non-tariff barriers that have already been mentioned, whether that is phytosanitary inspections, veterinary inspections and other types of inspections of borders. I, along with colleagues from the Exiting the European Union Committee, have seen what happens at Dover. It is a smooth flow of trucks through the port—one every few seconds. A slight delay, which we have seen for other reasons, causes massive back-ups. This is simply not possible, and that will happen at other ports as well.

World Trade Organisation terms would also mean that we would have to deal with the separation of the quotas that we have as part of the European Union. This will not be easy. For instance, New Zealand has questions about how its quota of lamb to the European Union will be divided between the UK and the EU27. We will not have the benefit of the 40 free trade agreements that cover about 70 different countries, unless they are rolled over. It is going to be difficult enough to roll all those over if we sign the withdrawal agreement; if we do not, it will be next to impossible and I do not believe that we have the capacity or time to do that. And that is just for goods.

For services, World Trade Organisation terms would mean a very basic agreement. Whatever has been said about the failure of the European Union to complete the single market in services, it is nevertheless a much better market for services than WTO rules.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Gentleman, like me, struggle to some extent with those who advocate falling back on World Trade Organisation rules, because they then talk about very comprehensive free trade agreements that in many ways seek to replicate the European Union?

Jeremy Lefroy: The right hon. Gentleman is precisely right. We would be going back several steps only to try to come forward a few steps.

Let me turn to the new trade agreements. Members have already mentioned how difficult it will be to negotiate the new agreement with the European Union. I agree, but I think it will be possible and it will be an excellent agreement. That is why I am going to support the Prime Minister when it comes to the vote in January. However, let us just think about how much more difficult it will be to negotiate that new agreement if we go without a deal. In effect, relations will have broken completely between the United Kingdom and the European Union. There

will be so many other things to have to deal with that the prospect of negotiating a new trade agreement will be at the bottom of the agenda for the European Union and, to be frank, for the UK because we will be dealing with so many other things. The idea that if we come out with no deal, there will somehow be a possibility of negotiating a quick free trade agreement with the European Union to replace the great agreement that we have at the moment is ludicrous. It will not happen. It will be easier for us if we leave with the deal that is on the table.

I will very gently refer to the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), because I do actually agree with him about the approach of the Labour party. I fully respect the position that the official Opposition are taking, but hon. Members should look at the Labour party's 2017 manifesto and at the withdrawal agreement. With the exception of the Labour party's manifesto saying that a customs union should be left on the table—if I am quoting it correctly—there is very little difference between this agreement and the manifesto that the Labour party stood on in 2017. That is why I urge both Front Benches to talk. This matter is too important for us to have a line right down the middle. It is incumbent on both sides to talk.

6.3 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who in many ways encapsulates the voice of reason on the Government Benches. I only wish that voice had been more prominent and had prevailed at an earlier stage in the negotiations.

I support my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) in this approach, but we have to recognise that we are now engaged in one of the most dangerous and difficult exercises in parliamentary brinkmanship possible. Looking at the way in which the Prime Minister has conducted these negotiations and the measures that have been announced overnight, it is difficult to come to any other conclusion than that the Prime Minister is trying to drive us towards a situation where Parliament has to make a choice between a bad deal and a disastrous one. If the Prime Minister were genuinely to start to take the necessary measures to avoid a no deal Brexit, it would have been necessary to take them two years ago. As my right hon. and learned Friend has made quite clear, it is actually too late to get the necessary infrastructure and the measures that would be required for a no-deal situation.

What we have now is something that is profoundly damaging—above all, damaging to businesses and to the economy that is sustained by them.

Wera Hobhouse: Is it not absolutely necessary that the Government now knock these Brexit fantasies on the head and do not continue to give the hope or the impression to the people of this country that something is possible when it is clearly the most damaging thing that this country could face?

Mr Bailey: Yes. I am going to come to that in a moment.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with me and the north-east chamber of commerce that no deal would be disastrous

for our economy, that WTO rules would make it much more difficult for our businesses to be able to compete in Europe, and that we in this Chamber should be doing everything possible to stop no deal happening?

Mr Bailey: I completely agree. I presume that Members in all parts of the House have been lobbied by representatives of the manufacturing sector. Living in a manufacturing constituency, I have had an awful lot of lobbying, and I have yet to come across any trade association or any representatives of individual companies who think that the no-deal scenario is anything but a disaster.

Looking at those who seem to want a no-deal scenario, I would divide them into two categories. There are the no-deal deniers—those who still try to perpetuate the myth that this is all the politics of fear and that none of these things will really happen. The fact is that this is not something being generated by politicians to pursue a particular political objective—it is the words of people who have invested in companies; who make the decisions on which the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of our electors depend; and who will have to implement the decisions and deal with the measures that will have to be taken if a no-deal scenario actually occurs. They cannot be disregarded. There is also the myth perpetrated by Government Members that the compromise withdrawal deal that is being promoted by the Prime Minister is somehow a way forward. Certainly, some businesses have said that we should go for it on the basis that it at least buys them a bit of time before the disaster hits them. However, there is nothing in the withdrawal deal that satisfies me that that disaster would not occur.

Today, literally just before I walked into the Chamber, I had an email from a business in my constituency involved in the motor supply industry. It says:

“If we leave the EU with May's proposed deal we will have access to the European Single Market, but no say in the development of its rules. The automotive sector is bound by enormous amounts of rules governing safety and environmental issues which constantly change. There can be no doubt that our competitor nations will use their very best endeavours to use these rules to their advantage and our disadvantage. All of the main automotive companies in the world have made it plain that they have no interest in investing in a UK that is outside the EU. May's proposed deal would therefore lead to the decline and eventual disappearance of our industry in the UK.”

I think that is the authentic voice of the small businesses involved at the sharp end of our manufacturing sector.

No deal is also a disaster for our public finances, with £2 billion being spent on preparatory measures. What could we have spent that £2 billion on? There are so many better alternatives—I will not go into them now, but that did not come out in the course of the referendum debate. It also disregards the personal hardship, worry and concern for literally hundreds of thousands of people involved in businesses who have to face Christmas without knowing what the outcome of these negotiations will be and the potential impact on their personal finances.

It all could have been different. People have talked about the Prime Minister's determination and sense of public duty. I agree that she has it, but that does not alter the fact that we are where we are because of the series of disastrous personal and political positions that she took. Her rhetoric at the Tory party conference was hardly that of a person who wanted to sensibly negotiate

[Mr Bailey]

with a body such as the EU. There was also the announcement of the red lines, the opposition to Parliament having a say on the withdrawal agreement—something that was actively fought for and grabbed by this Parliament—and the constant pandering to the no-deal deniers or ideologues on the Government Benches. That is not symptomatic of someone who wanted to reach out and come to an agreement, which I think was possible at one stage.

We only have to look at the vote on triggering article 50 to realise that there was a consensus on both sides of the House at a given time that we had to go forward and respect the will of the people. I have been a remainer and a pro-European all my life, but I voted to trigger article 50 because I respected the view of the people and thought it was necessary to try to implement what they wanted. Equally, as a representative of an important manufacturing constituency, during these negotiations I could not disregard the interests of those companies and the people who work in them, which seem to have been disregarded by the Government's policies.

This Government's policy must be to state quite categorically that their overriding political objective is to avoid no deal and that they will take whatever measures necessary, including extending article 50 or talking to Opposition Members to see what sort of deal can be done, to ensure that we do not come out with no deal. I will conclude with a quote from the same manufacturer who contacted me just before I came here today. He says:

“Neither my employees nor I will easily forgive anyone in parliament if this disaster is not stopped before it is too late.”

Only the Government can stop it, and they can only do that by making it quite clear that no deal is not an option.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Having just come into the Chair and counted how many Members wish to speak, I am somewhat shocked. Mr Deputy Speaker said that five-minute speeches would be about right because he had an indication that a large number of Members wished to speak. Something must have been said of which I am unaware that has made nine Members decide they have nothing to say after all. I do not know whether the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) will consider that a victory. Members might be a little surprised that the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) spoke without interruption from me for 10 minutes instead of five. I calculate that if Members speak for approximately six to seven minutes, everyone who wishes to speak will have the opportunity to do so. It is nice to see the House behaving so well and so honourably. I hope that it will continue to do so and that I will not have to introduce an official time limit.

6.14 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Before I came into the House this afternoon, I, together with other north-east MPs, received a letter from the chief executive of the north-east chamber of commerce. It is entirely apposite to the subject of this debate about the failure of the Prime Minister to bring the deal to the House and about our being able to have a vote on the deal.

The letter is absolutely to the point because it talks about the risk for manufacturing in the north-east of a no-deal Brexit and the impact it will have on businesses. It talks about the need for businesses to have certainty about what is happening so that they can plan their businesses and be clear about what is needed to ensure they go forward positively in the future.

The first thing the letter talks about is the need for preparedness, which again is part of the discussion here today. The concern is that the advice from the Government and the measures being taken, which were announced yesterday, are actually too late for some, while others already have things in hand. There is a real concern about the lack of business preparedness.

It is above time that this House had the chance to have a vote on the Prime Minister's deal and to express a view clearly. It is something that has already been delayed two weeks, and now we are going away for Christmas, so among all the concern from businesses about what will happen, we have already lost four weeks in which we could have been making a decision. This House could have been expressing a view about how we should move forward and what should be the next steps for this House.

As I say, it is now clear that the Prime Minister cannot achieve the amendments to the legal agreements that she is seeking from Europe which might make the deal acceptable to some. I say “some” because clearly not all people will be satisfied, but it might make the deal acceptable to some who object to it at present.

I want to turn to the letter from James Ramsbotham, the chief executive of the north-east chamber of commerce. Frankly, I was tempted to read out the whole thing as my speech because it is very appropriate. However, you will please to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I am just going to read a bit of it. The relevant bit is where he says:

“Firms need clarity, precision and reassurance. The longer businesses wait to understand...the future UK-EU relationship, the bigger the hit to their near-term investment, expansion and confidence. What they want is to know who they will be able to hire in future, how they will pay VAT, whether their goods will be stopped at borders, and whether the contracts they enter into will be enforceable.

One processing manufacturer said, ‘Looking at WTO tariffs of 6.5%, plus fees for shipment, plus additional staffing costs to cope with the increased admin, it quickly adds up and hinders the British market from being competitive in Europe. An industry which overall sees 75% of its goods exported into Europe could have major issues going forward with a No-Deal Brexit.’”

He also tells us that some businesses are looking to relocate because of concerns about the future.

It is no good the Minister telling us again and again that the best way to avoid no deal is to vote for the Government's deal, because the Prime Minister's deal does not actually satisfy those tests. It gives us some temporary relief while other discussions go on in the future under the political declaration. It does not give business the certainty that it is looking for.

Chris Heaton-Harris: It does.

Liz Twist: Well, we are going to have to disagree about this, because clearly businesses do not feel that they have such certainty. It is really important that we get on, have a vote on the deal, have that discussion and then look at where we will go forward.

I want to say to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) that, like him, I am getting a very heavy email postbag from my constituents with their views. They are not saying to me, “Vote for this deal”.

Mr Charles Walker *rose*—

Liz Twist: If I may, I will just finish my point.

Some of my constituents are saying, “I voted for Brexit and this deal isn’t it, so vote against it”, and others are saying, “This deal is no good for us; I’m a remainder and I want a better deal, so vote against the deal”. I would say that that is much like the divisions we have seen in this House—on the Government side as well as anywhere else.

I just want to say that it has long been time for us to get on and have the vote on this deal, and move forward to the next stage, with a better proposition and one that we can take forward.

6.19 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Many hon. Members have focused their remarks on the impact that a no-deal Brexit would have on communities in their respective constituencies. I intend to speak in the same vein, but I shall also argue that it is the Government’s responsibility to rule out such an outcome without delay.

It has been widely reported that up to £5 billion could be wiped from the Welsh economy under a no-deal scenario, which equates roughly to a reduction of some 10% of the Welsh economy. EU rules, regulation and arbitration mechanisms would no longer apply to the UK as a third country, so the current flow of trade with the EU would be constrained, as unhindered access to the single market would cease. Much of the talk about stockpiling and the sufficiency of port infrastructure to support third-country produce checks has focused on Calais and Devon, but of course the potential for disruption is just as acute in Caergybi, or Holyhead—the main port for the UK’s trade with the Republic of Ireland, the UK’s fifth biggest export partner.

The consequences of a no-deal Brexit for Ceredigion, which relies on the knowledge and rural economies, are just as serious. The education sector alone accounts for 20% of our economic output, sustaining some 5,000 jobs, with over 2,800 jobs directly supported by the county’s two universities. The UK’s ability to participate in Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe and Erasmus+—and all such schemes—will be thrown into disarray by a no-deal Brexit, and the uncertainty that will inevitably occur in such a scenario will weigh heavily on our universities’ ability to recruit EU researchers and students. It is little wonder, therefore, that the chief executive of Universities UK has said:

“A ‘no deal’ Brexit would have huge implications for universities in all corners of the UK, and prove enormously damaging for regional jobs, growth and skills.”

Furthermore, agriculture is a crucial wealth and job creation industry across rural Ceredigion. It is estimated that every £1 generated in agriculture translates into some £7.40 for the local economy through supply chains and spending, and that each job in farming supports 3.5 jobs in other sectors. It will come as no surprise to Members in the Chamber that red meat—especially lamb—exports are the backbone of the agricultural industry in Wales, and we know that the single market is a vital export destination for Welsh food and drink

in general. Over 80% of food and animal exports goes to the EU, and between 35% and 40% of all Welsh lamb produced. A no-deal Brexit, and the loss of access to that valuable export market, is simply unthinkable.

The Government are aware of the implications of a no-deal Brexit and the harm that it would cause to the economy. They are now also aware, thanks to the conclusions of the European Court of Justice, that they could avert such a course if ever it seemed likely. I consider it utterly inconceivable for any Government to be so irresponsible as to inflict upon their citizens the level of damage that a no-deal Brexit would cause. That is why I must pose the question again: why are the Government insisting on spending billions of pounds on no-deal preparations, throwing communities across the UK into debilitating uncertainty, when it is within their gift to rule out such an outcome?

The Prime Minister has the power to avoid a no deal by revoking or seeking an extension to article 50, as other hon. Members have rightly outlined this afternoon. I would argue that it is her duty to rule it out now, and dissipate the harmful and unnecessary uncertainty that the mere prospect has generated.

6.23 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake).

Theresa May’s disastrous handling of the Brexit negotiations is entirely of her own making. It is she who chose to interpret a narrow victory for leave as meaning that the UK must exit the single market and the customs union; it is she who decided to call a general election in the middle of the most important negotiations in our post-war history; and it is she who utterly failed to face down the hard core of English nationalists in her party who want Brexit at any cost. In among all the chaos and incompetence, however, there is one aspect of her strategy that has become crystal clear. She has been talking up the prospect of no deal in order to bounce MPs from both sides of the House into supporting whatever deal she asks us to approve. Her game plan is simple: scare the living daylight out of Parliament by repeating ad nauseam that the choice will be between her deal and no deal at all.

It is vital that Parliament rejects the Prime Minister’s scaremongering and blackmail tactics, because they are built on an empty threat. The fact is that no deal is simply not going to happen for three reasons. First, a no-deal Brexit will unleash unmitigated chaos across government, business and society. As a member of the Exiting the European Union Committee, I have heard extensive evidence from senior civil servants and business leaders about the extent to which our country is ready to absorb the shock of leaving the EU on 29 March 2019 without a deal.

Wayne David: Does my hon. Friend agree it is not simply that we would be leaving the European Union and relying on WTO trade rules? It would mean a rupture in the whole corpus of legal arrangements that have been in place for 40 years. Such a scenario is totally unthinkable.

Stephen Kinnock: I agree entirely. Let us not forget that this will impact on people’s lives and citizens’ rights—the rights of EU citizens in the UK and British

[Stephen Kinnock]

citizens in the European Union. What will happen to the European arrest warrant? What will happen to our entire security apparatus across the EU? It is not just about trade and the WTO; it is much bigger than that.

I have been deeply impressed by the professionalism and dedication of every one of those who have come in to speak to the Select Committee to give evidence. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that they are engaged in a charade. Let us take the state of preparedness at our ports. Jon Thompson, the head of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, told us that his French counterparts have categorically refused to engage in bilateral discussions about how to plan for a no-deal exit, because bilateral contacts are not permitted under the terms of article 50. We can continue, should we wish to do so, to allow in goods from the EU at Dover without checks on 30 March, but we have absolutely no idea what the French are going to do at Calais in the event of no deal.

On our customs processes, Mr Thompson told us that there are 145,000 businesses across the UK who currently import or export their goods solely within the EU. Thanks to our membership of the customs union, not one of those businesses ever has to complete a customs declaration form because all the checks are done at the point of departure—that is, at the relevant factories, warehouses and farms. If we exit without a deal, every one of those businesses that wishes to continue trading with the EU will need to know how to complete a range of complex customs declarations. According to Mr Thompson, however, to date only 2% of the 145,000 have contacted the HMRC to seek guidance on what they should do in the event of no deal.

On health, Sir Chris Wormald, permanent secretary at the Department of Health and Social Care, told us that there is no clarity on reciprocal healthcare arrangements for UK citizens in the EU and EU citizens in the UK. This will end in the event of no deal. A British tourist in Paris needing medical treatment is currently entitled to full access to the French public healthcare system, but as of 30 March 2019 he or she may be required to hold a private insurance policy.

On legislation, Jill Rutter, director of the Institute for Government, told us that, in order to ensure that UK law is operable on 30 March 2019 in the event of no deal, a mountain of primary and secondary legislation would have to be passed. The Government have so far managed to pass six of the 13 currently announced Brexit Bills. Without a deal, they will need the Trade Bill to complete its passage through Parliament, along with other key Bills in areas such as agriculture and fisheries, as well as legislation to secure EU citizens' rights. And then there is the mountain of secondary legislation, with between 800 and 1,000 statutory instruments having to be passed by 29 March. Even if MPs were to start working on all this primary and secondary legislation now, it would be a herculean task but, as we are not even going to have the vote until the 15 or 16 January, there is no sign at all of this being able to be brought forward. We are in the realm of the impossible.

Peter Grant: Does the hon. Gentleman fear there is a significant risk that, just as the Government are trying to put unacceptable pressure on Parliament to accept a bad deal by holding up the threat of no deal, so, as these

major and often contentious pieces of legislation come through, Parliament will be put under intense pressure to agree bad legislation without proper scrutiny just because we have to get something on the statute book in time?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is a steamroller. The tactics and strategy are based on steamrolling, bullying, blackmail and holding a gun to Parliament's head. The purpose of this debate is to show that Parliament will not have it. We will not be bullied. We will not be presented with a false choice. We will not be blackmailed in the way the Government are attempting. It is a constitutional and democratic outrage.

Secondly, we have no idea how the EU27 would react to a no-deal exit, but draft legislation recently tabled by the French Government contains this sentence:

“In case of withdrawal of the UK from the EU without agreement, British nationals and their family members currently residing in France would be staying illegally”.

This leaves little room for doubt as to the mindset of member states' Governments or the profound challenges that would be created for the British Government and for British citizens and businesses.

Thirdly, but not least, it is absolutely clear that there is no parliamentary majority for no deal. It is equally clear that it is impossible that the Government could consider a no-deal exit without the support of Parliament for such a course of action. The conclusion is, therefore, that a no-deal Brexit is simply not on the cards, and a responsible Government would be making that statement clearly today.

As no deal is not going to happen, and given that the Prime Minister's deal is dead in the water, it is finally becoming clear, I hope, that there is an option that can bring Parliament together and get us through this difficult time. It is an option I have been talking about for two years now—many of my hon. Friends and colleagues from across the House will be sick to death of me banging this drum, but I will continue to do so. An EFTA-EEA-based Brexit combined with a customs union—otherwise known as the Norway-plus option—is the only option that resolves the Irish border issue and protects the jobs and livelihoods of the people we were elected to represent. It is the only option that I believe can command a cross-party parliamentary majority and which has a hope of reuniting our deeply divided country.

It is vital that Parliament hold its nerve. This is not a choice between the Prime Minister's deal and no deal, because no deal is simply not going to happen; this is a choice between the Prime Minister's deal and the right deal; it is a choice between caving in to the Prime Minister's empty threats and scaremongering and standing up for the interests of our constituents; it is a choice between capitulating to a bully and asserting our sovereignty. I am confident that when the time comes Parliament will step up and do what is right for the country.

Mr Charles Walker: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it not the case that, when the Speaker or Deputy Speaker stands up, the Member sits down?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I was trying to prove this evening that this House can behave exceptionally well, and that is why I did not interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I think he has got the hint, given that I am on my feet, that he has exceeded the time I hoped he would take, although as I have not applied a formal time limit, I cannot stop him. The hon. Gentleman, however, being an hon. Gentleman, has now resumed his seat.

6.33 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What we are witnessing is the most expensive hoax in history. Some £2 billion is being wasted preparing for a no-deal situation that would have a catastrophic impact on our economy: medicine and food shortages; an economy 10% smaller; £6 billion in tariffs—£2.1 billion on vehicles alone, £1.6 billion on food, £1.1 billion for metals, and so it goes on. The million diabetics who depend on insulin will be put at risk. We have heard about radioisotopes. This cannot be a serious proposition from a serious Government. The idea that we should face this catastrophe unless we accept a botched deal that nobody wants is completely unreasonable.

Let me turn to this botched deal. People voted, quite reasonably, for more money, more jobs and more trade, and for control of migration and their laws. All that sounds quite reasonable. It would be reasonable to vote for it, and I would not knock anyone for doing so. The problem is that the people who did vote for those things are not getting any of them in this deal. It is therefore reasonable for them to reject it, and reasonable and proper for them to have the right to reject it in a public vote.

Some people say, “Oh well, they voted this way, and if we force them to have another vote, they will be terribly angry.” They will be much more angry when they lose their jobs and their livelihoods. Many people I speak to in Swansea say, “I voted leave, but I did not vote to leave my job.” Some 25,000 people in Swansea Bay rely on EU exports. They are critically worried about tariffs and constraints even within the proposed deal, because we will not be part of the single market.

In my 2017 election manifesto—my personal promises to Swansea—I pledged to do my utmost to ensure that we were in the single market in order to avoid those problems, and give the people the right to have the final say on whether they wanted the deal. My share of the vote went up by 50%, to 60%. It was the highest Labour share in history: higher than the one in 1945 and higher than the one in 1997, without there even being a Labour Government. It was a leave area, but people have changed their minds because they have seen the facts, as any rational person would. The irrationality is on the part of the Government who say, “That is what they thought two years ago before they knew the impacts, so we must force-feed them.” People who ordered a steak and got a bit of chewed-up bacon still have to eat it, which is completely ridiculous.

Under the Prime Minister’s deal—I am not talking about the catastrophic gun that the Government are holding to our heads, and I know that the Prime Minister has tried her best to do what she can—we will end up as a rule-taker rather than a rule-maker. There will not be less migration; it will merely be from further afield, and culturally different. There will not be more trade; there will be less trade, because we will not have the collective

leverage of the EU to negotiate with China, with Donald Trump, or with any other large market. When it comes to all the bilateral trade deals, anyone in their right mind, whether from Uruguay or Chile or from South Korea, will say, “Hold on: we are negotiating with a single country rather than a collective. We want a better deal.” We will have worse terms and worse trade, less money and fewer jobs. People do not want that.

Some say, “People will be very angry if we have a people’s vote.” People will be absolutely enraged if they find that they are much poorer, with poorer jobs, because we forced through a botched deal—although obviously it is not the catastrophe that is now said to be the choice. That is why yesterday I presented a Bill proposing that we revoke article 50 if this place cannot agree on a deal that is then ratified by the public. That would enable us to stay where we are, in the status quo, in the EU, and that is what businesses want.

People may talk about parliamentary democracy, but parliamentary democracy involves a duty of care to our citizens. I have been saying, on behalf of Swansea, “We want a vote, and we want to stay in the single market at least, as well as the customs union.” My constituents have endorsed that. They have not said, “Oh no, this is terrible”, because they expect me to think about these things, day in day out, which I do.

No deal would be a disaster. It should be taken off the table. It is irresponsible, and a waste of £2 billion. We should give the people the final say, and then decide what is best. Ultimately, our children and our children’s children will make a judgment on what we have done. If what we have done sets us off on a road to ruin and isolation and to be inward looking, rather than being part of a collective that espouses the values of rights, democracy and the rule of law, shared prosperity and the creation of a better world—if we choose wrongly—they will never forgive us, so let us give the people the final say.

6.35 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It was interesting to hear the honourable Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy)—who is about to disappear from the Chamber—talk about the perils of the World Trade Organisation. That was fascinating, because we have not really discussed the issue in the Chamber. I have heard, incidentally, that there is a potential not for sanctions, but for vetoes from other countries, such as Russia, in trade agreements under WTO rules. I may be wrong, but that is something that I have heard, and it would be good for it to be confirmed in an intervention.

In the absence of an intervention to confirm that, I shall continue by saying that I have spent the last fortnight on the Fisheries Bill Committee preparing legislation that will see us take back control of our waters and fishing quotas, and hopefully help regenerate coastal towns such as Hartlepool.

Fishermen and fisherwomen were among the most vociferous pro-Brexit voters. They saw it as an opportunity to tip the balance back in our favour and limit access to our seas by non-UK trawlers. That is the point: it is all about rebalancing—escaping the shackles of the common fisheries policy, but not destroying our trade links with the EU. A hard Brexit threatens that for our fishing industry, and will potentially lead to untold damage to businesses up and down the UK.

[Mike Hill]

We should have had a meaningful vote last week so that we could get on with the job of thrashing out an alternative—an alternative that would protect jobs, businesses, the environment and the flow of goods across our borders after we leave the EU. We have a mere 100 days before we leave the EU; the clock is ticking fast, yet the Government are dithering and withering and wasting precious time. As has been said, kicking the can down the road resolves nothing. Setting aside £2 billion to prepare for a no-deal is a tremendous waste of money—money that could help prevent my council from raiding its reserves to make ends meet; money that could be put back into public health budgets in my constituency which have been severely cut and redirected to the leafy suburbs of the south; money that could be put back into education and save our struggling schools in Hartlepool; and money that could be better used to end the blight of poverty and homelessness. In Hartlepool, the Trussell Trust food bank has handed out more than 27,000 meals in the last 11 months.

Brexit is a brave step into the unknown, but my constituents voted to take that step in the referendum. They did so in the expectation that things would be better and the prospects more prosperous for our country. They did not expect to be worse off, to be cut off and to lose jobs and businesses. That is why we need urgently to get beyond the meaningful vote. Let Parliament take back control and get us out of this mess.

6.42 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on securing this important debate.

We find ourselves in an historic situation as a country and as a democracy. Our country faces the real possibility of leaving the European Union in March 2019 without a deal having been reached in the negotiations. The consequences of such a scenario for trade, jobs, living standards, workers' rights and the integrity of our country would be both profound and devastating, and we have a Government who are riding roughshod over our democracy by the way they are treating this Parliament. This Government were the first to be found in contempt of Parliament in modern times, and they continue to refuse to put their Brexit deal to a vote of this House. Taxpayers' money is being wasted by this House and this Prime Minister by her touring Europe.

The Prime Minister insists that her deal is the best on the table for Britain, yet she continues to refuse to bring it to this House for a vote. That does not suggest to me that the Prime Minister has strong confidence in the contents of the deal. If she really believed that this is the best deal, she would be prepared to make the case for it in a meaningful debate and vote in this House.

I can remember the times when the Prime Minister repeatedly told the country that no deal was better than a bad deal. Now she tells the country that a bad deal is better than no deal—and this is indeed a bad deal. It fails to protect jobs and living standards. It offers no guarantees that workers' rights, environmental standards and consumer protections will not be put at risk. It threatens the integrity of the United Kingdom, due to

the backstop that is meant to prevent a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The nature of that backstop, and the inability of the UK to leave it unilaterally, would turn our country into Hotel California. We could check out any time we liked, but we could never leave.

The Prime Minister has brought about some rare unity in the House. She has united Members from across the party divide against her deal. When it finally comes to the House for a vote, I am confident that it will be rejected. What worries me is that the Government continue to rule out the prospect of a no-deal Brexit that the Government's own analysis has shown would be devastating for the economy. They should provide certainty for businesses, workers and communities by taking the option of no deal firmly off the table.

My constituents want an end to the political games that are being played in this House. They do not want the Prime Minister's botched deal, which fails to protect jobs, living standards and workers' rights. They do not want the European Research Group's hard Brexit, which would devastate our economy, and they do not want the political opportunism of the Scottish National party, which seeks to use Brexit as its latest grievance to push for a second independence referendum. They want a Government who can negotiate a Brexit deal that unites the country and delivers a fairer Britain.

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench spokesman has said that it is highly unlikely that the Government will get meaningful changes to their deal. Does the hon. Gentleman seriously think that the European Union, which has quite a lot of other things to think about, is going to contemplate any sort of radical, root-and-branch completely different deal that his party might come up with before the end of March?

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, because I was just about to go on to talk about a Labour Government.

A Labour Government will negotiate a strong single market deal and permanent customs union with the EU to protect our trade, jobs and living standards. A Labour Government will guarantee workers' rights, environmental protections and consumer standards. A Labour Government will guarantee the rights of EU nationals living in this country, who contribute so much to our public services and society. We will address the underlying causes of Brexit by investing in our communities, tackling low pay, ending precarious employment and ensuring that our public services are run for people, not for profit.

I will finish up now, as it would be unfair to the next speaker to carry on. I reiterate the call that I put to the Prime Minister in the House last week: recognise that you have failed to deliver a Brexit deal that delivers for working people; recognise that you no longer command the confidence of the country; and give the people the opportunity to elect a Labour Government by calling a general election, so that we can get to work for the many people looking on at this Tory pantomime and this shambles of a Government.

6.47 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), and I thank him for his courtesy.

This is not a Noel Edmonds game show. The Government are playing politics with Brexit. They are playing on people's fears, and they have created a hoax that will divert huge resources away from frontline services this winter. The Chancellor has said that at least £4.2 billion has been set aside for no-deal planning since 2016. That is a grotesque waste of taxpayers' money on something that will not happen, that does not need to happen and that Parliament must not allow to happen. How much extra help would that £4.2 billion buy for the NHS? How many extra police and how much extra help for our schools would it buy? And that £4.2 billion is only the Government spend. The increased costs now for our businesses do not bear thinking about.

Why am I so confident that a no-deal Brexit does not need to happen? When the Government were negotiating with the EU27, they took a negotiating position about no deal, using the slogan "no deal is better than a bad deal". That was the negotiating position taken by the Government to try to negotiate the best possible deal with the EU, but the negotiations concluded. The Prime Minister and the EU signed off on an agreement. This is the final deal, according to the Prime Minister. She said as much when she opened the debate that was concluded prematurely.

Given that an agreement has been signed off, pending the approval of the UK Parliament and the European Parliament, why is no deal still being touted as an option? It is there for one reason only: the Prime Minister wants to bully Members across the House into voting for her deal. It is a deal that businesses tell me will lead the UK into a blind Brexit, when nothing about our future has been nailed down. It is a deal that does not give us access to the European Medicines Agency, which gives patients access to cancer drugs six months earlier. The Minister shakes his head, but the deal says that there is an aspiration to join the European Medicines Agency; it does not nail anything down. It is a deal that leaves us following EU rules without having any say in them. It is a national humiliation. We will not be bullied, and we do not want to vote for the Prime Minister's deal.

The Prime Minister could easily rule out no deal herself. If the House was allowed to vote on the matter, no deal could easily be ruled out. There was even an amendment to the motion that was pulled that would have ruled out a no-deal Brexit. The Government are wasting so much money on something reckless that could be stopped now. And now Parliament is going into recess—18 days off at time of national crisis, when we could be sorting this out.

Why are the Government not allowing Parliament to vote on this now? It is simply because they are trying to escalate the crisis. What responsible Government allow a crisis to develop just to bully MPs? What responsible Government spend millions on fridges for political reasons? What responsible Government, for political reasons, allow businesses to escalate their planning for no deal, which is likely to include making people redundant? Whether people voted to leave or to remain back in 2016, nobody voted for this. A no-deal Brexit was not on the ballot paper and it was not in the prospectus.

I believe that there is only one sensible way out of this crisis: Parliament must be allowed immediately to rule out a no-deal Brexit, without going into recess. Parliament must be allowed, the day after new year's day—when

everyone else goes back to work—to vote on the deal. When Parliament votes against the Prime Minister's bad deal, as it will, we must revoke the article 50 notice and give the people the final say. This would be the first chance the public have had to vote on EU exit while being in possession of all the facts needed to make the decision. We need a people's vote with an option to stay in the EU.

I represent Stockton South in the north-east of England, an area with significant inequalities, in need of investment and massively dependent on our relationship with the EU: 57% of the north-east's trade is with the EU. Our area stands to lose the most from a no-deal Brexit—16% less growth, according to the reports that the Government did not want us to see. North-east businesses are pleading with MPs to rule out a no-deal Brexit. The North East England chamber of commerce, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) said, wants us to stay in the single market and in the customs union to protect jobs. A no-deal Brexit is an existential threat to the NHS. The Government should stop playing politics with Brexit, immediately rule out no deal and give us a meaningful vote without delay.

6.54 pm

Keir Starmer: This has largely been a good debate, with clear and powerful points being made on both sides of the House on which we all need to reflect.

Despite the Minister's valiant attempts, he was not convincing in his defence of the preparations for no deal. No deal is not viable and not credible, and if that is true, it will not serve the Government's intended purpose in bringing this to a binary choice, and we should not be wasting money on it. No deal should be taken off the table, and then we could have a sensible discussion about what happens next.

A lot was said by the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) about the national interest. I will not sink to misrepresenting his views, even though he sank to misrepresenting mine.

Mr Charles Walker: I am really fascinated to know what deal the right hon. and learned Gentleman would accept from the Prime Minister.

Keir Starmer: I have said for months on end that—

Mr Walker: What deal?

Keir Starmer: If the hon. Gentleman listened, he might actually understand what I have been saying for month after month and not sink to misrepresenting my view. I have argued for a permanent customs union and a single market deal. I have bothered to go to Brussels over two years to discuss whether that is viable, and I would not have proposed it if I did not think it viable. That is something I have done over and above what he has done.

Mr Walker: That is not Great Britain but little Britain.

Keir Starmer: I really think the hon. Gentleman should not embarrass himself any further.

What is not in the national interest are the red lines that the Prime Minister agreed not with her Cabinet, and not even with this House, but with a group of three or four people in the autumn of 2016. We have all had to live with those red lines ever since, and we have had no say. That was not in the national interest.

[Keir Starmer]

It was not in the national interest to push Parliament away at the beginning of the process, perhaps recognising that, in the end, we would have to reach consensus. It was not sensible to push Parliament away after the snap general election of 2017, when it was obvious that what is happening now would happen. It was not in the national interest never to reach across to the Opposition. It was not in the national interest to take as long as until June 2018 to come up with the Chequers proposal.

Every time I had debates and discussions with people in the EU27 before June, they said, “What is your Government trying to achieve. We don’t even know that.” That was not in the national interest, and it was not in the national interest to propose a Chequers deal that, hopelessly, was not accepted even by Conservative Members and that was immediately rejected by the EU. That is the central concern.

The reason why we are talking about the backstop and an additional transition is that the future relationship is so hopelessly underdeveloped. Nobody here and nobody in Europe thinks for a moment that the future relationship will be ready for January 2021. It is another of those myths that we have had for two years. It is not going to happen, which is why there is great anxiety about the backstop.

A backstop in which England, Wales and Scotland are out of the single market will have repercussions, and having a future relationship that is so blind that we do not know whether it might be economically close or distant is not something that any responsible Opposition could vote for.

It was not in the national interest to resist a meaningful vote. We are now all enjoying the fact that we will have a meaningful vote in January, but we would not have had it if Opposition Members, and some Conservative Members, had not voted for it. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Broxbourne did. I think he probably voted against it, voting not to have a say, not to have this debate and not to have the chance to have a say—just wave it through.

Mr Charles Walker: It is because of my Committee that Parliament has the meaningful vote.

Keir Starmer: I asked whether the hon. Gentleman voted for it.

Mr Walker: You are being ridiculous.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am determined to prove this evening that the House can be well behaved.

Keir Starmer: It was not in the national interest to resist the meaningful vote. It was not in the national interest to resist any disclosure of impact assessments, which had to be forced. It was not in the national

interest not to disclose legal advice that was relevant but not, in truth, confidential. And it was not in the national interest to pull the vote and prevent what needs to happen next.

I have been consistent in arguing for my proposition. We have tabled amendments before the House time and again, and they have been voted down time and again through blind loyalty. Instead of a Prime Minister and a Government who are prepared to work across the House for true consensus, what is happening now among Government Members was utterly predictable at 10 o’clock, when the result of that snap election came in. At that moment, the Prime Minister should have realised and thought about the long-term prospect of getting a deal through, and that meant working in a consensual way, taking on board the proper points that have been made by Opposition Members. That is what acting in the national interest is all about.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of the Cabinet’s decision to accelerate preparations for a no-deal outcome to Brexit, following the Prime Minister’s failure to allow this House promptly to express its view on the Government’s deal, in the light of the significant public expenditure involved.

Dr Blackman-Woods: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last night, a man sleeping rough on Parliament’s doorstep died. This is the second time that that has happened. I know individual MPs and staff do what they can to help people, but I wonder whether you are aware of any strategy that Parliament might be seeking to put in place to support people who are homeless. I also wonder whether there has been any indication from Ministers that they will be making a statement on this tragedy and on their failure to address the crisis of homelessness that we see every day in our communities up and down the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for bringing to the attention of the House the tragedy of the loss of life of someone who has been homeless and sleeping rough here. I am sure the whole House will join me in saying how sorry we are that something like that has happened. She has asked me whether I am aware of whether Ministers are likely to come forward with plans to deal with homelessness. I understand that the Secretary of State might well be coming forward with such plans, but I have no formal indication of when that might be or in what form. The hon. Lady has made some very important points, and I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench have heard them and that the Ministers with responsibility will come to know very quickly about what she has drawn to the attention of the House—if by no other means, I will make sure that they know about it. I have every confidence that Ministers will take into consideration what she has said this evening in making future plans.

Backbench Business

Disability Support

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) to move the motion, it might be helpful for the House if I explain that as the debate under Standing Order No. 24 began at precisely 4.24 pm, the Backbench business may continue until 9.36 pm. I understand that the second debate on the Order Paper under Backbench Business—I am helpfully getting assent from the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee on this, for which I thank him—will not be moved today.

7.3 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to commission an independent assessment of the cumulative impact of changes to the social security system on sick and disabled people and their families and carers.

It has been a long day for everybody, but I appreciate the fact that we are able to hold this debate, as it is so important to the millions of disabled people, many of whom will be watching today. We applied to the Backbench Business Committee for this debate back in June, and I am grateful to the Committee's members for supporting this debate, but in six months a lot has marched on.

Let me refresh everybody's memories. Back in 2013, nearly 105,000 people signed a petition launched by the War On Welfare campaign—WOW, for short—that called on the Government to carry out a cumulative impact assessment of the effect of Government cuts on disabled people. Back in February 2014, we held that debate, and Members from all parties raised the alarm about the cumulative effects of austerity on disabled people. Disappointingly, the Government's response at the time was to deny that the public spending cuts—not only in social security but across other Government Departments—were having such a detrimental impact on disabled people. They also said that cumulative impact assessment methodology was very difficult. At that time, Scope and Demos estimated that the cumulative effects of the changes in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 alone amounted to £28 billion-worth of cuts for 3.7 million people.

It is abundantly clear from the numerous inquiries, reports and analyses, as well as from the personal testimonies of disabled people themselves, that austerity is doing immense harm to disabled people and their families and carers. I shall expand on that in a moment, but first I wish to clarify exactly what a cumulative impact assessment—or a CIA; it is a mouthful to keep saying that every time—is. A CIA involves various methods and processes to assess the overall effect of a set of changes—for example, Government policies such as tax or welfare reforms—on a particular population, which in this case is disabled people. The assessment can not only quantify the impacts—for example, by looking at the net changes in income—but use qualitative methods to understand how the policy changes affect disabled people or other groups. As whole, impact assessments are decision-making tools. They should inform policy development based on the evidence and

findings that the assessments present. They can also be used retrospectively. The power of CIAs is that they consider a number of policies together to see how they affect each other.

I believe passionately in evidence-based policy. Too often, it is the other way around: policy-based evidence—we select the evidence that suits the policies that we want. CIAs can help to avoid that. For me, they are an essential component of open and transparent policy making. If a politician says, for example, that they want to tackle burning injustices in society, CIAs will say whether or not a policy programme can achieve that. They are therefore also a way to hold politicians to account.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): We should bear it in mind that the Government, at least at the two most recent general elections, wanted to save about £12 billion from the welfare budget, so all these systems are geared towards that end. That is why we have major problems with universal credit. For people with disabilities, there are issues with the independent living allowance, which really unsettled a lot of families, to say the least. More importantly, every so often a person with disabilities is subject to a review, which causes great anxiety, and in some instances leads to mental stress and strain. It is not a very fair system, and the private sector should not be involved because at the end of the day it is very much about saving money.

Debbie Abrahams: Yes, and I shall come to exactly some of the points my hon. Friend raised. He managed to get quite a bit into that intervention.

What CIAs have been done so far? Back in March this year, the Equality and Human Rights Commission published its report on the cumulative impact of tax and welfare reforms. The report looked at the effect, since 2010, of tax, welfare, social security and public spending on people with protected characteristics as set out in the Equality Act 2010. It included assessments of the impact on disabled people. The EHRC looked at the measures introduced in both the 2012 Act and the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, including the move to personal independence payments from disability living allowance; the cuts in support to the employment and support allowance work-related activity group; the introduction of universal credit, which involved the removal of the severe and enhanced disability premiums; the freeze in the uprating of social security support payments; and more. The EHRC analysis found that, by 2021, households with at least one disabled adult and a disabled child will lose more than £6,500 a year—that is 13% of their income. Households with six or more disabilities lose almost £3,150 a year, and disabled lone parents, predominantly women, with at least one disabled child lose almost £10,000 of their net income.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My hon. Friend is outlining analysis of the loss of income experienced by disabled people, but I know that she will also want to acknowledge the work of the Social Metrics Commission led by Baroness Stroud from the other place, which has also identified the additional costs that are experienced by disabled people and which has properly, or more accurately therefore, portrayed the poverty that they experience compared with some of the measures

[Kate Green]

that we have been able to use previously. Does she agree that a cumulative assessment is about drawing together many different ways of measuring the impact of cuts, changes and access to public services and the additional costs that disabled people and their families experience?

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely essential point. I will come on in a moment to the poverty that disabled people are experiencing by virtue of the additional costs that they face. She is right that a whole range of different methods can be used and we need to look at all of them to ensure that we can fully understand the impacts on disabled people.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is setting out an excellent case for what cumulative impact assessments can achieve. Does she agree with me on the holistic impact of other cuts, particularly on our health services? I am seeing GPs in my constituency who are refusing to write fit notes or assessments for medical evidence for people. We are seeing cuts in voluntary services, community transport and befriending services, leaving people with disabilities feeling utterly isolated, alone and bereft.

Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. Again, my hon. Friend makes an essential point. The UN Committee investigating breaches in the UN convention on the rights of disabled people found those issues as well.

That was the EHRC's cumulative impact assessment back in March. Although October's Budget made some changes to universal credit, it restored, as analysis of the Office for Budget Responsibility showed, just half of what was cut in 2015, and only marginally helped those disabled people who are able to work. For those too ill to work, analyses by Policy in Practice shows that they will be financially worse off compared with when they were on legacy benefits. Importantly, today's Work and Pensions Committee report confirmed the issues that many of us have already raised about the proposed managed migration of disabled people onto universal credit and said that it needs to be stopped. Furthermore, we need to ensure that the so-called natural migration that results when there is a change of circumstances needs to be properly looked at.

Apart from the changes in universal credit, there were absolutely no other measures for disabled people in the Budget. In fact, the OBR report showed that disabled people were set to lose more social security support by 2022. For example, personal independence payment spending is to be £1 billion less in 2022 compared with March this year.

I am sure that the Government will say that they are helping disabled people to improve their living standards by getting them into work. However, just over 51% of 4 million disabled people of working age are in employment compared with 81% of non-disabled people—a disability employment gap of just over 30%, a figure that has barely narrowed since 2015 when the Conservative party manifesto pledged to halve that gap. As we also know, there are more than 8 million households with at least one person in work that are living in poverty. Work is not, as is frequently said by Government Members, a route out of poverty.

Last year, the Government set more modest ambitions with a new target to get 1 million more disabled people into work, but even this needs a radical rethink. There are many reasons why the disability employment gap has hardly been reduced in the last three years, including the lack of information and advice for employers, but we must remember that discrimination against disabled workers is still quite prevalent. In a recent survey, 15% of disabled people revealed that they had been discriminated against when applying for a job, and one in five while they were in work. Information is not enough to address this; it needs leadership and cultural change.

Kate Green: Does my hon. Friend therefore agree that a cumulative impact assessment would also identify the lack of access to legal aid when people may need to take forward discrimination cases in employment?

Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. I was going to mention employment tribunals, which I think have fallen by 80% since the cuts to legal aid. A cumulative impact assessment would enable us to see the impacts there.

With the best will in the world, the Disability Confident scheme just does not cut it. There needs to be a commitment to expand and properly resource access to work. Supporting under 34,000 disabled people a year at and into work is a drop in the ocean when there are over 2 million unemployed disabled people who want to work. But as we know, not all disabled people are able to work. The consequence of the inadequate support made available through our social security system is that 4.3 million sick and disabled people are living in poverty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) mentioned, disabled people are twice as likely to live in persistent poverty as non-disabled people; 80% of disability-related poverty is because of the additional costs that disabled people face by virtue of their disability, and these have been estimated at £570 a month on average.

The cuts to social security mean that more and more disabled people are becoming isolated in their own home as their mobility vehicles or personal support are taken from them. Many are struggling to pay their rent or mortgage. Their health conditions have deteriorated and other conditions have developed, including mental health conditions, as they face the relentless stress and anxiety resulting from a social security system that is hostile, unsupportive and even dehumanising.

The sanctions regime that has affected over 1 million disabled people since 2010, the work capability assessment and personal independence payment assessment processes are all part of this. Quite frankly, it is grotesque that people with progressive conditions such as motor neurone disease have, until last month, been habitually forced through the personal independence payment assessment process. I understand that there are still issues with that, although it was meant to have stopped last month. I would be interested in the Minister's response to that point.

There is also overwhelming evidence of the inaccuracies—some have called them lies—in these assessment reports. Why have the Government not been able to act on this? With over 70% of assessment appeals successful, whatever contract management processes the Government have in place, are clearly not fit for

purpose. All these Government social security changes will have a huge toll on the health, wellbeing and even the longevity of disabled people.

A peer-reviewed study by my former colleague Ben Barr and his colleagues showed the detrimental mental health effects of the work capability assessment, including it being independently associated with an increase in suicides. On top of this, the Government's own data reveal that the death rates for people on incapacity benefit and employment support allowance are 4.3 times higher than in the general population, people in the ESA support group are 6.3 times more likely to die than the general population, and those in the work-related activity group are twice as likely to die as the general population. I reported these figures back in 2015. People on IB and ESA are poorly; they are not feckless as too many people have tried to suggest. But again, the Government did not listen and went on to push disabled people in the support group and originally assessed as not fit for work through another work capability assessment process into the WRAG, and then cut their support by £1,500 a year in 2016.

Ruth George: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Debbie Abrahams: If my hon. Friend does not mind, I am conscious that I need to make progress.

Last month's *British Medical Journal* report from King's College and other research centres showed the impact of social care cuts on additional deaths of disabled adults and older people. They estimate that for every £10 per head cut in social care, there are five additional deaths. They also estimate 150,000 additional deaths by 2020, on 2014 trends. I will just let that sink in—150,000 additional deaths.

National and international organisations have called on the Government to undertake a cumulative impact assessment of the effect of cuts on disabled people. They include the Government's own Social Security Advisory Committee, the House of Lords Select Committee on the 2010 Equality Act and Disability, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and, last month, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

However, I would just like to refresh everyone's memory on last year's findings from the UN committee investigating breaches since 2010 of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. These are breaches by this Government. It said that the Government were responsible for "grave" and "systemic violations" of the rights of disabled people, and that these failures amounted to a "human catastrophe". Although it highlighted the poverty and shocking impact of cuts on disabled people's ability to live adequately and independently, it went beyond social protection and social care issues, listing 60 recommendations right across all the articles of the convention and all Government Departments, from accessible physical environments, to education and access to justice. A key recommendation was that the UNCRPD should be enshrined in UK law.

The UN committee also expressed concerns regarding how the terms under which the UK leaves the European Union could affect disabled people. I noted with alarm a leaked DWP report in *The Times* last week that also suggests this. Since the 1990s, the UK has trailed behind Europe on the rights of disabled people. The Government's

refusal earlier this year to protect the rights of disabled people by incorporating the EU charter of fundamental rights into UK law as we leave the EU is deeply disappointing.

My other concern is how disabled people, who have been very poorly served by this Government, will do with an even weaker economy. In all the exit scenarios from credible analysts, the economy shrinks both in the short and the long term compared with the situation in our current relationship with the EU. Disabled people have been at the back of the queue in public spending terms since 2010. What will happen to them with an even smaller spending pot? Although a Labour Government would make different political choices to tackle poverty and inequality, with lower levels of economic growth, how quickly we can do this will be a real issue if we are to stick to the fiscal rules we set out in last year's general election.

In recent days, in preparation for this debate, I have been contacted by hundreds of sick and disabled people with their stories of how these cuts have affected them. I would like to share a few of those stories. L, who is a single mum in Oldham, contacted my office recently after her UC was suddenly stopped. She was told that it was because her son, who has severe learning disabilities and who L is the carer for, had reached his 19th birthday. This "change in circumstances" meant that her son had to make his own claim. Unfortunately, no one had told L this. Instead, they just stopped her support payments. She was lucky in that her family helped her out for the five weeks until she had her payment reinstated, but she told me:

"At times I just want to end it all...it's just so hard and I get no support or respite."

Another of my constituents, John, was refusing to have the life-saving surgery he needs for a brain tumour because he was worried he would be sanctioned. He had been sanctioned for three months earlier in the year because he did not attend a work capability assessment, although he had explained it was because of his treatment for his tumour.

Beth told me:

"I was contributing £82.50 per month for my care but in 2017 I was informed that my contribution needed to increase and I would have to pay £81 per week. Nothing in my financial circumstances such as my PIP award had changed so I queried the increase and was told that it was correct. Now I have no money for my medication or the aids I need...the impact on me has been increased pain, isolation and anxiety."

Beth has spina bifida, fibromyalgia and anxiety disorder.

Dawn moved from one local authority to another and fell foul of the change in circumstances rule. She was put on UC and lost her disability premium of £64 a week. Lee, who has severe mental health problems, was subject to seven assessments—seven—in six years. Jayne lost her mobility car after a PIP assessment because her degenerative condition was not considered bad enough, and now she has to rely on her friends and family for help. This is happening up and down the country. The despair in the messages is palpable, and I urge everyone to read the WOW campaign's voices e-book, which collates these experiences and is so moving.

We are the fifth richest country in the world. How this Government have treated our disabled people shames us all. We must never forget that nine out of 10 disabilities are acquired. Any one of us could have an accident or

[Debbie Abrahams]

contract an illness. Like the NHS, our social security system should be there for all of us in our time of need. People should not be vilified by a system that is meant to be there to support them.

In addition to understanding the cumulative impact of Government policy, which the motion calls for, we need to radically transform our social security system and develop a new social contract with the British people. I know that my hon. Friends on the shadow Front Bench have been working on this. Since 2010, we have seen social security spending cuts of nearly £40 billion, with another £12 billion planned by 2022. Although the Labour manifesto last year and our disability manifesto, which I was proud to write, were a start, we need to do much more—I know that that is recognised—particularly regarding the financial inadequacy in the social security system. We cannot expect people who are living in such hardship and poverty to wait a few years for a real living wage to kick in. What about the disabled people who cannot work?

The 1942 Beveridge report was the basis for a new welfare state, set up after the second world war, when the debt to GDP ratio was over 250%. Under Beveridge, we established the NHS in 1948 and expanded social security and our education system. It was heralded as a revolutionary system that would provide income security for its citizens as part of a comprehensive policy of social progress. But since then, society has changed. The pressures from globalisation, automation and an ageing society mean that we need to develop a new, sustainable social security system that we can be proud of.

We need a new Beveridge report for the 21st century, defining a new social contract with the British people; addressing the poverty, inequalities and indignity that millions of people—disabled and non-disabled, young and old, men and women—are enduring; and bringing hope to a new generation as it did 76 years ago. The poverty and inequalities that disabled people are facing are unacceptable, but they are not inevitable.

7.27 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). I commend her on her passionate speech.

In recent months, much has been said of the ongoing changes to the social security system. Indeed, some Opposition Members continually focus on negative experiences, to the exclusion of the positive aspects of change. I cannot agree with that often gloomy assessment, however well intended it is. I have spoken to those in my constituency who deal with the delivery of a changing welfare system at the jobcentre every working day, and who also dealt with the previous clumsy, fragmented social security system. I was pleased to note that staff are enthusiastic about the changes and advised me that the Government have listened to them on this long journey and continue to listen when areas of improvement are identified.

With the wholesale replacement of an entire welfare system that was tired and not fit for purpose, such gradual improvements are not surprising—indeed, they are an indication that the Government continue to

listen to feedback from those best placed to offer it. The work coaches dealing with cases each and every day now have greater flexibility to help vulnerable individuals, assisting each in a different way, tailored to their particular circumstances. Coaches can focus on the most pertinent cases, while claimants who demonstrate their familiarity with the system through their daily work diary can be left, for the most part, to navigate the system by themselves, although assistance must always be available to them if required.

Ruth George: The hon. Gentleman is making some points about the universal credit system, but that system is not accessible by 50% of disabled people. They are unable to access it online or through their work journal. In my area, home visits are not being allowed either. What does the hon. Gentleman say to those people who cannot access such a system?

Bill Grant: It is difficult to say something positive about those cases, but I can relate that to my own experience—

Ruth George: These are people with disabilities.

Bill Grant: I can only relate that to my own experience. We have outreach workers who go and assist these individuals, and that assistance must be given when requested. I am saddened if that is the case in the hon. Lady's area, but I am proud of the staff in Ayr and other local jobcentres.

Like many Members, I have had concerns that the implementation of such a comprehensive system may lead to errors, human or indeed systemic, in the support given in particular to vulnerable and disabled claimants. Indeed, I have referred to these concerns previously in this very Chamber. However, I have been reassured by recent measures, particularly those announced in the Budget, to ensure support during that transition. The additional £1 billion over five years to support the transition is especially welcome, but I accept that more would be welcome in that regard.

I have likewise been concerned by allegations of failings in the health assessments required under the personal independence payment scheme. However, on inspection of and after a closer look at the figures, this pessimism is not supported. I understand that only 4%—[*Interruption.*] There is a degree of pessimism. Of initial decisions, only 4% are overturned at appeal. Of course, we have all dealt with specific cases where errors have indeed been made—and, I hope, rectified—but the overall figures are encouraging. I repeat that the overall figures are encouraging. We need to monitor what we are doing to understand what we are doing. Almost 90% are satisfied with the PIP claim process.

Something that is often overlooked, sadly in my view, is the flexibility for those with disabilities returning to work that is encouraged by the revised welfare system. Where previously there were rigid rules—very rigid rules—there is now the flexibility to allow a phased reduction in benefits while a person builds up their hours and their confidence in a new role. This can be a challenging yet rewarding event for the individual. This is a sensible element of the new system in helping people back into work, where appropriate, and one I very much support.

The Disability Confident scheme, which has been with us for a number of years, also assists greatly with this process. I commend employers throughout the length and breadth of the country for embracing this excellent system. At this juncture, I note that disability benefits are not covered by the benefits cap, and rightly so.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): On the Disability Confident scheme, will the hon. Gentleman recommend that MPs should be joining it and trying to ensure that they engage with employment practices that support people with disabilities to come and work in the House of Commons? The Speaker's internship scheme, which has been extended to include placements for people with disabilities, is an excellent scheme. Will he also suggest that we should be looking at people with disabilities not just as employees, but as employers, and doing all we can to support their progress?

Bill Grant: I wholly agree with the hon. Lady. Yes, we should be trailblazers and setting the example by giving employment to those who are seeking employment and want to contribute to society, and broadening that as best we can. We should also be encouraging local employers, as I am sure the hon. Lady does, to take that on board, and to build a bridge between the person who really is employable and wants to work and the opportunity for the employer that, perhaps with a minor adjustment to the workplace, can accommodate a disabled person. I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention.

I am sure hon. Members will be encouraged to note that in the United Kingdom—this proud nation of ours—spending on disability and health conditions is the second highest in the G7.

Universal credit is a comprehensive system, bringing about the much-needed modernisation of a dated and discredited welfare system. I have not found it to represent the draconian approach that some have suggested—their experiences of it are clearly different from mine—and I am encouraged by the much greater flexibility it offers in helping people return, where appropriate, to the dignity and self-esteem that employment must surely bring.

I am optimistic about the future of universal credit, should Ministers continue, as they have thus far, to listen and respond to concerns or suggestions from Members of this House, jobcentre staff and, most importantly, those who themselves rely on the support afforded by the welfare system in the United Kingdom.

7.35 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and thanking the Backbench Business Committee for enabling us to hold this important debate.

I was taken aback by the roseate picture that the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) gave us. It does not square with my experience in my constituency, and I want to outline why. The problem of cuts to disability benefit has affected a lot of my constituents very badly indeed. That is largely because, although Durham is no longer a mining area, it has a legacy of heavy industry. Healthy life expectancy across the country as a whole may be 69 years; in County Durham it is 59.

That means that many people under pension age are in need of support from the social security system and need disability benefits.

One problem results from the interactions with other parts of the benefit system. Those are serious and complex. Obviously, the bedroom tax—which we debated at length in 2014—has adversely affected those people who needed a spare room for a carer in their family, which they are now financially penalised for using. Another group of people who are badly affected are the WASPI women. I had a fantastic meeting with 300 WASPI women in my constituency. Some people who turned up were hale and hearty, but a considerable number were seriously ill and had a disability. Some of them were working at the age of 15; their bodies are now worn out. The Minister must know that that is an issue because she has noted the significant increase in the number of women over 55 who have had to go on to ESA.

One woman who recently came to see me had to stop work because she had cancer and her doctor said she could no longer do a part-time job. Because her job had been part time, she was not entitled to contributory ESA. Because she has an occupational pension of £60 a week, she is not entitled to any other money from the social security system.

A family came to see me. The mother was disqualified from benefit when she moved from DLA to PIP. At the stroke of a pen she lost that benefit, her son lost carer's allowance and they lost housing benefit. They were losing £8,000 a year. Their income was halved by the change in assessment.

Then, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth said, we had the problem of the Motability cuts. Everybody wants to help and support people who go out to work when they have a disability. The cuts to Motability have been one of the most destructive, futile and pointless cuts one could possibly dream up. A young woman came to see me. She had dwarfism. She had succeeded in getting a university degree and holding down a job. When her Motability was taken from her, of course her whole life was thrown into chaos. Then we had the benefit freezes, which adversely affect this group of people. We are now seeing people with disabilities and chronic illnesses being moved on to universal credit, gradually at first but there will be more in future. That means there is another group of people who will be suffering from the delays to benefit payments and pushed into debt. When Ministers talk about being fiscally responsible, having a welfare cut and the fantastic savings they have got out of the social security budget, the truth is that those savings have been achieved on the backs of people like my constituents with severe disabilities and health problems.

I want to talk in particular about the move from DLA to PIP and ESA. I cannot think of a worse-named benefit than PIP: it's not really personal, it doesn't give people independence and there isn't much of a payment if they do manage to get it. There is massive confusion among the public, some of whom thought they were entitled to DLA for life. Some people who received higher-level DLA now have zero points and receive no PIP whatever. My constituency caseworker, who has dealt with hundreds of cases over the past couple of years, has an 82% success rate on appeals—82% of decisions are being overturned.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of the fact that in Wales 75% of PIP and 74% of ESA decisions were overturned on appeal in 2017? Does that not lead to the conclusion that this is an utterly dysfunctional and shambolic system, which is a huge waste of resources and taxpayers' money? It is not only callous and cruel—it is not value for money.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend expresses it very well. I did not know the statistics relating to Wales. Wales and Durham are obviously having a very similar experience, which is perhaps not surprising as Wales is another area where people are coping with a heavy industry legacy.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): In Swansea, some of the most vulnerable people are going through the most dreadful anguish and anxiety. They are chronically ill, yet they think they will not end up with benefits. Is that not part of a wider strategy to squeeze the poorest and most vulnerable to pay for the bankers' greed, which led to the 2008 financial crisis?

Helen Goodman: It is extraordinary that the Government have been able to find the money to cut inheritance tax for the richest, but they cannot find money for people with disabilities and mental health problems.

As my hon. Friends have said, the stress and distress caused, particularly to people with mental health problems, are a serious problem. People are put into a situation of tension because they do not know when or whether they are going to be reassessed. I have constituents who are concerned for their family members' wellbeing, because they get so anxious and cannot face the work capability assessments.

Let me now turn to the problem of ESA. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock talked about how we need to encourage and support people back into work. That is indeed true, but the fact is that, from the point of view of an employer, employing people with disabilities means higher employee liability insurance, it very often means adjustments at work and there is simply no incentive for people—[*Interruption.*] The Minister is saying, "Rubbish" from a sedentary position. Would he like to come to the Dispatch Box and tell me why that is rubbish?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): Both as a Member of Parliament in my constituency office and as somebody who ran a business for 10 years, I employed disabled people and I benefited. It takes good employers to have a wide-ranging workforce. If you get it right it is a win-win for everybody. I do not recognise the situation the hon. Lady sets out.

Helen Goodman: I am glad the Minister did as he did, but we do also hear from people who cannot get jobs because of their disabilities and from employers who say it is too expensive to make the adjustments.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): On the point about it being too expensive, does the hon. Lady recognise the support to work schemes that the Government have introduced and which now can reach

up to £57,000 per employee, which can help to negate some of those costs and support disabled people in work?

Helen Goodman: If those schemes were so good, the proportion of people with disabilities in work would have gone up, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth, who opened the debate, pointed out, it has not increased one jot in the last eight years.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right. She will recall that the gap between the employment rate for disabled people and the overall average was falling steadily until 2010, and she will know that it has flatlined ever since. Does she share my disappointment that the Government no longer have a target for reducing the disability employment gap—the target initially set by David Cameron but since abandoned, unfortunately?

Helen Goodman: My right hon. Friend, who had a proud record as a Minister tackling these issues in the previous Labour Government, points out the twists and turns of policy. It is patently ridiculous for Ministers, following the UN report, to be complacent in this area. There is no room for complacency.

I wish to illustrate the problem of ESA with some stories of constituents of mine. Mrs M, 63, had to stop working as a carer because of ill health. She was signed off by her GP. She has Paget's disease and a tumour on her leg. She sees an oncologist. She needs a new hip. She is seeing a surgeon because she needs a new knee. She has heart arrhythmia on the left side and sees a cardiologist. She was refused ESA at assessment and had to apply for JSA, and she was advised to apply for jobs as a roofer and bouncer or to consider retraining as a social worker. Obviously, we supported her appeal, and ESA was awarded. It is patently ridiculous that people have to go through this sort of thing.

Mr C, 60, had previously been awarded DLA following a series of strokes. He was transferred to PIP in January 2018 and awarded a high rate for both care and mobility. He put in an ESA assessment request in September 2018, but he got confused because all his medical information had been sent to DWP for the PIP assessment, and he was then expected to pay again for the medical evidence for the ESA application. Why can the Department not sort out its administration, instead of putting these financial burdens on to our vulnerable constituents?

Mr I, 64, was previously awarded PIP and was reassessed in 2018. The award was unchanged—eight points for mobility because he cannot walk 50 metres unaided—but his ESA assessment in October 2018 failed because he could move 200 metres using a wheelchair. He is currently awaiting a mandatory reconsideration. One of the confusions is that people cannot understand how they can be awarded a high award in the PIP assessment but then be required to work under the ESA assessment. It does not stack up. One reason it does not stack up is the amateurish and unqualified nature of the staff doing the assessments. This has been a problem from the off. Ministers have had eight years to sort it out, but they have failed.

Let me tell the story of Mr J. Mr J is autistic and has various mental impairments. He had been receiving DLA, but was moved to PIP. He applied for ESA and was placed in the support group. He was unaware that his ESA was contribution-based rather than income-based. When he went to the chemist and was given the prescription form, he ticked the box because he had previously been entitled to free prescriptions, but that was no longer the case. A fine was issued, which the family had to pay. Mr J's mother had to intervene and become the appointee to deal with the issue, as Mr J was plainly not capable of doing so himself.

Mr J is not a one-off. He is not unusual. Five years ago, 30,000 people were fined for falsely saying that they were entitled to NHS prescriptions. Last year the figure was 1 million, and it was 1 million because the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions are not properly co-ordinated. The Department for Work and Pensions does not give people the information that they need when they receive their benefits, and the Department of Health and Social Care is hounding them for money. For the Minister, on a nice ministerial salary of £98,000 a year, a £100 fine might not be a lot, but for people with incomes of £100-£150, it is a whole week's income.

This is a complete disgrace. It is utterly careless. We have been raising the issue with Ministers for the last six months and they have still not sorted it out. Of course I am not saying that Ministers set out to fine a million people—that would be a ridiculous assertion—but it is sometimes culpable to be careless, and this Government are careless of disabled people.

7.51 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): If I may, I will bring the debate back to the actual motion, which calls on the Government to commission an independent assessment of the cumulative impact of changes to the social security system. This is an important issue, and it is right that we should discuss it today. Let me add that it is an honour to follow the impassioned speech of the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman).

Of course we must ensure that the social security system works for everyone. It should be a safety net to help those who have fallen on hard times, but it should also help people to stand on their own two feet. When they cannot do that, it should be there to support them and enable them to lead decent lives.

If we are to consider the motion properly, we must recognise that, because of the Government's actions, disability spending will be higher in every year to 2020, relative to both 2010 and today. Thanks to their reforms, the average weekly award of PIP is more than £13 higher than the old DLA award, and 87% of claimants say that they are satisfied with their claimant journeys. In this year alone, £50 billion will be spent to support people with disabilities and health conditions. There are further achievements that I could stand here and natter on about, but for the sake of brevity, I will merely say that the Government have a strong track record on disability support.

Moreover, the NHS, which has now been given a record level of funding thanks to this Government, will continue to offer unparalleled care to people with poor health. As for carers, their allowance has increased from

£116 to £120 a week since 2010. There is more support for carers, and it has grown faster than wages. In the context of the motion—to which I return again—that is very good news. The changes will almost certainly have a positive impact within the wider social security system, and will benefit sick and disabled people and their families and carers. I do not think we need an independent assessment to tell us that.

Let me make a quick point about universal credit. I believe that the purpose of any social security system should be to help people into work and give them the satisfaction that work provides, rather than creating yet another culture of dependency that the country simply cannot afford. It is estimated that universal credit will help 200,000 more people into work when it is fully rolled out, and will empower people to work an extra 113 million hours a year. For disabled people specifically, they have boosted income of about £110 a month thanks to the increased support under UC. On a recent visit to my local jobcentre, my staff and I found that the majority of claimants in my constituency are happy with UC according to jobcentre staff. In fact, the staff there are very happy to be dealing with it; they prefer it to the old legacy benefits.

I had a recent case of a disabled gentleman who was struggling to find outreach support from the jobcentre. With the assistance of a local councillor we were able to help this gentleman. I raised this case with the Secretary of State this week, and I am pleased that she said that she would look at ways to promote that outreach so that people are aware of the services offered at our jobcentres.

Ruth George: The hon. Gentleman is painting an extremely rosy picture of circumstances in Clacton. Is he aware of the visit a month ago to Clacton of the UN special rapporteur on poverty, and his report on the serious poverty he found there and the lack of support for people, including those with disabilities?

Giles Watling: Of course I am aware of the visit of the UN rapporteur, whom I met for two hours. He spent, I think, two hours in Jaywick, where there absolutely are problems; he arrived, spoke to the people of Jaywick and went away in two hours. That shows total disrespect for the staff and the officers of the local council who have been working so hard for so long to improve the situation in Jaywick. We are building 10 more houses there: five for council housing and five starter homes. We have bought 30 hectares of land and we are expanding our works in Jaywick, and things in Jaywick are improving. Moreover the rapporteur's visit irritated the people of Jaywick greatly; it irritated them that somebody yet again has come to Jaywick, looked at it and said, "This is a bad place to live." No, it is not; it is a wonderful place to live with a wonderful community who are on the up at the moment. I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, as I enjoyed that hugely.

We were the party that introduced the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, a groundbreaking Act that was subsequently amended and replaced by the Equality Act 2010. On the specific point about an independent assessment, it is because of the chain of legislative changes that we started that all Departments and public bodies now have a responsibility for considering and

[Giles Watling]

monitoring the impact of policies on disabled people. This is the case for all policy, not just disability-related policies.

Finally—and this is the crucial point—if we commission this assessment, we must recognise that the DWP does not believe it is methodologically sound to publish a cumulative impact separately for disabled people. The main reasons are that the Department's survey data are limited, particularly in terms of capturing the severity of disability, and because most people live in households with others, the Department does not know how incomes are shared. It is very hard to look at effects separately for the disabled. That will be the case for an independent body, too, so there is no point in commissioning a flawed and inaccurate assessment; that helps nobody.

7.58 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): I congratulate my colleague the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing this important debate and I appreciate the Backbench Business Committee's granting it.

This is an interesting situation, because I support some elements of UC. I remember supporting it in the coalition. There were elements of it that I pointed out at the time would cause problems. Some of what I said was taken on board, but unfortunately some was not and we have reaped the whirlwind all these years later. A key element of UC that I supported avidly was around working allowance, and I was disappointed that that was cut to ribbons in 2015, although I was delighted only a few months ago that £1.7 billion was restored, if not the full amount. So, there has been a bit of progress.

I worked with my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth—I call her my hon. Friend even though we are in different parties—on the Work and Pensions Committee between 2010 and 2015, and we saw a lot of things in the same light. That is one of the reasons that I think today's request is not unreasonable. Anyone who was born with a disability or acquired it when very young faces an enormous challenge to get work. I know this because I have been working in this area for more than 30 years. After the kerfuffle earlier today, I should tell the House that I have been hard of hearing for 50 years and I am quite a good lipspeaker. I have kept silent about that, however. I decided that there was enough Sturm und Drang without my chucking any more into it. I am going to rise above that.

Disabled people face barriers to employment, to education and in many other areas. A Conservative Member made the point that it was the Conservatives in the early 1990s who introduced the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. I know that well, because I helped to campaign for it, all those years ago when I was young and had no grey hair. I met John Major at the time, and he was very impressive on the issue. The DDA was a huge game changer. Without that law, we would not have made anywhere near the number of advances on disability discrimination in services and employment that we have in fact made. However, there is a long way to go, and that is often because people do not understand the barriers that disabled people face.

Governments on all sides often point out that, under the DDA, someone who acquires a disability while working can keep their job. That is a great thing, and it is really important, but I know loads of disabled people who would give their right arm just to get in the door and be given a job. The system is now much better at protecting people who, sadly, acquire a disability through illness, for example, and that represents fantastic progress. However, the thing that has not changed in all the years I have been in politics, and all the years before that when I was involved in this area, is that it is still incredibly hard for a disabled person to get a job.

On top of that, people have to deal with the incredibly unwise move by the DWP a couple of years ago—before the present Ministers were in situ—to change elements of the capability assessment. The Government kept the support group and a couple of the other groups, but they changed the part of the employment and support allowance that helps disabled people to get work. They changed the income so that it was the same as that of jobseeker's allowance, or just above it, rather than retaining the higher amount that was available to the support group. That was such a foolish move. I was not an MP at the time—I had a brief two-year period after 2015 when I was not an MP, then I came back—and I remember writing to my colleagues and to the then Ministers about the decision.

Human nature is human nature, and if the additional payment is reduced by 20% for disabled people who are prepared to try to find work, with support, those people will of course strive darn hard to get into the support group. That is not wrong; that is what happens. If I had been off work for six or seven years, and I had been persuaded by my work coach at the Jobcentre Plus to go into an ESA cohort that would give me a little more money than pure JSA—a little less than in the support group but more than JSA—I would be willing to go into that group because there would be more income and also because the work coach would be there to help me to find work. If the rules were then changed, so that my money was exactly the same as it would be on JSA, I would try to stay in the support group—it would be bonkers not to, to be perfectly honest. That is just human nature. That was really frustrating, so I was not surprised to learn that there have been real problems in that area over the ensuing years, and that a lot of people have moved over to the support group who perhaps would not have done so.

There are still some really odd anomalies. I have recently been helping a constituent who had worked for the DWP at the local Jobcentre Plus for x number of years. Unfortunately he became ill, and after a few years it was clear that his illness was stopping him working effectively, even part time. The DWP did its best to help him through the process, but eventually he was let go, under proper due process—I have no complaints about that, and neither did he. Two years later he was on ESA and had to go for a work capability assessment, because the DWP's system had said, "No, you're not disabled enough to have these benefits." He was disabled enough to be made redundant but not disabled enough a few years later to actually get the benefits, which was ridiculous. I do not believe that it was a conspiracy; I believe that it was classic dim bureaucracy. I try to provide support at tribunals where possible, so one member of my office team—I am training up a second colleague—joined my

constituent to act as an advocate at tribunal. He won and is now getting all the benefits to which he is entitled.

My point is that that clunkiness happens more often for someone who is disabled. I know so much about this subject, having worked with so many thousands of people over the years, so that is why I believe we need an assessment. I do not think that is unreasonable. I do not agree with all the things that it is suggested are required. My colleague the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth would be surprised if I agreed with her on everything, but I agree with her on this. We need a specific assessment of the impact that the changes are having on disabled people. If we do not have that, I fear for the really huge migration—the million migration—although I accept that the Government have been making some good amendments to universal credit, sometimes through gritted teeth. That is why I do not think that it is unreasonable to ask for an independent impact assessment that is focused on disabled people.

Debbie Abrahams: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Centre for Welfare Reform recently published an analysis of the Government's reasons for not producing a cumulative impact assessment? In summary, it found no good reason why the Government should not evaluate the combined impact of their policies.

Stephen Lloyd: I was not aware of that, but it makes my case perfectly. As the hon. Lady knows, that is a good lobby group, from a different perspective—from the right of centre. What we have is left of centre, centre—an empty void these days, but that is by the by—and right of centre all telling the Government to have the impact assessment.

Giles Watling: Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that if the impact assessment is based on faulty data, and therefore comes up with faulty answers, it is not worth having?

Stephen Lloyd: I have to say to the hon. Gentleman, with genuine respect, that I think the Department is spinning to him on that. I know a lot about disability statistics, including all the different Government and DWP statistics, and I do not believe that it would be beyond the wit of man to come up with the model that gets over the particular hurdle he has talked about. My view is that the hurdle is not as dramatic as the DWP is saying. We might have to agree to disagree, but I genuinely believe that, and I have worked a lot with the DWP over the years under different Governments.

I will now close, as I know others wish to speak. The request for an independent assessment is not unreasonable, and it would do the Government credit to accept it. On that basis, I hope the Minister is listening.

8.10 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), who is clearly well informed on these issues and who shares my love of statistics.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing this debate. Opposition Members have talked about the UN report and the Government's supposed complacency,

and I make it clear that, in the 18 months I have been here, not one of my colleagues or I have been complacent about the welfare policies we see play out in our constituencies every single day. I will elaborate on some of the areas where I think we are doing quite well and on other areas where there is still scope for further reform, on which I am sure colleagues will want to work with me and, of course, with Ministers in trying to deliver.

We are having this debate against the backdrop of significant changes to our welfare policy. DLA is being phased through to PIP, along with attendance allowance for pensioners with care needs. We have seen a big difference in how the money is being spent, too.

Some Opposition Members have criticised the Government, saying that costs have been cut on the backs of the most vulnerable in our society. I have heard that allegation made against Ministers time and again, which is why I went to the Library to look at the overall expenditure within our welfare system. Breaking it down, around £10.3 billion was being spent on DLA in 2009-10—we did not have PIP in 2009-10—and in 2017-18 around £16 billion was being spent on DLA plus PIP. In cash terms, there has not been a reduction in overall expenditure.

The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), who is no longer in her place, said that we are cutting costs on the backs of the most vulnerable, which is neither fair nor accurate. If we are to have a proper debate on how to help the most vulnerable in our society, we should speak to the right facts. The facts and statistics have come up as an issue time and again, including in the House this week. We owe it to all our constituents to speak to the facts, and if Opposition Members dispute the facts, they should take it up with the Library.

In looking at how the policies have come across, not only has the way in which the money is distributed changed, but so has how services are delivered. What has happened with a lot of the welfare reforms—I have seen it, and my constituents have come to my office to speak about it—is that many people on legacy benefits are, for the very first time, having some of the assumptions challenged and are being asked for reassessments. Sometimes that is for the good, but sometimes there has been a detrimental impact where they have fallen through the different changes. They might have had a change of circumstances, or they might have moved between counties or to different parts of the country, which has had a negative impact. I have asked questions of Ministers in the House to try to tackle those issues.

Debbie Abrahams: How many disabled people were supported by the social security system in 2009, and how many are supported now? It is important to have the denominator value so that we have a rate, not just cash values.

Luke Graham: I could not agree more. I find it interesting that we have had an increase of around 800,000 people aged 16 to 64 who are now being classified as disabled. I understand that they had previous classifications within the welfare system and were receiving different benefits, so a simple change in the denominator would not indicate the impact.

[Luke Graham]

The Government have made commitments to people in receipt of cash benefits. [Interruption.] It is a fair point. The hon. Lady asked me a direct question, and I gave her a direct answer. Again, I would happily debate the number of people who are now being classified as disabled.

There have been some positive movements in the Government's changes. We have seen the employment rate for disabled people go up from 43% to 51%, which is welcome. I referred to Access to Work earlier, and £104 million went into the scheme in 2016-17, providing support to around 25,000 people.

Again, no Conservative Member is complacent. We are very clear that changes still need to be made. A number of my constituents have talked to me about their experiences of the assessment process, taking me through the paperwork. I have gone through that page by page with them to understand where they are having difficulties. From that, we can see that some of these changes have brought people into our offices; they have brought them into the welfare system. For a long time, they have lagged in the dark, whereas now assumptions are being challenged and new benefits are being offered. As a result, new questions are coming from our constituents, and we should try to answer them as best we can.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for giving a far more honest portrayal of his experience of his constituents than other Government Members. May I just challenge a point he made earlier about the figures? Of course, when he refers to these figures, he is being somewhat selective. The rate of inflation means costs have risen since 2010, so naturally the costs, output and spend he refers to will be higher, but that does not necessarily mean that people are not being affected disproportionately.

Luke Graham: We are looking at a 38% increase in cash terms, but if the compound inflation rate over the same period is taken into account, this would come out as less than 38%. I am happy to go through the calculations with the hon. Lady separately, but we would still find a real-terms increase in the benefits that are being paid out.

On all these policies, we, as constituency MPs, see people who come into our offices. They come to see me and my staff in my Alloa office and in my Crieff office, and we see some of the human impact of the changes made in welfare. I support looking at how we assess the impacts on disabled people, because we are putting in a considerable amount of money. My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) made the point about the amount being spent on disabled benefits, and we are one of the highest spenders in the developed world, which should be applauded, but if the money is not getting to the right people at the right time, we need to see exactly how it is being administered and how our services are being delivered on the frontline right across our country.

Like other Members here, I have hosted debates on Disability Confident, which is a fantastic scheme. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) talked about how MPs should be signing up for that. My office is a member of the scheme and the same applies to colleagues from

right across the House. The Minister visited the Glenalmond Timber Company in my constituency, and I hope everyone will be able to join me in congratulating Jed Gardner, its production manager, who now has Disability Confident leader status—the first in Scotland. I hope everyone will congratulate him on the fantastic work being done in Methven to give people with disabilities opportunities to work. When I visited the company and when the Minister did, too, we could clearly see the impact this has on not only individuals, but their family and friends. So some incredibly positive work is being done by this Government, although there are also areas where we need to review and assess continually.

Furthermore, in my constituency, we recently held a joint event with my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on Disability Confident in Alloa, which the local community and the DWP attended. It was hosted in Inglewood House, which, I am glad to say, signed up to the Disability Confident scheme immediately following that event. Again, that is an incredibly positive action, showing that companies in Clackmannanshire, Perth and Kinross are taking Government initiatives from the green Benches here and applying them in a daily way where we can see real improvement in our constituents' lives.

As I said, I have a number of concerns about how the assessment is taking place, and I would support looking at having an assessment of how these things are being delivered. I hope to work with my Government colleagues on how that would be done. I hope that such an assessment would be independent, or certainly objective, to make sure that our constituents, our Government and ourselves will have the best possible view on how these disability benefits are being delivered.

Kate Green: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the recommendation in the Work and Pensions Committee's report published this week that, while someone is waiting for a work capability assessment, it is unreasonable of the Department not to pay universal credit, because that is leaving people high and dry?

Luke Graham: The short answer is yes. I led the inquiry on universal credit in the Public Accounts Committee, and I refer all Members to the inquiry and subsequent report, where we identified the strengths and shortfalls of the UC system. I hope that Government colleagues have read that report and taken those recommendations into account.

I wish to make one or two final points before summarising. We have talked a lot about statistics. One concern I have—this is often not appreciated in this House—is that the devolution of certain levels of statistics around the country means we often have different levels of government in the UK producing different statistics, which makes like-for-like comparisons quite difficult. When preparing for this debate and for the mental health debate that was pulled, I struggled to get figures from the Library, because in Scotland we are now not going along with certain NHS quality-for-delivery frameworks. Even if different parts of the United Kingdom and different levels of government use different methods, we have to find a statistical method to find a uniform measure so that we can have a meaningful debate in this place. Otherwise, we are not comparing apples with apples and we cannot get a real view of how services are being delivered for our constituents.

In that same vein, the devolution of welfare powers has been debated in the past, and I am sure that the debate will be ongoing in this place in the coming years. I have a real concern about the devolution of welfare powers—not because I think that all powers should remain here and I want to sit on the green-Bench throne, but because when we speak to the most vulnerable people in our constituencies, as I know every Member does, we find out that adding another agency or two into the equation would make it even more difficult for them to get the help that they need.

I support this issue, because we should have an objective assessment of what these changes are doing for our constituents and for the most vulnerable people. We are spending the money, but we have to make sure that it goes to the right place. For too long, benefits have been a party political issue. When it comes to disability and helping the most vulnerable people in society, we can look past our party affiliation and deliver for our constituents.

8.21 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on securing this important debate.

On a daily basis, my office sees at first hand the horrendous and appalling impact that the Government's changes to the social security system have had on some of the most vulnerable people in my Aberavon constituency. Many of my constituents who come to my advice surgeries are at their wits' end, worried that their benefits are going to be stopped and that they will not be able to pay their rent or put food on the table for their children. We have seen hundreds of vulnerable constituents put through the humiliation of shambolic health assessments that cast doubts on their physical disabilities or mental health issues. Following that humiliation is the awful uncertainty and fear of the appeals process, which we almost always win.

Some people have been awarded no points following PIP or ESA assessments, when it is quite clear that they are struggling with a disability, or when information has been inaccurately recorded. This has eroded confidence in not only the assessment process but the whole system. Universal credit has landed people in rent arrears for the very first time. Some people's experiences are simply harrowing.

In one case, a woman who had suffered with a degenerative disc condition for 27 years, along with depression and anxiety, waited for more than a year for her ESA assessment, only to have it cancelled on the day. A month later, she was assessed, but the anxiety and stress of the wait, followed by the degrading assessment itself, led to a mini-stroke two days after the assessment. She now has high blood pressure, which puts her at risk of a further stroke. Despite all that, she was put into the work-related category. That decision was overturned following a mandatory reconsideration. She is not alone in having had to go through this process. In Wales in 2017, 75% of PIP decisions and 74% of ESA decisions were overturned on appeal. This high rate is symptomatic of the fundamental flaws in the initial assessment process. If the correct decisions were made from the outset, a lot of the misery, worry and suffering would be avoided.

When we raise these problems with the Government, we get the same response time after time: they do not recognise these big problems and will carry on regardless. They are like an ostrich with its head buried in the sand. But that is indicative of the Government's track record: they carry on until they are shamed into doing something about it. What can be more shaming than when a United Nations poverty envoy says that changes to social security have meant that

“great misery has also been inflicted unnecessarily, especially on the working poor, on single mothers struggling against mighty odds, on people with disabilities who are already marginalized, and on millions of children who are being locked into a cycle of poverty”?

That was published in his report.

It is appalling and inexcusable that this is happening in a G7 country. Our social security system is there as a safety net for the most vulnerable people. Right now, that safety net is failing. MPs, the EHRC and the United Nations have all called on the Government to conduct a cumulative impact assessment. If the Government are so confident that they are doing the right thing, they have nothing to fear over commissioning this assessment. Ultimately, the Government must stop burying their head in the sand over this and wake up to the reality that their punitive and callous policies are causing misery and hardship to hundreds of my constituents and hundreds of thousands of people across the country.

8.25 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I very much want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and the Backbench Business Committee for bringing this debate before Parliament, because it allows us to shine a spotlight on the experiences of our constituents who are living with a long-term illness or disability and who are relying on financial support from the Government.

Support has dwindled for these people in recent years, including for the nearly 6,000 people in Bristol South who are currently claiming employment and support allowance because they are unable to work owing to illness or disability. The national evidence is already clear. “The cumulative impact of tax and welfare reforms” report published earlier this year by the EHRC found that changes to taxes, benefits, tax credits and universal credit announced since 2010 affect the poorest the hardest, with ill and disabled people being among the worst hit. It is not just a loss of income, shocking as it is, that has an impact on disabled people; there is something very wrong with the Government's instructions to the staff at the Department for Work and Pensions and the culture that has been created. The number of constituents in Bristol South who have been forced to appeal and initially refused ESA or personal independence payments is appalling, as others have mentioned.

Fantastic work is being done by South Bristol Advice Services, based in Withywood. It does a great job in supporting those who need help, but the determination required simply to make a claim is often too much for those suffering with long-term conditions or life-changing illnesses. There is little evidence of compassion in the system. Sadly, universal credit is making that situation worse in both financial terms and the complexity of the claim process. The Government have already admitted that the most disabled people's incomes will

[Karin Smyth]

not be fully protected, and I am already seeing constituents who are losing out simply because of a change in circumstances.

Promises about future backdated transitional payments ring hollow when a person cannot afford the rent because their universal credit claim is in disarray three months after moving to a bungalow adapted for their disability. Rent arrears have spiralled. In one case, a blind constituent was informed only in writing that universal credit now included an element for rent. No one contacted her to inform her verbally.

I want to pay tribute to the persistence and resilience of my constituents who daily face the challenge of their medical conditions and who must also deal with the current benefits system. I applaud those who have come to accept that a mandatory reconsideration and an appeal to Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service are just part of the claims process. My constituent who informed me that he has completed his third successful appeal has my admiration and respect. However, there are far too many others who simply do not carry on with their claims, who get ground down by the bureaucracy, who miss out on vital financial support and whose health, as others have mentioned, suffers greatly as a consequence.

Of course the Government should commission an independent cumulative assessment of the impact of changes in the social security system on sick and disabled people, their families and carers, but they should also act now, immediately stopping the roll out of universal credit to ill or disabled people.

8.29 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Government Members appear to be arguing that there should not be a cumulative impact assessment for disabled people for which my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) has argued so eloquently.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton) *indicated dissent.*

Ruth George: I am glad that the Minister is disagreeing and I very much hope that she will put me right and will agree to this.

There are plenty of figures out there. We know that 30% of families including someone with a disability are in poverty. That is 10% higher than the rest of the population. In fact, according to the Social Mobility Commission, half of people in poverty—nearly 7 million people—are in a household with an adult who has a disability. Fixing the problems of poverty for people with disabilities will go a long way to fixing the problems of the UK's high level of poverty.

Over the last eight years, we have seen successive cuts to benefits that affect people with disabilities. From 2013, we saw a 1% benefit uprating for three years. Employment and support allowance lost over 5% of its value compared to the retail prices index and 3% compared to the consumer prices index. The four-year benefits freeze will take off 6.5% compared to the CPI and a full 10% compared to the RPI; 15% of the value of that benefit will be lost over seven years. These are not generous benefits in the first place.

In addition, many disabled people have had to cope with the cuts to local housing allowance, which is down to 30% of median rents. They therefore have to bulk up their rent out of their meagre ESA. Child tax credit has been frozen. The childcare element in tax credits has been at the same maximum since 2005, and the amount of help people can get with childcare costs has reduced from 80% to 70%. In addition we have the bedroom tax, which affects so many people with disabilities, and £30 a week has been abolished for those in the work-related activity group under ESA.

People with disabilities have been facing all those cuts, even before the cuts under universal credit. That is why people with disabilities feel so strongly that there needs to be a cumulative impact assessment of the full impact of the history of serious cuts to their income. Under universal credit, we are also seeing cuts that affect children with disabilities. The Government claim to support and protect the most vulnerable in society, but my constituent—a single parent with a son with a disability—wrote to me saying, “My son is six years old. He is practically bed-bound, yet the Government want to transfer me on to universal credit because I can no longer work to support him, and his support will be reduced. If my disabled son is not one of the most vulnerable people who needs protection and support, then who is?” I put that question to the Minister today.

The difficulties in claiming universal credit for people with disabilities have been set out in many cases elsewhere, but because roll-out so far has been mostly to people who have been on JSA—not to people with disabilities on employment and support allowance—we have not seen the scale of support that is needed. However, as I mentioned earlier, I am already seeing problems in my constituency with regards to people with disabilities getting the home visits that they feel they need.

Families in particular are feeling the cuts, including parents who are disabled with children who are disabled. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth set out the appalling level of cuts—a reduction in income of nearly £10,000 a year—that those families will see under universal credit. It is no wonder that families fear universal credit. A constituent with a four-year-old son who is autistic and non-verbal wrote to me to say that she has had to give up work to care for him because she cannot get care in the school holidays, so as well as losing her own wage, she has also lost tax credits. The family looked to claim housing benefit, but found that they would need to claim universal credit instead. Given that they have already racked up rent arrears because their income has been so reduced, if they faced five weeks' wait for support under universal credit, they could end up losing the house they have been tenants in for the last 21 years. I hope that the Government will be listening to these real stories of people who are already suffering. I have had universal credit in my constituency for only two and a half months, and I am already seeing constituents who are suffering under it.

That is on top of all the constituents who are suffering from employment support allowance and PIP assessments. In the Work and Pensions Committee, I set out to the Minister the very harrowing account that I had heard of a group of survivors of sexual violence and their experiences of PIP assessments—how one woman was curled up on the floor crying and sobbing uncontrollably while the assessor simply repeated the questions at her deadpan

and offered her no support or understanding whatsoever. I was very pleased that the Minister agreed that that was a disgusting situation that should not be allowed to continue. In response to the Committee's report on PIP and ESA assessments, the Government promised to look at the recording of those assessments and to bring that in. However, on questioning the permanent secretary today in the Committee, we heard that he had no idea how that was being rolled out, although the commitment to do so was made eight months ago.

A constituent who was looking to claim PIP said that she was forced to purchase her own recording equipment if she wanted her assessment to be recorded, whereas she knows that in the past the assessment centre had used its own equipment. She was also looking to get support with getting to the assessment centre. She was told that she could get there in a taxi but that it would cost £100 up-front and she could only claim that back 30 days after her assessment. People with disabilities are not being treated in the way that they should be treated. I am afraid that this is a culture that we are coming across time and again in what we hear in our constituency surgeries.

The Disability Benefits Consortium found that eight out of 10 people who underwent a PIP assessment found that it made their health worse. Two thirds felt that they had been poorly assessed. Constituents with mental health difficulties, in particular, find that those difficulties are not adequately assessed. One constituent said that, although she presented with serious mental health difficulties, the bulk of the questions she was asked were aimed at her physical health, where she has only minor conditions that do not prevent her from working. Only a third of the time was spent covering her mental health, and those questions were loaded. When she tried to expand and explain her answers, she was told to stick to the questions.

My constituent has been left on the verge of suicide by that assessment and the struggle of waiting for a response as to what will happen as a result. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth set out so starkly, there has been an increase in suicides by people who have been undergoing work capability and PIP assessments. None of us want to see this happen. In Committee, I raised with the Minister the fact that constituents of mine were being asked why they had not yet committed suicide. I was very pleased that she again took up the issue. That question has not come up in the cases that I have received more recently, so I very much hope that that practice is spreading through the privatised companies that do these assessments. However, there is so much more to do, as cases just from my one, very rural and relatively affluent constituency show.

Dr Cameron: The hon. Lady is making an extremely powerful speech. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for disability, and we have heard that there are particular difficulties for people with acquired brain injury and epilepsy in relation to the types of questions asked in assessments. Does she agree that assessments should be more sensitive to the different types of disability?

Ruth George: The hon. Lady makes a very relevant point. The evidence from my constituents with mental health issues and brain injuries is that assessments are centred on physical health and physical difficulties.

I know from my 20 years working for the shop workers' union, USDAW, that work is not easy these days, particularly for people with long-term health conditions. Employers now have sickness absence procedures, and employees often cannot have more than three periods of sickness absence, however short, in any six-month period. People with disabilities—particularly those who do not have a union representative to support them under the Equality Act 2010—are simply slipping through the net, not performing and being left out of the workplace.

Unfortunately, universal credit and the cuts to that benefit will trap people who have disabilities more without work, and particularly those who are on a higher-level benefit with premiums and then take up a short period of work. For example, one of my constituents took a job working for Royal Mail for six weeks over the Christmas period, because he felt relatively well and wanted to do it. He has just found out that when he finishes that job, he will be transferred on to universal credit and will lose his transitional protection and support. That is not a message that says to people with disabilities, "Try to work. Try to do your best."

We see even more problems with the system where people with disabilities are being refused work capability assessments and are not seeing any money at all. One of my constituents was presented to me by a support charity six months ago. It has been trying for six months to get him some money, since he failed his ESA assessment. He had a fit note and should have been getting money. Only with my intervention did he get support. For six months, he was living off friends, family and food bank parcels.

Stephen Timms: I wonder whether my hon. Friend saw this comment from Professor Alston in his report:

"great misery has also been inflicted unnecessarily...on people with disabilities who are already marginalized".

Ministers have sought to dismiss that criticism, but does that not sum up pretty well the experience of a very large number of people up and down the country?

Ruth George: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that important point, on which I was going to end my speech.

I want to quote a constituent with a disability who wrote to me to set out her experience. She was not asking for support—she was able to fight the system—but she said:

"The reason I'm writing to you is to encourage you to keep fighting for us in Westminster, to be the voice that is being taken away from the disabled people in this country. Fight to put an end to this barbaric, humiliating assessment system, where the person who makes life or death decisions doesn't even get to meet you, isn't medically qualified (specific to the individual condition) and is meeting targets to refuse claims."

That is the view of people with disabilities. They want Parliament to be seen to be supporting them. The changes to universal credit in the Budget did not affect people with disabilities, who are some of the worst impacted by cuts to universal credit. I very much hope that the Minister and the Government are listening.

8.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am pleased to contribute to the debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing it.

[Jim Shannon]

Benefits are the biggest issue in my office. I have one member of staff who does nothing else but deal with benefits five days a week; to be honest, she works outside her hours because she is a compassionate lady. The rest of us in the office, including myself, have done DLA appeals, and we still continue to do them. We deal with the benefits system as well, and these are incredibly difficult issues. The Government have indicated that they will review some of the universal credit system, and may I say that that cannot come soon enough?

I want to say something to the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), who is in his place, and to the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, who has left but will no doubt be back shortly. I am not saying this to give them a big head, but both Ministers are very affable and engaging, and they do try to address the issues. I know that because I have spoken to them both. They have come to me to say, "Look, if there's anything at all that you want to speak about, please speak to us about those things".

Both the Ministers are keen and eager to help—I say that in advance because I do not want them to think I am attacking them, because I am not doing so—but there are things I have to say tonight about universal credit and where it is, and the fact that it is having an impact on my constituents. It would be remiss of me to come to this Chamber and not to say that. I wanted to say that first, because I know the Under-Secretary always responds; he knows that, because I have spoken to him before about it. None the less, we are where we are on these issues.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has done a very in-depth analysis, which I and others have read; indeed, some right hon. and hon. Members have referred to it. It shows that the bottom two deciles will lose, on average, approximately 10% of their net income, with much smaller losses for those higher up the income distribution. Negative impacts are particularly large for households with more disabled members and for individuals with more severe disabilities, as well as for lone parents and those on low incomes.

For some family types, these losses represent an extremely large percentage of income. For example, for households with at least one disabled adult and a disabled child, average annual cash losses will be just over £6,500—over 13% of average net income. Here is a specific figure, because I have some people from Bangladesh in my constituency: the impact of changes to direct taxes and benefits is to reduce the income of Bangladeshi households by some £4,400 per year on average. These are specific points, and I want to say them in a very constructive way to the Under-Secretary, because I know he responds. I am happy to say these things, because I know he will come back, as he always does.

At an individual level, women will lose on average considerably more from changes to direct taxes and benefits than men. Women will lose some £400 per year on average, and men will lose some £30.

Stephen Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful point. The figures he is talking about are true in my constituency as well. I know one family that is losing just under £500 a month. As we in the Chamber

all know, the reality is that these are substantial sums of money for some of our poorest disabled fellow citizens. There is no point arguing about it any more. That is why I think the request from the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for an independent impact assessment is reasonable and fair, and it needs to be a matter of priority, otherwise there will be many more of the stories the hon. Gentleman is talking about.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and yes, I totally agree. At the very end, I will make a similar recommendation to what the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

This does affect low-income families. Some of the figures I have mentioned are for men and women, but the figures conceal very substantial variation within both genders. Lone parents in the bottom quintile—the bottom fifth—of the household income distribution lose some 25% of their net income, or £1 in every £4 on average. The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) referred to this earlier, and mentioned very clearly the income impact on those in the lower income brackets.

On average, disabled lone parents with at least one disabled child fare even worse, losing almost £3 out of every £10 of their net income. In cash terms, their average losses are almost £10,000 per year. That is massive, and we cannot ignore those things. Those things really quite annoy me, and I think they annoy us all. In fairness, I think they probably annoy Ministers as well, but we do need a response from Ministers if we are to deal with them.

Around 1.5 million more children are forecast to be living in households below the relative poverty line. These are massive issues; in Northern Ireland, and in my constituency, children are sliding into poverty as a result of these reforms. I am being completely honest, Madam Deputy Speaker: these things are happening, in my constituency! And they are happening in everybody else's as well.

We quite recently had the roll-out of universal credit, so we know these things come in almost like a storm breaking over people. The statistics carry on, but this gives a very clear picture to me. We were told that universal credit would be beneficial to households in need. I have to say honestly, I do not see that happening at this moment. To see disabled homeless people being so massively affected is totally unacceptable. For that reason, I support the recommendations of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. It recommends that the UK Government should:

"1. Monitor and publish the impact of welfare reforms on disabled people, including assessment of the cumulative impact of tax and social security changes."

I think that if we get those facts, they will tell the tale.

"2. Review the levels of benefits to ensure they provide an adequate standard of living."

It is so important. People are falling into poverty, and children in particular. I always get annoyed when I hear of children living below poverty levels; I think others might as well.

"3. Ensure that work coaches are trained to deliver tailored employment support so that the specific needs of disabled people are being met."

How important that is.

Justin Tomlinson *indicated assent.*

Jim Shannon: I think the Minister is nodding his head, and I think he accepts that, but we need to have people that can do that for them. We deal with them every day of the week in my office, and in every other hon. Member's office. I am not different from anybody else—we are all the same.

The EHRC also recommends that the Government should:

“4. Make the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities...part of UK law”—

that is what the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) referred to in his intervention—

“so individuals can effectively challenge rights violations in the domestic legal system, and develop a clear and coordinated plan for how the UK and devolved”

Administrations

“will systematically address the UN's recommendations on disability rights.”

I have been contacted in the last two days by some constituents. The hon. Member for High Peak referred to a quotation from some of her constituents. My constituents have asked me to highlight the fact that universal credit simply isn't working. Those are real-life responses from real people with real problems. They have asked me to make contact with the Department, especially with Ministers, to ensure that their voices were heard in the midst of everything that has happened in this House today. We all know about it—I get a sore head just thinking about it. I assured my constituents that I would ensure that I voiced their concerns today, in the presence of the responding Minister. The concerns are as follows.

The Government say that no one falls through the cracks and ends up losing their benefit, because they will make sure that everyone claiming benefits under the old system is moved automatically on to universal credit and not forced to make a new claim. The Government say that no one is left without the money they need to survive, because they are continuing to pay people all of their old benefits until their new ones have kicked in. The Government say that everyone is protected from becoming worse off under the new system, especially vulnerable groups. I say that is a very honourable assumption to make. I do not for one second say that that is the purpose of what the Government have put forward, but currently the Department is failing people.

I know of many people who went to the jobcentre and went through the online process with a member of staff and then came into my office. The benefits office—what we would have called the bru office many years ago—is just around the corner from my office, so most people come to me when they have a problem, to talk to my staff members. Although they went through the online process with a member of staff, they then came to my office, in tears, as they simply could not understand what was happening to them. They could not understand that they had not got their benefits. They could not understand the paperwork system. I do not want to be too critical, but I have to say these things, as that is what has happened.

People are sick with worry, not understanding what is happening or what is required of them. They are very worried about their benefit, and when we think that

many of those who are on universal credit are ill, and that the stress of this makes things worse, it is clear that we are failing. We are failing the most vulnerable, and much as I would love to help every person on universal credit, my staff are doing nothing else but that.

I observe, by the way, in the news that staff in one of the jobs and benefits offices were enjoying a celebratory cake for doing an excellent job and seeing the end of the roll-out in Northern Ireland. There was not much of a celebration in Newtownards about it, and that is a fact. Nor was there a celebration anywhere else. That is not saying that they should not have enjoyed the cake; I am just saying, celebrate when it is good but do not celebrate when it is not. Too many people are anxious and concerned. I would ask the Minister to assure me, and others in the House, that changes are on the way for the most vulnerable in the practicality of the roll-out, and changes in how it is affecting all of those I listed earlier.

I understand that we need all those who are able to work to do just that. That is very constructive and helpful, but let us be honest: are people on benefits and sickness benefits because they want to be? No, they are not. They want to work the same as the rest of them. It is perfectly plausible to put that forward. But I also understand that forcing those who are not able to work to worry and make themselves ill is cruel and unnatural. It must not happen. We need changes, yes. We also need assurances and action. I look to the Minister and the Department as to how and when that will happen.

8.55 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Madam Deputy Speaker, I appreciate your fortitude, and that of the previous occupant of the Chair, at this time of the evening. It has been a long week. I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for bringing forward this important debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Welfare reform has had a huge impact on my constituents, in particular on the lives of disabled people. That is the case not just in my constituency, but across the UK. Regardless of the rhetoric of those on the Government Benches that welfare reforms are helping people back into work, the reality is that the conditions are getting harder for those who are most in need of assistance.

Despite the War on Welfare petition with over 100,000 signatures calling on the Government to introduce cumulative impact assessments, the Government have been unrelenting in introducing these changes. For many, they have earned a reputation for having a hostile environment when it comes to these welfare changes, coupled with the Government's austerity measures, notwithstanding the impact of Brexit and the potential for a further weakened economy. The reality is that it will be the most vulnerable and the disabled who will be hardest hit by Brexit. Whether it is Brexit, the initial 2012 changes or the 2016 welfare reforms, we have to acknowledge that they are not working as well as they could be in practice. That is not a political statement; it is a matter of fact that they are not working as well as they could be. Unlike some Ministers, I know that the Minister of State for Disabled People cares deeply and she will want to get this right.

[Angela Crawley]

We have heard many contributions from across the House from right hon. and hon. Members, who have conducted themselves, may I say, immeasurably better in the Chamber than in recent weeks. They have served their constituents admirably better on this important matter. It is worth highlighting some of those valuable contributions. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth rightly highlighted the WOW campaign and the disproportionate impact on disabled people, families and carers. This is not a political statement, but something we all, across the House, want to get right. I know the Minister shares the same passion to get it right.

The hon. Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) and for Clacton (Giles Watling), I am sorry to say, gave a rather rosy depiction. I am afraid I do not share the same optimistic view. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) for being a bit more realistic about the experience of his constituents. The fact is that there are elements of this that can be reviewed and reformed, and we all want to do that.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) highlighted the range of cuts. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) spoke passionately, as always, about the impact on WASPI women, who are working longer and harder under the pension changes. The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) rightly highlighted that many disabled constituents want to work but cannot. That reminded me of the phrase that a good friend, Susan Douglas-Scott, said to me: often, it is society that disables individuals, not the individuals themselves. The hon. Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) highlighted the UN report and the EHRC report, and the joint calls for cumulative impact assessments. Of course, no debate would be complete without the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who needs no further words.

My constituent Liam from Hamilton has been trying to get the limited capability for work element for his universal credit, but so far he has been unsuccessful in his work capability assessment. His doctor, however, is adamant that Liam should not be working. Liam was a heavy goods courier. After a work-related injury, he cannot stand for any length of time and he cannot walk without fear of falling or his knees giving way. He has experienced heart palpitations, high blood pressure, numbness of limbs and sleepless nights as a result of various medical treatments. Despite all that, the gravity of his disabilities is not reflected in his medical assessment. Many of the conclusions of the assessment were based on assumptions rather than evidence. That seems to be a theme in many of the assessments.

Liam was therefore required, as part of universal credit, to claim to search for jobs for which he is physically unsuited and to attend training sessions for jobs he cannot do. This included a session with Remploy, the specialist charity for disabled employment, whose staff are experts in this area, but which refused to put Liam forward for any jobs because he was physically unsuitable for anything it could offer.

It is a shame that Liam is in this position. He has a very strong work ethic and wants nothing more than to get back to work. He is becoming increasingly frustrated

by this situation because he is unable to provide for his children. He is a single parent with shared custody and often unable to see his own children because there is no food in the house and he is unable to feed them. Is it right that families should be forced to make these decisions? The system is clearly flawed and not working. This man cannot work, yet he cannot even see his own children because he cannot afford to feed them. It is heartbreaking.

For many of those claiming PIP and employment support, the situation is not much better. The assessment criteria for these benefits do not appear to have been written by disabled people with disabled people in mind; rather they are tick-box exercises carried out by ill-trained staff. It is abundantly clear from many of the cases that have come through that my office and the assessors do not pick up on all the issues faced by disabled constituents. Yet I am asked daily to advocate on their behalf, when I do not even know the half of their situation or the magnitude of their disability. How can a work capability assessment or adviser assess that in less than five minutes, 20 minutes or half an hour? It is not possible. We have to be realistic.

On Friday, I visited a local charity in my constituency, Esteem, which I sponsored this year for my annual Christmas card competition and which supports people with mental ill health. It highlighted the experience of many of the clients it sees on a day-to-day basis who have gone through the jobcentre and faced horrible experiences. I know that that is not everyone's experience, or the intention of any staff member in the local jobcentre, but Esteem has identified that employees and staff do not feel adequately trained or qualified to assess individuals and are bending over backwards to prevent people from receiving further cuts. They are doing everything they can. It is not the fault of staff that the policy is flawed, and I do not blame them for administering the policy set by the Government.

This flawed assessment process is resulting in inaccuracies being reported to the DWP and leading to far lower amounts of benefit being given than what is needed to fit people's circumstances and to give them the right level of support. In some instances, DWP staff are advising people not to switch because it would be less beneficial for them. There might be issues with the legacy system, but clearly there are also issues with this system, if DWP staff are having to give that kind of advice to get people through the process. We have to acknowledge the flaws.

Having to fight to overturn a case causes huge stress to claimants as well as putting extra pressure on agencies, citizens advice bureaux and MPs' offices. It is admirable that, as we have heard, Members across the House have gone out of their way to help individuals to fill in forms, go through mandatory reconsiderations and get the right support, but, ultimately, if the system worked as it should, we would not have to do that; we should not have to do that. It is not a good use of our office resources, staff or processes.

We have to get to the root cause. This situation demonstrates how unfit for purpose the current system is. Another of my constituents, Darin, suffers from a chronic condition as well as mental health issues, but he lost his entitlement to an enhanced rate of PIP and mobility element in a recent reassessment. The assessor clearly did not consider the full range of his needs.

For example, he is deemed personally able to manage his own treatments, but in reality he relies on his mother to take care of his medication and to wake him up every morning to make sure he gets the appropriate medication and support. He cannot do that on his own, yet his mother's caring role was completely disregarded. It was Darin's mother who approached my office, which helped to get the case overturned under a mandatory reconsideration, but we should not have had to do that. That anxiety and stress could have been avoided altogether had the assessment been accurate in the first place.

Another constituent approached my office after losing the Motability element of his PIP reassessment. He had an adapted car, which was necessary for him to get to appointments and to maintain his independence. However, the assessor who carried out the review found that he did not require help with mobility, despite having lost one of his legs. He also lost all his entitlement to PIP during that reassessment. Again, he dealt with the matter through my office, and had to undergo the process of mandatory reconsideration—not to mention the impact on his family of the shock, the stress and the senseless removal of support. The fact was that he simply had no alternatives.

The system can be senseless and excessively technocratic, although that is not always the case. It takes no account of how the removal of financial support or help in the form of, for instance, a mobility car will affect disabled people, making their lives far more difficult.

In a similar case, my constituent Margaret, from Carlisle, lost her Motability car during her transition from DLA to PIP, which left her housebound. She successfully disputed the distance that she could walk, reducing it from the 20 to 50 metres in the assessment report to 1 to 20 metres. Her Motability car was returned but, in the meantime, unfortunately, she had bought another. That meant that, although she was receiving the correct level of support, her living standards had been needlessly reduced by the reassessment process.

If the system works as well as we have heard it does in so many accounts, why does every single one of our offices, each and every day, have to help people to counter it? The fact is that it simply is not working as it should. I think it not unreasonable to suggest to the Minister that the motion offers the Government an opportunity to conduct a thorough review of the assessment criteria, with the meaningful involvement of disabled people and those with long-term conditions, to ensure that the criteria are fair and truly reflect the extra costs that people face and the myriad conditions that affect them. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire rightly admitted that a continual review and assessment were required.

Let me end by asking the Minister a simple question. If the Government can spend limitless amounts on Brexit and on planning for no deal, why can they not introduce an independent cumulative impact assessment of their welfare reforms?

9.7 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell)

for initiating a similar debate four years ago and pay tribute to his hard work in championing the rights of disabled people. I thank the War on Welfare campaigners for their work over the past six years in making the voices of disabled people heard in the House, along with other disabled people's organisations and campaigners. More than 100,000 people signed the WOW petition which first brought the debate to the House.

Today, we have heard accounts from Members on both sides of the House. Let me mention just a few. My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) described the devastating impact of social security cuts and, in particular, the impact of cuts in the Motability scheme. Many disabled people have lost that vital support. She also spoke of the impact of the movement of many recipients of disability living allowance to the personal independence payment. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) shared personal and powerful testimonies from his constituents, but also highlighted the shocking statistics relating to the number of decisions on both employment and support allowance and PIP that were overturned in tribunals.

We are not asking the Government to reveal the truth about the effects of cuts on disabled people; we are asking them to own up to creating a social security system for disabled people that the UN report on extreme poverty described as "callous", "punitive" and "mean-spirited"; a system that the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has labelled as responsible for "grave" and "systemic" human rights violations; and a system that the Council of Europe concluded does not conform with the European social charter's guarantee of the right to social security.

We are demanding that the Government own up to the effects of over £40 billion of cuts to disabled people's social security since 2010, to imposing a sanctions regime on sick and disabled ESA claimants, to a cruel and callous assessment framework for both PIP and ESA and to the human catastrophe that is UC.

In the past eight years, disabled people have been forced to bear the brunt of the Tory austerity programme. They have been consistently and disproportionately impacted by cuts to social care, legal aid, housing, education and social security, as well as cuts to the independent living fund. The Centre for Welfare Reform has found that disabled people have been hit nine times harder by austerity than the rest of the population. Disabled people have been punished by this Government's austerity agenda. They have been punished by the abolition of the DLA and the introduction of PIP in April 2013, and we know the policy intention for abolishing DLA was to reduce expenditure on disability benefits by 20%, a move that has left hundreds of thousands without the support they need. Those people include a constituent of mine who suffers from chronic kidney disease and has been HIV-positive for 30 years and who was given zero points on his PIP assessment, despite being unable to undress or prepare food by himself and despite being in receipt of DLA for 20 years.

Disabled people have been punished by the gutting of ESA, by introducing the 12-month time-limited payments for those on the contributions-based element, by the tightening of the ESA criteria and by the devastating cut to the ESA work-related activity component, worth £30 per week, introduced in 2017, which has hit over

[*Marsha De Cordova*]

50,000 people this year. And disabled people have been punished by an inaccurate and callous assessment framework that denies them dignity and respect—an assessment framework that has forced over a quarter of a million disabled people to take the DWP to tribunal to get the social security that they are entitled to and under which 72% of PIP decisions brought to appeal are overturned.

Since 2010, disabled people have been punished by a “pointlessly cruel” sanctions regime, which has hit more than 1 million disabled people in the past eight years and which the Welfare Reform Act 2012 ensured was more severe, more punitive and more long-lasting than ever before, resulting in disabled people facing severe debt, skipping meals and taking out loans because they missed appointments at the jobcentre or did not fill out enough job applications. Figures released by the DWP last month show that 10% of ESA sanctions last longer than 26 weeks, so sick and disabled people are losing six months-worth of their income.

Most importantly, disabled people face the Government’s flagship UC system, which acts as little more than a vehicle for cuts. Today’s Work and Pensions Committee report has confirmed the devastating truth of the impact of UC on disabled people and of the structural problems inherent to UC such as the five-week wait and an online claims system that is inaccessible to many people. Under UC, just one in three disabled people receive their payments on time and in full, with the rest having to wait weeks on end before receiving payment. Severely disabled people moving on to UC are losing vital social security support that they need in the form of disability premiums, including the severe disability premium that they would have had under legacy social security worth £64.40 a week—payments that severely disabled people relied on to cover extra costs for ready meals and help with household tasks.

For one severely disabled person, UC meant that they received no money for six weeks, on top of losing their SDP. The delays in payment and losing the premium meant that they were forced to get help from the council, which gave them food vouchers so that they had something to eat. In their own words, they felt “embarrassed and degraded” by a system that left them destitute. It took a year for their UC payments to be sorted out, with endless calls that

“were too physically and mentally painful to make.”

The Government made a grave error in cutting disability premiums for those who are most in need. The transitional protections that this Government were forced to give as a result of a High Court ruling earlier this year do not apply to new applicants or to those who naturally migrated to universal credit, whose conditions remain the same but who will lose that vital support. So I ask the Minister today to commit to ensuring that no severely disabled person who moves on to universal credit will lose their premiums.

In the words of one WOW petition campaigner, in the past eight years this Government have created

“a hostile environment for sick and disabled people”

that

“has turned life into a living hell”.

They have created a hostile environment in the form of a punitive social security system that is stacked against disabled people. It is a system that is littered with errors such as the underpayment of ESA to almost 200,000 claimants by this Government. Disabled people have had to rely on the High Court to right the terrible wrongs in the social security system. In the past year alone, the High Court found that the Government unlawfully discriminated against hundreds of thousands of PIP claimants and that they unlawfully discriminated against severely disabled people who lost disability premiums.

Conservative Members continue to bury their heads in the sand when it comes to the suffering that they have caused. Over the past months, we have heard Ministers, including the former Secretary of State, label cuts to disabled people as “fake news” and the issues surrounding universal credit as “teething problems”. They dismiss the findings of UN investigations as politically motivated, and they dismiss calls to conduct a cumulative impact assessment that would offer a definitive analysis of the human cost of eight years of austerity for disabled people. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Social Security Advisory Committee have joined the call for that assessment to be done. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has carried out an impact assessment, and its findings were stark. We know that an impact assessment can be done by the Treasury, and if not, the Institute for Fiscal Studies can carry out an independent assessment.

How many more disabled people have to suffer under this Government’s austerity programme? How many more reports will link the Government’s policies with mental distress and suicide, yet be ignored? The fact that the Government refute the findings of the UN on the effects of austerity on disabled people is shameful, but the fact that they refuse to conduct an assessment of the human impact of their own policies is downright denial.

9.17 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I should like to add my voice to those congratulating the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing such an important debate. It is to the great credit of the House that, after what have been an emotional, long and tiring few weeks here, Members from every country of Great Britain are here tonight to speak up so well and so passionately for their constituents. This is probably our last full debate before the Adjournment debate tomorrow, and it is right that we have focused on such an important issue as the disabled people in our country and the amazing contribution that they make.

Of course, we should rightly focus all our efforts on what more we can do for those who are vulnerable and need our support, and I am sure that all hon. Members will want to ensure that we are doing everything we can to live up to the ideals of the United Nations conventions, which we helped to design, and to those of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which a Conservative Prime Minister introduced in this House. There is also cross-party support for the Equality Act 2010, which underpins so much of what we are doing. These are important issues that should unite the House, and I am pleased to have heard a lot of constructive comments this evening.

I have very little time, and I will not be able to answer all the questions that have been raised, but I will write to hon. Members if I have not been able to address their concerns. I want to focus on the motion, as it is so important.

I want to reassure hon. Members that the Government do publish distributional analysis of the cumulative impact of Government decisions on household finances at every fiscal event. The last publication was in October, to accompany the autumn Budget, and assessed the tax, welfare and public spending changes announced from the 2016 autumn statement onwards that carry a direct and quantifiable impact on households. Her Majesty's Treasury uses its intragovernmental tax and benefits microsimulation model to produce that analysis, and the underlying data comes from the Office for National Statistics annual living costs and food survey.

Her Majesty's Treasury uses the LCF survey, because it is the primary source of data about what income people have, how they spend their money and what public services they have accessed. The survey is unique in capturing all that information. Only by assessing the impact of Government policy on each of these areas can an accurate and fully comprehensive assessment of the total impact of all Government policies on welfare, taxes and spending on public services be made. Looking at only one aspect, such as changes to income from benefits, does not provide a complete picture and is misleading. For example, the Government have committed to increasing spending on the NHS by £20 billion, which will have a positive and direct impact on the lives of millions of disabled people. To look only at benefits would be really misleading.

The LCF survey came into existence in 2007, but a household food consumption and expenditure survey has been run by Government since the 1940s. The primary purpose of these surveys has always been to collect detailed expenditure data for a sample of people, which is then used to assess changes in people's spending patterns in order to adjust the basket of goods used to estimate inflation. The survey does not collect information from the sample of individuals that would allow us to assess whether a person is disabled—it has never been able to do that. As with all Government surveys, taking part is voluntary and a difficult balance has to be struck between the amount of information we are asking respondents to provide, and therefore the time it takes to complete the survey, and the proportion of the sample who are willing to take part. The survey sample is designed to be representative of the population, and the more people who do not respond, the more the estimates from the survey potentially suffer in quality.

Therefore, the lack of information about disability means that the information does not exist for the Treasury to estimate the cumulative impact of all Government policies on disabled people. However, the Office for National Statistics is currently undertaking developments to its household surveys to integrate various surveys and to link various sources of administrative data held by the Government, which means it might be possible to have the required information on disability status in future. The ONS is consulting users, and I have instructed my officials to raise the issue of disability status in the living costs and food survey. I encourage stakeholders, and all Members who care about this as much as I do, to contact the ONS, which is independent, and raise the issue. If we had that information, and if the ONS

proceeds in the way I have just described by linking datasets, it would be possible for us to undertake the sorts of assessments that people have articulated so well this evening.

However, although a cumulative impact assessment is not possible now, the DWP does undertake a wide range of other research and analysis to assess and monitor the impact of policies on disabled people. The DWP runs its own household survey—the family resources survey—which collects information from a sample of households, with detailed information on sources of income, the amount of income families receive and detailed information on the characteristics of the people in those households.

Stephen Timms *rose*—

Sarah Newton: I have said that I will not take interventions, in order to answer all the questions, but I will write to any Members I am unable to answer in the time available.

The family resources survey collects the information required to make an assessment of the disability status of people in a household. The information is then used to provide estimates of the amount of income that families with disabled people have. The DWP publishes estimates of the numbers and percentages of people within households with disabled people who have low incomes in the annual “Households below average income” publication.

In the 2016-17 survey, we saw that 16% of people in families with a disabled person were described as in absolute low-income poverty before housing costs, with a weekly income after tax of £280 or less for a couple with no children, compared with 19% in 2009-10. Absolute low-income poverty, on a before housing costs basis, has actually improved by three percentage points since 2010 for families with a disabled person.

Looking at all four measures of low-income poverty—before and after housing costs, and on a relative and on an absolute basis—poverty for people in families with a disabled person has improved since 2010 on three of the four measures, and there was no change in the fourth. I am not complacent. One person living in poverty in this country is one person too many, which is why we are determined to do everything we can to put more money in people's pockets.¹

Stephen Timms: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: Let me make these points. I have been asked to address a lot of issues, and I really want to do that.

As well as the poverty figures, the Department for Work and Pensions publishes impact assessments for every new policy that carefully consider the potential impact of those policies on people with protected characteristics, in line with its legal obligations and its strong commitment to promoting fairness. The DWP has a continual and broad programme of research and evaluation of policies affecting disabled people, which is often contracted to independent research bodies, and all the findings are published. A recent example of such work is the research into the experience of PIP claimants, which was published in September and provided valuable insight into how PIP is working to inform policy development.

1. [Official Report, 5 February 2019, Vol. 654, c. 2MC.]

[Sarah Newton]

We have had some appalling misuse of statistics tonight. Of all the people who have applied for PIP, 9% have gone to appeal and 4% have been overturned. I work with a great number of colleagues in this House, with the Select Committees, with the all-party parliamentary groups, with disabled people and with those who represent disabled people. When we hear recommendations on how we can improve the process, we implement them. The Work and Pensions Committee did an extremely valuable piece of work on assessments for ESA and PIP, and we are delivering on implementing those recommendations.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George), who is a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, spoke about the video recording of PIP assessments. I am determined to see that happen, because it will restore a lot of confidence in the process. We spent the summer carefully speaking to people with disabilities and to those who undertake the assessments—let us not forget that they are fully qualified healthcare professionals—about video recording. Putting all that information together, we started live testing the video recording of PIP assessments only a few weeks ago. That work will be completed in the new year, and we will be able to report back to the Select Committee and to the House on our progress and on how we will roll it out.

We are also undertaking a huge, large-scale test—it is actually the largest randomised control trial of its kind in the western world—as well as research into the employment and support package, to look at all the things that work to enable people with disabilities who want to work to get into work. It was interesting to listen to the personal experiences of the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), and there are many disabled people who want to work but face unacceptable barriers to work, although we have made a lot of progress.

The latest data from the ONS shows that 900,000 more people are in work over the last five years, which is a steady increase in the employment rate from 43% to 51%, but we are very ambitious and want to see that gap close completely so that employers can draw on all the talents of the nation. We have set ourselves the goal of having 1 million more disabled people in work, on which we are making good progress.

Not only are we helping those people who can work into work, but we are always looking at what more we can do to improve our main health and disability-related benefits. Let us be absolutely clear that we are spending record sums on those benefits—over £50 billion this year, which is much larger than our defence budget. The figure has grown by more than £5.4 billion since 2010, and it is forecast to rise in every single year of this Parliament. All those benefits that are about the additional costs of disability were not frozen and were not part of the benefits cap, and include payments for carers, so it is simply not true to say, as Members have this evening, that we have been reducing the amount of money that we spend on the social security system.

Stephen Timms: Professor Alston produced a punchy report, and it made some telling points. He referred to “the dramatic decline in the fortunes of the least well off in this country.”

He added:

“The Government has remained determinedly in a state of denial.”

From what the Minister is saying, it seems she is confirming Professor Alston’s point. There has, has there not, been a dramatic decline in the fortunes of the least well-off?

Sarah Newton: I was very pleased when the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth opened this debate by saying that she is an evidence-based policymaker, because I am too. I spent time serving on the Science and Technology Committee, where I was instrumental in having social science brought into its purview, and I was on the board of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. It is very important to me to make sure we use statistics, data and research accurately, and I am quoting from independent, impartial information.

As I said, one person in poverty is one too many, but let us not forget that we have had to deal with the legacy we were left by the previous Government of “There is no money”. We have had to make difficult choices about public expenditure, but we made sure that we increased the amount of money for people with disabilities and we increased money for the NHS. That extra money going into the NHS is directly benefiting people with health conditions and disability.

I have little time to wind up, but I want to mention that we have talked about other barriers that people face to fulfilling their aspiration to play a full part in our society, on which I completely agree. Employment is really important. All of us will be going back to our constituencies. We will do some Christmas shopping, go to carol services and enjoy a panto—we will be doing things with our families—but so many disabled people in our country will not be able to do that. We are absolutely determined through what we do with our sector champions and on our inter-ministerial working groups to make sure that every disabled person in our society can play their full part. We are removing those barriers. We are absolutely committed to living up to all the UN standards that we have signed up to, which are certain to make positive differences and changes.

9.32 pm

Debbie Abrahams: Again, let me thank the Backbench Business Committee and all contributors to the debate, who have been fantastic, highlighting what is happening in their constituencies up and down the country. I also wish to thank the thousands of people who have been in contact with me over the past months and days. I thank the disability people’s organisations—WOW, Disabled People Against Cuts, Disability Inclusion and the many charities that have provided their briefings, including the Centre for Welfare Reform, which said that such a cumulative impact assessment would be possible. Given that the Treasury accepts the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s cumulative impact assessment modelling, it seems bizarre that the Minister is saying that it cannot happen. I am conscious that if I do not finish before 9.36 pm, we cannot have a vote on this motion. So, once again, I ask us all to remember the stories we have discussed this evening as we leave to go on our Christmas breaks.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to commission an independent assessment of the cumulative impact of changes to the social security system on sick and disabled people and their families and carers.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

HUMAN FERTILISATION AND EMBRYOLOGY

That the draft Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 (Remedial) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.—(*Craig Whittaker*)

Question agreed to

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the draft Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Parental Orders) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 November, be approved.—(*Craig Whittaker*.)

Question agreed to.

Rail Fares: Cheltenham and London

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Craig Whittaker.)

9.34 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I have called this debate on rail fares between Cheltenham and London because when it comes to rail travel, my constituents are not being treated fairly. Local people, simply because they live where I and my constituents do, are being charged more per mile for their train travel to London than others who live a similar distance from the capital. It is an injustice that stretches back decades and it needs to be put right.

Cheltenham is around 90 miles or so from London. Because Dr Beeching, in his wisdom, pulled up the more direct line through Andoversford, the train line itself is a little lengthier because it travels a more circuitous route, but the central point remains: it is not terribly far from London at all. It is a substantial town, with more than 110,000 people. It is larger than Basingstoke, Chelmsford, Maidstone and Worcester. It is the home of GCHQ and GE Aviation—certainly if we include Bishops Cleeve. It is the home of Spirax-Sarco and Superdry. It hosts the world famous Cheltenham jump racing festival, the renowned literature, jazz, and science festivals, and much more besides. When it comes to train use, Cheltenham is by far the busiest station in Gloucestershire. Data from the Office of Rail Regulation shows that 2.35 million passengers used the station in 2016-17—almost as many as all the other stations on the route combined, and twice as many as 10 years ago.

Despite all that, there is a glaring discrepancy when it comes to the price of tickets, and season tickets in particular. Take, for example, Kingham to London, which is admittedly a shorter distance, but not much shorter. The season ticket price is £7,124. What about Bath Spa to London, which is further than Cheltenham to London? The season ticket price is £8,064. A season ticket for Bristol Temple Meads to London is £8,244, and a season ticket for Worcester to London is £8,400, yet a season ticket for Cheltenham to London Paddington is £10,344. To make the point absolutely clear: were someone to go way further than Cheltenham, down to Exeter, which is a similarly sized town, the distance from London is 202 miles, which is approximately double the distance to Cheltenham. The season ticket for Exeter to London is £9,788. In other words, it is around £500 cheaper than the Cheltenham season ticket. How can that possibly be fair?

What rubs salt into the wounds is that the service is not as good as it should be. First, there is a systemic problem: it is too slow overall. I see the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) nodding his head in agreement. Let me put that into some kind of perspective: the journey from Bristol to London takes around an hour and 43 minutes, and from Exeter, which as I said is around double the distance, it takes two hours and two minutes to get to London, yet the shortest journey from Cheltenham takes longer still than that. On average, it takes two hours and 16 minutes.

The first problem, then, is that it is too slow, which is galling because there was a time when Cheltenham had the fastest train service anywhere in the country—the

[Alex Chalk]

Cheltenham Flyer was the fastest train in the land. The second problem is that there are too many delays and cancellations. On Saturday 4 August, five services were cancelled because a train manager was not available.

What is the impact of all this? Put bluntly, the impact in my constituency is modal shift, which is a technical way of saying that people get in their cars. So many of my constituents drive to Kemble, Kingham, Swindon, Oxford, or even all the way to London. My constituents express frustration at the fact that they are forced to do so and at the fact that that has an unhelpful impact on the environment and air quality. Other concerns are expressed about businesses being restricted from developing and expanding in the way that they otherwise might have done. I posted on social media about this issue, and businesses in Eagle Tower in the centre of Cheltenham said that they are unable to recruit in the way that they might otherwise do or to expand their businesses.

This issue is also important because Cheltenham has plans for a cyber-park, which I have been passionate about since 2014 and which has made really crucial steps forward in recent months. The Department for Transport has committed £22 million in transport infrastructure improvements. The Department for International Trade is promoting the park at international conferences and so on. The park will succeed, but its ability to do so will be immeasurably enhanced if we can have an affordable and good rail connection with London.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Considering that we are talking about the Stroud Valleys line, which goes to Cheltenham, I have a vested interest in this matter. On fares, when I had to travel to Gloucester last week, I found to my shock that it cost an extra £10 either way. That may well be what happens from where I live in Stonehouse, and yet that is exactly the same cost of just getting a train from Stonehouse to London. In other words, the company is charging a person the same when they are on the train as they would do if they were getting on the train for the shorter journey. That cannot be right or fair. Effectively, it is charging the punter more than it should. Does he agree?

Alex Chalk: I do agree, yes. There are two aspects to the pricing perversity that that helpful intervention discloses. First, the line itself is more expensive than similar lines. Secondly, there can be perversities within the line itself, which is an inequity for local people. In the interests of balance, it is important to note that there are some really important and good things taking place. Nationally, I commend the fact that the Government are continuing with an ambitious programme of investment. That is £48 billion over the next five years. The DfT is in the process of moving from Delay Repay 30 to Delay Repay 15, which is more justice for consumers. In Gloucestershire, the redoubling of the Kemble to Swindon line is a hugely positive infrastructure improvement. There are impending timetable changes and new faster trains, so we will be getting a direct hourly sub-two hour service to London in 2019. That is all great. It is also great that Cheltenham is getting an additional 70 surface car parking spaces, taking capacity to at least 320 spaces. That is investment worth £700,000 going into Cheltenham, so that is also good news, and there is further investment

to come. I am not standing here and saying that, somehow, we should turn the clock back. I do not believe in renationalisation. I am just about old enough to remember British Rail, and it was absolutely terrible. The fact is that, since privatisation, a huge amount of money has been invested in our railways and passenger numbers have soared.

It is not enough to say that renationalisation would be a terrible backward step. It is not enough to say that it would cost the taxpayer, not save them money. It is true that it would reduce investment, not increase it, and innovation would be stifled, not encouraged and so on. However, simply rejecting renationalisation is not enough. The market needs to be forced to act fairly. Private companies have a responsibility to the public, and a particular responsibility where the public is a captive market, and cannot take their custom elsewhere, as is the case on the railways. The provider must operate within a framework that ensures that that monopoly position is not abused and customers are treated fairly. It is fair to say that, in these circumstances, it is not acting as it should. In a debate on 15 October—so, not very long ago—the then rail Minister referred to “historical anomalies”. He also stated:

“No one could defend the current fares system”.—[*Official Report*, 15 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 476.]

He was absolutely right, and I really welcomed that frank admission. One issue is that monopoly power on certain lines distorts pricing. For example, if we look at Grantham, which is also around 100 miles from London, we see that there are three franchises competing to provide a service. A season ticket from Grantham is around £3,000 a year less. Equally, if we look at Crewe, where there are two operators, it is only £500 a year more, despite being 170 miles from London, so a considerable distance further. The issue of whether there is a single operator or more providers can make a big difference as well.

This issue must be fixed. I am aware that the Government have commissioned the Rail Delivery Group’s “Easier Fares” consultation, and are considering that. I am also aware that, on 11 October, the Secretary of State launched a “root and branch review of the rail industry”. In his words, he said:

“It is vital that this review leaves no stone unturned and makes bold recommendations for the future.”

I warmly welcome that, but one of those stones needs to be marked “Cheltenham”. We are not asking for special treatment, but we are asking for fair treatment. For the sake of my constituents and the future of the town I represent, that cannot come soon enough.

9.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He is a great champion for Cheltenham, and all things in and around it, as we have just heard. He is most certainly a great campaigner on rail issues for Cheltenham, as I have found very early in my time in this role, and as my predecessors are all too aware.

My hon. Friend made reference to the fact that passenger numbers in Cheltenham have grown recently. Indeed, in the last 20 years and a bit more, passenger numbers have doubled on our rail network; it is a fantastic thing. The Government and franchise train operators have made significant investment in services

and the network to cope with the challenge of this significant increase in use. It is also fair to say that there are many issues to resolve, one of which is fares and value for money. I recognise the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend regarding the fares between Cheltenham and London, as well as those raised by passengers around the whole wider issue of rail fares.

I should just explain where we are on this matter and put the issue into context. Fare revenue is vital in the day-to-day running of our railway operations and the massive upgrade programme to which my hon. Friend referred and which is taking place all around the country. Of course, that is all focused on benefiting passengers. We know that any increase in rail fares may affect the budgets of working people and their families, and we want passengers to know that they are getting value for money. As a Government, we want to help people to keep more of their own money, which is why we have increased the personal allowance and frozen fuel duty and so on. In the world of rail, that means that, since 2014, the Government have ensured that increases to regulated rail fares have been restricted to inflation only. Indeed, 2019 will be the sixth year running in which fare increases have been capped in this way.

I am aware that it might sometimes seem that the fares offered for sale on our railways are always expensive, but there are many very cheap fares offered for travel, especially if people are able to book in advance. For example, it is possible to purchase an advance standard single fare from Cheltenham Spa to London from as little as £14.50. We want to continue to ensure that passengers feel the benefits of fare availability that suits them, and we want them to have access to affordable fares. That is why we are exploring how to link fare increases to the more commonly used consumer prices index measure of inflation in the future. At the moment, it is linked with the retail prices index. To be sustainable, income and costs to the rail industry have to change in parallel. Linking fare increases to the CPI without parallel changes in the cost base would simply mean higher costs to taxpayers year on year. The Secretary of State would like to work together with the rail industry, the Office of Rail and Road, the regulator, the unions and the Rail Delivery Group to ensure that the CPI, not the RPI, is used as the basis for industry staff cost deals in the future.

Alex Chalk: I am very grateful to the Minister for his helpful response. Does he agree that the review also needs to consider structural discrepancies? Although I take the point about restricting the rate of increase, in fact that does not address the underlying structural discrepancy, the perversity and unfairness remain. Does he therefore agree that this needs to be looked at in the round?

Andrew Jones: Basically, yes I do; indeed, I am coming to that point.

What I am trying to get across is that, as an industry as a whole—with industry colleagues—we can keep the sector as efficient as possible, continue the income through the farebox and plough that back in to make our rail network even better, with investment in infrastructure and rolling stock.

As my hon. Friend highlighted, my predecessor did indeed acknowledge that the fare system is in need of thorough reform, and my priorities are no different

at all. I am a regular rail user, of course, and I understand that there can be anomalies in the fare system that can feel unfair to passengers, and we must explore changes to remedy this situation. There can be perverse pricing on our network and we are going to tackle that.

The Williams rail review that was announced by the Government earlier this year will take a root-and-branch look at the system, including considering how the railway can offer good value fares for passengers while keeping costs down for taxpayers. The RDG and Transport Focus recently ran the Easier Fares consultation, which closed in September, where they asked passengers to give their thoughts on how fares could be improved. My Department is looking forward to seeing the results. I met the RDG yesterday and it told me that it would publish the results of its consultation early next year. Both the Williams review and the results of the Easier Fares consultation will support discussions on reforming the fares system to better deliver improvements for passengers. I want to see simpler, more easily understood fares. As my hon. Friend knows, we committed in our manifesto to review rail ticketing and to remove the complexity and perversity that we see in pricing. This is indeed the root-and-branch review that he mentioned.

Together we can help to improve the service that passengers receive on our trains. We are working closely with the industry to deliver a better offer to passengers who travel on fewer than five days per week. Work patterns are changing—we can recognise that and see it all around us—and rail ticketing has to become more flexible to allow part-time workers access to more cost-efficient fares. We will seek proposals from Great Western Railway, as part of its direct award, on how it might be possible to introduce more flexible products while of course ensuring that they are affordable and represent value for money for taxpayers too. This has not yet had quite as much publicity as it might. As well as working with industry to improve the quality of the rolling stock and the infrastructure, we want the industry to introduce initiatives that both benefit passengers and bring about growth in rail travel.

The RDG has announced the introduction of a 26 to 30-year-olds' railcard that will reduce the cost of rail travel for young people by up to a third on certain tickets. This will be rolled out nationally from 2 January. We welcome this initiative—I am sure that everyone would—as we believe that it will improve opportunities for young people through making travel more affordable and increase social mobility. My hon. Friend mentioned his worry that the cost of rail travel can be discouraging for economic activity in terms of people visiting his constituency. I hope that the introduction of this railcard, as announced by the industry and the Chancellor, will help them and be welcomed by my hon. Friend and others.

Cheltenham Spa is a fantastic place; I know it very well, actually. It has regular services to and from Birmingham, Bristol and London, with services operated by Great Western Railway and CrossCountry. To support improvements to the amenities of the station itself, a masterplan for the station has been promoted, with the local authority playing a leading role. My hon. Friend mentioned increased car parking. Additional car parking is a key element within the planned package of improvements, with a new multi-storey car park planned.¹ These improvements are strongly supported by Great

1. [Official Report, 8 January 2019, Vol. 652, c. 4MC.]

[Andrew Jones]

Western Railway. They also include easier pedestrian access, extra bicycle storage, and a more user-friendly bus interchange. The improvements will accommodate growing demand, particularly once the improved London services are introduced using brand new Intercity Express trains. There is a significant amount of investment to make changes to benefit his constituents.

One point that is raised repeatedly by colleagues is work that is taking place across the network to make it more accessible. We have a Victorian infrastructure, of course, and successive Governments have, over many years, run a programme called Access for All that is about making stations more accessible for people who may struggle with mobility. Everybody benefits from that, because it could just be about managing luggage, having an easier route, or travelling with little ones in pushchairs. Lots of people will benefit. We are continuing that work. There is a £300 million budget for the expansion of Access for All in control period 6, which starts next year.

Design work is currently taking place to create a new, accessible route to Cheltenham Spa station under that programme. Work to begin installing the new accessible route is planned to start next autumn and will include the installation of lifts to all platforms, to help passengers gain access to their platforms more easily. That is very positive news, and I hope it will be recognised and welcomed in Cheltenham.

My hon. Friend referenced the new rolling stock. GWR has supported the station improvements and introduced new Intercity Express trains on its network, supporting better services for passengers. It is replacing old British Rail-era trains. That seems a long time ago; my hon. Friend said he could just about remember it, but I remember it clearly. Those new bi-mode trains are a vast improvement. They are cleaner running, faster, more spacious, offer a significantly more pleasant experience and are more efficient to run. The new trains are already entering service, and each one delivers more capacity, with 76 more seats available for passengers. However, the work does not cease there. Once those trains are introduced, passengers will continue to see improved journey times and greater reliability. Maintaining operators'

ability to invest in our railways is a crucial part of the ongoing development of both the Cheltenham to London route and Cheltenham Spa station.

I thank my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) for their contributions to the debate. We will continue to look at ways of both improving services and keeping the cost to passengers as low as possible, while maintaining value for money for taxpayers. The case for reform is strong—we have recognised that and agree with it. The question is how we take it forward.

While specific details of the Williams review are expected next year, many of the concerns shared by my hon. Friend and his constituents will be addressed by that review. The review has launched its call for evidence, which is an important step in its initial phase, and the review team hopes to hear from a wide range of stakeholders across the country. I encourage constituents to get in touch with the team and make any contributions that they feel are relevant. I will ensure that my hon. Friend's speech is sent to Mr Williams for consideration.

Next year, we will see more improvements to the service that passengers from Cheltenham receive—new, faster trains with a greater capacity continuing to be introduced, improvements to Cheltenham Spa station and further development of the station's accessibility under the Access for All programme.

We will also have a longer-term review of our rail industry, which has been such a success over the last 20 years. It has gone from nationalisation and decline to privatisation, with 1 billion more passenger journeys a year—a huge growth—but is it structured as well as it should be for the next phase of its life? That is the question that Mr Williams has to answer. It is a great opportunity to ask broader questions, including about the Department's role in the industry. I will ensure that my hon. Friend's points are considered and that the rail review includes fares, to make them simpler and nimbler and eliminate any perversity, so that we encourage more people on to our railways, including those from Cheltenham.

Question put and agreed to.

9.58 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Divisions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Markets in Financial Instruments (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 17 October, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 307, Noes 215.

Division No. 283]

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Davies, Chris	Hall, Luke	Maynard, Paul
Afolami, Bim	Davies, Glyn	Hammond, rh Mr Philip	McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
Afriyie, Adam	Davies, Mims	Hammond, Stephen	McPartland, Stephen
Aldous, Peter	Davies, Philip	Hancock, rh Matt	McVey, rh Ms Esther
Allan, Lucy	Davis, rh Mr David	Hands, rh Greg	Menzies, Mark
Allen, Heidi	Dinenage, Caroline	Harper, rh Mr Mark	Mercer, Johnny
Amess, Sir David	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Harrington, Richard	Merriman, Huw
Andrew, Stuart	Docherty, Leo	Harris, Rebecca	Metcalfe, Stephen
Argar, Edward	Dodds, rh Nigel	Harrison, Trudy	Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Atkins, Victoria	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Hart, Simon	Milling, Amanda
Bacon, Mr Richard	Donelan, Michelle	Hayes, rh Sir John	Mills, Nigel
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi	Dorries, Ms Nadine	Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Milton, rh Anne
Baker, Mr Steve	Double, Steve	Heappey, James	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Baldwin, Harriett	Dowden, Oliver	Heaton-Harris, Chris	Moore, Damien
Barclay, rh Stephen	Doyle-Price, Jackie	Heaton-Jones, Peter	Mordaunt, rh Penny
Baron, Mr John	Drax, Richard	Henderson, Gordon	Morgan, rh Nicky
Bebb, Guto	Duddridge, James	Herbert, rh Nick	Morris, Anne Marie
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Duguid, David	Hermon, Lady	Morris, David
Beresford, Sir Paul	Duncan, rh Sir Alan	Hinds, rh Damian	Morris, James
Berry, Jake	Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain	Hoare, Simon	Morton, Wendy
Blackman, Bob	Dunne, Mr Philip	Hollingbery, George	Mundell, rh David
Blunt, Crispin	Ellis, Michael	Hollinrake, Kevin	Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Boles, Nick	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Hollobone, Mr Philip	Murrison, Dr Andrew
Bone, Mr Peter	Elphicke, Charlie	Howell, John	Neill, Robert
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Eustice, George	Huddleston, Nigel	Newton, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew	Evans, Mr Nigel	Hughes, Eddie	Nokes, rh Caroline
Bradley, Ben	Evennett, rh Sir David	Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy	Norman, Jesse
Bradley, rh Karen	Fabricant, Michael	Hurd, rh Mr Nick	O'Brien, Neil
Brady, Sir Graham	Fallon, rh Sir Michael	Jack, Mr Alister	Offord, Dr Matthew
Braverman, Suella	Field, rh Mark	James, Margot	Opperman, Guy
Brereton, Jack	Ford, Vicky	Javid, rh Sajid	Parish, Neil
Bridgen, Andrew	Foster, Kevin	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil	Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Brine, Steve	Fox, rh Dr Liam	Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Pawsey, Mark
Brokenshire, rh James	Francois, rh Mr Mark	Jenkyns, Andrea	Penning, rh Sir Mike
Bruce, Fiona	Frazer, Lucy	Jenrick, Robert	Penrose, John
Buckland, Robert	Freeman, George	Johnson, rh Boris	Percy, Andrew
Burghart, Alex	Freer, Mike	Johnson, Dr Caroline	Perry, rh Claire
Burns, Conor	Gale, Sir Roger	Johnson, Gareth	Philp, Chris
Burt, rh Alistair	Garnier, Mark	Jones, Andrew	Pincher, rh Christopher
Cairns, rh Alun	Gauke, rh Mr David	Jones, rh Mr David	Poulter, Dr Dan
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Jones, Mr Marcus	Pow, Rebecca
Cartlidge, James	Gibb, rh Nick	Kawczynski, Daniel	Prentis, Victoria
Cash, Sir William	Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl	Keegan, Gillian	Prisk, Mr Mark
Caulfield, Maria	Girvan, Paul	Kennedy, Seema	Pritchard, Mark
Chalk, Alex	Glen, John	Knight, rh Sir Greg	Pursglove, Tom
Chishti, Rehman	Goodwill, rh Mr 4Robert	Knight, Julian	Quin, Jeremy
Churchill, Jo	Gove, rh Michael	Kwarteng, Kwasi	Quince, Will
Clark, Colin	Graham, Richard	Lamont, John	Raab, rh Dominic
Clark, rh Greg	Grant, Bill	Lancaster, rh Mark	Redwood, rh John
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth	Grant, Mrs Helen	Leadsom, rh Andrea	Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Clarke, Mr Simon	Gray, James	Lee, Dr Phillip	Robertson, Mr Laurence
Cleverly, James	Grayling, rh Chris	Lefroy, Jeremy	Robinson, Gavin
Coffey, Dr Thérèse	Green, Chris	Leigh, Sir Edward	Robinson, Mary
Collins, Damian	Green, rh Damian	Letwin, rh Sir Oliver	Rosindell, Andrew
Costa, Alberto	Greening, rh Justine	Lewer, Andrew	Ross, Douglas
Courts, Robert	Grieve, rh Mr Dominic	Lewis, rh Brandon	Rowley, Lee
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey	Gyimah, Mr Sam	Lewis, rh Dr Julian	Rudd, rh Amber
Crabb, rh Stephen	Hair, Kirstene	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian	Rutley, David
Crouch, Tracey	Halfon, rh Robert	Lidington, rh Mr David	Sandbach, Antoinette
		Little Pengelly, Emma	Scully, Paul
		Lopez, Julia	Seely, Mr Bob
		Lopresti, Jack	Selous, Andrew
		Lord, Mr Jonathan	Shannon, Jim
		Loughton, Tim	Shapps, rh Grant
		Mackinlay, Craig	Sharma, Alok
		Maclean, Rachel	Simpson, David
		Main, Mrs Anne	Simpson, rh Mr Keith
		Mak, Alan	Skidmore, Chris
		Malthouse, Kit	Smith, Chloe
		Mann, Scott	Smith, Henry
		Masterton, Paul	Smith, rh Julian
		May, rh Mrs Theresa	

Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig

Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vera, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Harris, Carolyn
Hayman, Sue
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr
George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Laird, Lesley
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs
Emma
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Ian C.
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate

Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas-Symonds,
Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Blackman-Woods, Dr
Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
David, Wayne

Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet
Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet

Question accordingly agreed to.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (COMPANIES)

That the draft Accounts and Reports (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 31 October, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 305, Noes 216.

Division No. 284]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Dodds, rh Nigel

Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick

Hermon, Lady
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie

Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, rh Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie

Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David

Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Laird, Lesley
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Ian
C.
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby

Phillipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria

Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayman, Sue
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 December 2018

[DAME CHERYL GILLAN *in the Chair*]

Train Operating Companies: Yorkshire

9.30 am

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the performance of train operating companies in Yorkshire.

It is truly an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) and the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for co-sponsoring this important debate.

Back in June, I stood in the Commons Chamber in a rail debate and my opening words were, “What a mess”. Six months on, I have to repeat that statement: what a mess.

Seven months ago, I had a meeting with Northern rail just ahead of the implementation of the revised timetables. I was unequivocally assured that services would improve and that that would be the answer to a lot of the issues that my constituents were experiencing. I was told that the new timetables had been stress-tested and that everything would be fine. Instead, what we got was absolute, total and utter chaos—and I do not use that word lightly. Trains were delayed and cancelled day after day after day. People were late for work, school and college. Vital medical appointments and even funerals were missed, all because of a half-baked plan that was obviously unworkable from day one. In August, I met TransPennine Express and was given yet more warm words and platitudes, but once again there was very little action.

In my constituency, in the six-month aftermath of the May timetable, Dewsbury and Ravensthorpe stations were in the bottom 10 of all smaller stations in the UK for performance: the eighth and third worst respectively. My neighbouring constituency, Huddersfield, was in same bottom 10 of the league table for larger stations. Minister, I will not allow my constituents to receive such treatment from your Government. Things have to get better.

The picture across the whole of Yorkshire has been bleak, hence the title of the debate. Not a single station in Yorkshire was in the top 100 best performers. I am sure the Minister knows that, given that he also represents a Yorkshire constituency. According to *The Yorkshire Post* and On Time Trains, only 29% of services had been on time at York and Huddersfield stations since the May timetables were introduced. If we look at the 100 busiest stations in the UK, eight out of the top 10 worst stations for on-time performance in the past six months are within the so-called northern powerhouse, with York and Huddersfield being the two worst in the whole country. If we look at all stations in the UK, Slaithwaite, in the neighbouring constituency of Colne Valley—my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley will talk a little more about this later—has the worst

service performance of any station. Again, eight of the 10 worst performing stations in the UK are within the northern powerhouse. In contrast, nine of the top 10 best performing stations in the country are in London. This country does not revolve around the capital city of London; there is much more beyond the M25.

Neither is the picture over recent months greatly improved. Using data from trains.im, the monthly performance figures show the region’s two biggest providers, Northern and TransPennine, offered an abysmal service in November, with only 67% and 65% of trains on time respectively—easily as bad as at the height of the timetable crisis and among the worst in recent years. Apart from Brexit and the NHS, this is the biggest item that comes into my mailbox. I do not know how many times I have seen pictures of timetable boards in various stations with lists of cancelled or delayed trains. It really is not good enough.

I must commend *The Yorkshire Post*—not always the biggest fan of my party—on the work it has done on this issue, which has been absolutely fantastic and is very much appreciated by the many beleaguered commuters who experience the chaos. Earlier this month, it reported that almost 80 trains a day were being cancelled, with overcrowded services frequently running with reduced numbers of carriages. A new timetable, implemented from last week, thankfully offers some small hope of improvement. The first week went better than the first week of the previous timetable, but that would not be hard to beat. When compared to figures over recent months, significant improvement is yet to be seen. From the available data this month, some 77.7% of Northern’s trains have been running on time, up a feeble 0.1% from May’s mayhem. TransPennine has achieved only 73.4% of trains on time this month, down on the 75.5% achieved in May, but up marginally on figures from June and July.

Passengers are understandably weary of promised improvements, and the Rail Minister’s assurance that the situation has stabilised will undoubtedly be met with a degree of cynicism. For six months, my constituents have been given nothing but empty promises and false assurances. It was bad enough through the summer, but we can add to their misery the recent dark, freezing cold mornings on station platforms that are less than adequate, many with little shelter from the elements, and barely fit for purpose. Compensation was promised, but for many it was never received. Hours were spent filling in forms to no avail. I have heard of rail users who purchase their tickets through corporate reduction schemes being refused compensation. Apparently, because they get a discount on their travel, they should not be entitled to refunds, despite the fact that many pay more than £1,000 a year and the level of inconvenience and lost work hours were the same for them as for everybody else.

An expanded compensation scheme has been announced this week for Northern’s customers, starting with 25% for 15 to 30 minutes’ delay. That is reportedly funded by the Government, not the privately owned operator. Sadly, it is far too little far too late. Why was the money not invested in our rail services to prevent the need for such an enhanced compensation scheme? Even as Northern warns that passengers will not see an improvement in services until May 2019, unbelievably its fares are set to rise by 3.2% in the new year. It is clear that regulated fares should be frozen into the new year. I call on the

[Paula Sherriff]

Minister to back the Transport Committee's suggestion of discounts for those renewing their season tickets for 2019, meaning no price increase.

My constituent, Sophie, has been commuting from Mirfield in my constituency to Leeds every weekday for the past three years. Sophie is partially sighted and has to rely on public transport to get to work. She wrote to me last week to express her many grave concerns. She spoke about the issues at Mirfield station, which I have been raising for more than three years, and how the platforms lack basic facilities, with one being completely inaccessible to people with disabilities. Indeed, the charity Leonard Cheshire Disability points out that across Yorkshire and the Humber, 33% of train stations are not step-free, making them inaccessible for many disabled people.

Sophie also reports a lack of appropriate shelter against the cold winter elements and how nearly every morning she has to queue to buy a ticket when she arrives in Leeds because the train is so overcrowded that the conductor has not been able to pass through the train, and the one new ticket machine at Mirfield is on the opposite platform and is often out of order. Sophie feels incredibly grateful that she is still in employment. She says that it is solely down to her having an understanding boss who has afforded her the flexibility to work around the many train delays that she has had to endure. The past six months have been hell for Sophie and many people like her.

I also want to mention my constituent, Alex, who works near Manchester. He gets the train every morning from Dewsbury. He has had to take nearly two thirds of next year's annual leave allocation because of the trains' lack of punctuality. He feels he is getting to the point where he has to consider whether it is worth making that journey to work every day.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Alex's case exemplifies the bigger point that if we are to rebalance our economy successfully, we need to get the rail infrastructure right between the great northern cities of Sheffield, Leeds and Manchester. Does she agree that that requires investment in the long term, and, in the short term, making the best of what we have? Does she also agree that it is an outrage that one in four of the rail services scheduled from Sheffield to Leeds last Monday, for example, failed to arrive on time?

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that interventions are supposed to be brief, particularly when so many would like to speak.

Paula Sherriff: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I absolutely agree. A very similar level of service is being delivered to my constituents, so I fully sympathise with his constituents.

Late or cancelled trains have a wide impact. Many of us consider a train to be something that gets us from A to B. Of course that is true, but the disruption is also having a significant impact on people's mental health. They have no idea whether they will be able to get to work, and can get into quite serious trouble when they are late for the fourth day running. People might rely on them, such as clients or customers. They do not know

whether they will get home in time to put their children to bed or see their partner. That is having a massive effect on family life and on social mobility, as not everybody drives. It is also affecting employment opportunities. I have spoken to a number of people who now say that they cannot get to work. They do not drive, so using the train is the only option, and it is not worth the stress.

Our region's railways are among the least reliable in the country. Ironically, this week Northern rail unveiled a new advertising campaign, designed with safety in mind, to prevent passengers from boarding the trains as the doors are closing. The advert states that the train will depart the station "to the second". If only! As I see it, there are two major issues with that. First, someone in the advertising department either has a very strange sense of humour or has severely misjudged the situation, given that so many trains have not departed on time during the last six months. Secondly, the campaign is in preparation for when Northern rail removes guards from trains, thus compromising customer safety and further eroding the service on offer to rail users in the north.

As a result of the chaos, many of those who drive, as I alluded to earlier, are turning back to their cars as a means of transport. Falling passenger numbers require action to boost confidence in and accessibility to the rail network. That has sadly not been forthcoming. Rail in the north is still very much the poor relation of services across the country. Recent research from the Institute for Public Policy Research North revealed that spending on transport in Yorkshire and the Humber fell by more per head from 2016-17 to 2017-18 than anywhere else in the country. It reported that, last year, spending per head on transport in our region was £315, which is more than three times less than the £1,019 spent in London. It is simply unacceptable that promised investment has been scrapped, downgraded or delayed, while money is funnelled into London and the south-east.

When it comes to the causes of the poor service, leaves on the line can be blamed for only so much. Indeed, when discussing compensation for rail passengers on BBC News this week, the Minister admitted that the infrastructure is not there to cope. Work to electrify key lines in the north-west was supposed to be finished two years ago, yet delays to that have had a knock-on effect across the north and have been blamed by Northern rail for its postponement of planned service improvements in Yorkshire.

The Minister blames decades of decline for the infrastructure's inability to cope with network growth, yet it seems likely that the Transport Secretary is set to back a deeply flawed plan for the trans-Pennine route. If the plans that have been mooted go ahead, the tunnels will not be big enough to carry modern freight trains, and insufficient track is planned to allow faster trains to overtake slow ones.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend and neighbour is making a great speech. I must apologise—I have just sat on a broken-down train for half an hour, so she has even more sympathy than usual. She is right: what happened to the northern powerhouse? What happened to those promises of investment in our region?

Paula Sherriff: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for that intervention, and I look forward to the Minister's response to that question.

Frankly, what we have heard from our Transport Secretary, who recently said that he does not “do trains”, shows an appalling lack of ambition for the north. It will do nothing to address the problems of reliability, as both passenger and freight demand on the lines increase. Ministers need to get to grips with much-needed rail improvements. The system is clearly broken, and local rail users know that more than a mediocre compensation scheme is needed to fix it. Passengers need to know that when there is a delay or cancellation they will receive proper compensation, and Northern rail's expanded delay repay scheme announced this week is welcome. However, the scheme is reportedly funded by the Government. Going forward, it is not acceptable that the taxpayer foots the bill for the failing system, while shareholders continue to be put first.

What people really need is to know is that, rare exceptions aside, their trains will be reliable and punctual. The Transport Secretary has overseen review after review of the rail network, but it is still clear that the franchise system and the separation of infrastructure and operations simply do not work. Resources are not being targeted to where they are most needed, and there is an overarching lack of accountability. The Transport Secretary has cancelled massive projects such as Crossrail for the north, but has still been able to dig up money for London and the south-east—all while Yorkshire saw the biggest fare increase in the country.

We need clarity over responsibility within our rail network to ensure that services put the interests of passengers first, not the financial priorities of shareholders or the political priorities of Ministers. What assurances can the Minister give me that there will be real improvements to Yorkshire's rail network, and on what timeframe? Beyond an optimism that operators will adopt more passenger-focused services, what sanctions will be imposed where that is not delivered? Also, where rail operators fail, as they have persistently over the last year, what moves will be taken to renationalise those services, and how low is the bar for that to be a real consideration?

Enough is enough. My constituents and I are sick of hearing warm words and platitudes from the Government. I say to the Minister, from one Yorkshire MP to another, I implore you to give commuters in the north proper consideration and to commit to an improvement of services that will see an end to their daily misery.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Just so colleagues know, I will call the two Front Benchers at 10.35 am and 10.45 am. That will give the hon. Lady who led the debate the opportunity to wind up. I will not put a time limit on speeches, but Members can see how many people want to speak, and I would like to give everybody the opportunity to do so. I call Kevin Hollinrake.

9.47 am

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Thank you, Dame Cheryl; it is a pleasure to be called in the debate and to serve under your chairmanship. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff)

for securing this important debate. I have an awful lot of time for her, and a great deal of time for Dewsbury, having stood there as a candidate one year—not against my hon. Friend, who I am sure would have wiped the floor with me. I endorse many of her comments completely, particularly those regarding the impact on her constituents.

I was lucky enough to be chosen to lead a debate in September on exactly the same issues. I have to say that since that debate things have got worse, not better. I spoke about some of the commuting difficulties for my constituents, regarding not just the service itself, but the lack of communication around the services. Scheduled services running from York to Scarborough were stopping at Malton and unloading all passengers at that station, which has no toilets and no café. People did not know that they would be unloaded at Malton; they expected to go through to Scarborough.

It was completely disgraceful. The least people might have expected was for TransPennine to have told them at York that they would be unloaded at Malton. They could therefore have stayed at York until the arrival of a through train to Scarborough. It is simply unacceptable that, this summer, 56 trains were stopped at Malton in those circumstances; in the summer of 2017, only six trains were. That represents how bad the service has been.

TransPennine has made lots of promises about improvements. It has said that changing the driver rotas should improve things, and that some of the improvements in the north-west should have resulted in improvements to the service. However, that improvement in the service has simply not happened. In fact, November was the worst month this year for punctuality on the service through to the east coast—only 65% of trains arrived on time, and 20% of trains were defined as late, which is again the worst performance of the year. It is simply not acceptable for TransPennine to say, “We've had these problems and things are getting better.” They are not getting better. The least we might have expected is for the communication to be getting better, and it does not seem to be.

I concur with my hon. Friend's comments on increases in rail fares. Generally, it is right that fares increase, as long as some of the investment goes into our railways—it is clearly good that we are seeing the levels of investment that we are in our railways. However, where there is such terrible performance, it does not seem right that the people responsible for that performance also increase fares. I wonder what the Minister can say about that. Are there any sanctions available to him that he could impose on TransPennine to emphasise that it should not put fares up until the service has improved, as an incentive to improve the service? The political pressure is just not getting through. We are all talking about this, but the service is not improving.

I wrote to the regulator, the Office of Rail and Road, to ask for the inclusion of TransPennine in the inquiry into Northern and Govia Thameslink. I felt that the inquiry related to communications, and I do not know why it did not include TransPennine. At this point in time, when things have not improved and the service is clearly below par, it seems perfectly reasonable that the regulator should look into that in a more detailed way. Could the Minister apply pressure on the regulator to include TransPennine in the inquiry?

[Kevin Hollinrake]

There is some good news; there is no question about that. Despite some of the comments about investment, we are seeing higher levels of investment. Part of the problem has been the investment in the north-west. The delays in the engineering works for that have had the knock-on effect of causing delays on the trains. We are looking forward to the doubling of the frequency of journeys from York through to Scarborough by the end of next year, which will be welcomed by many of my constituents, with longer trains, better trains and new trains. That is all very good, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury that we need a more strategic approach to investment right across the north.

My hon. Friend signed the letter that I sent to the Chancellor; in fact, 82 parliamentarians, including many who are here today, did so. It asked for a doubling of investment right across the north over the next 30 years. We are waiting for the Transport for the North report, and when we get that, the 82 parliamentarians who signed that letter need to work together collectively to lobby for a step change in investment over a long period of time. I think the figure of £100 billion is what we had in the letter. Some of that funding was for Northern Powerhouse Rail, which we all want to see—to bring forward that scheme so that it arrives at the same time as High Speed 2. I prefer to call that scheme Crossrail for the north, because that might move us up the pecking order.

On the comparison with investment in London, London is a great place, and I love being down here, but the level of investment is phenomenal. That leads to prosperity, because higher productivity leads to higher prosperity, and people in London are 50% more productive than people in the regions—not just the north, but right across the country. That is why average wages in London are 50% higher than in the rest of the country, and certainly than in the north. One thing leads to another. Investment leads to productivity, which is good for the UK economy and great for our constituents, because they become more prosperous as a result. We need a longer-term approach. It is a wonderful vision that we might see Crossrail for the north, or Northern Powerhouse Rail, connecting Liverpool to Manchester to Bradford to Leeds to York to Hull to Scarborough. It will transform opportunities right across the north, and that is exactly what we want.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman and I are joint chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire. Will he agree that many of us still believe that calling a halt to HS2 and investing that money in the sorts of trains our constituents travel on every day is better than this vanity project, which is going to cost £100 billion?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is a very interesting point. I am sure, Dame Cheryl, that you have your own view on it, which you might wish to express. At the very least, I would like to see Northern Powerhouse Rail, High Speed 3 or Crossrail for the north—whatever we want to call out—delivered at the same time. That is far more important than the north-south journeys.

The critical thing for me is to connect the cities, which gives opportunities to rural areas as well, and the key issue is devolution. The money and the powers should

be devolved up to the north, so we do not have to come to Whitehall to ask for the money or to discuss where it should be spent—we should get the money in a long-term settlement. Devolution is key. It is great to see one of the current Mayors here, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who is trying to work through the Sheffield devolution deal, which is very welcome. I think that devolution to the cities across Yorkshire—rather than to the wider county—is far more workable, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman will make a great job of the devolution deal he has on his table.

I am absolutely determined, as many here today are, to make sure we get a step change in investment, and to solve the shorter-term problems that the hon. Member for Dewsbury pointed to in her very compelling speech.

9.56 am

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who spoke thoughtfully and forensically about the rail issues across Yorkshire, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), who spoke with great passion and vigour. I will just make a few remarks very quickly.

There are two main lines throughout the Keighley constituency, the Airedale and Wharfedale lines, which were electrified in 1994. Many people built their lives—their journeys into work and their children's journeys to school, and so on—around those lines. Traditionally, they have been high performing, which makes it even more frustrating for so many people that over the last year the performance levels have sunk abysmally low. I will not rehearse the statistics we have already heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury, but there is a frustration among Members of Parliament about what we can do to change the situation. We plead with Ministers. We plead with Northern and TransPennine. To be fair to the ordinary middle managers there, they try to get back to us, but they seem powerless to effect change.

Paula Sherriff: Does my hon. Friend agree that in order to achieve improvements, we will work in a cross-party way with the Minister and with the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton, and that we will do anything in our capability to try to make things better for our constituents?

John Grogan: That was very well put, and I was going to make that point. I am genuinely pleased that we have the Minister and the shadow Minister in their places. There is now some Yorkshire influence on the issue and, I hope, some Yorkshire common sense.

In my frustration, I have been considering who we can write to, so I am writing today to Deutsche Bahn, which ultimately owns Northern rail. We are told that we cannot possibly have nationalisation, but we have a nationalised rail company in Northern rail—it just happens to be German. The whole reputation of Deutsche Bahn is under threat here. I hope that, in the new year, a very senior executive of Deutsche Bahn will come to this House and talk to hon. Members from Yorkshire.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): If my hon. Friend needs any more support for his letter, I am sure everyone in this room would be very happy to add their names.

John Grogan: Let us make it a joint letter, sending Christmas wishes to Germany.

Without delaying the House too much longer, it would be remiss not to mention the strike, which is causing difficulties for the Yorkshire economy. There was some good news when it appeared that Transport for the North and, I think, the Government acknowledged that there would be a second person on all trains, but there seems to be an issue about the detail of what that second person would do. In Scotland, a deal was done where the guard would continue to have a safety-critical role—the driver would open the doors and the guard would close them. There are compromises that can be reached. Having beer and sandwiches at No. 10 is perhaps out of fashion, but we need Ministers to get the different parties together to end this strike and have proper negotiations.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents travel from Otley to my hon. Friend's constituency to catch the train on the Wharfedale line, and they all find that the trains are overcrowded. Without the guard, they would really struggle to use that service, particularly as the bus and train times are not compatible with each other. They need that additional support when they reach train stations on the Wharfedale line.

John Grogan: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. His constituents are very welcome at Burley in Wharfedale, Menston, Ilkley and so on. I believe in the critical safety role of the guard.

I will move on to talk about Boxing day trains. One consequence of the disruption on Northern and TransPennine is that they are not fulfilling their promise—it was in the franchise—to run Boxing day trains. Northern and their franchise were meant to run 60 Boxing day trains this year, and TransPennine were meant to have proposals that would be funded by Government. There are no Boxing day trains in Yorkshire, but there are four lines in the south-east of England that will be running Boxing day trains. The following football teams have home games in Yorkshire: Leeds United, Sheffield United and Barnsley. Harrogate are playing against Halifax—a big local derby in the lower leagues—and I will be watching Guiseley play against Bradford Park Avenue.

There is demand for public transport and trains on Boxing day. Buses now run in Leeds, Bradford and some other Yorkshire cities, whereas they did not a decade ago. Some people cannot go home for Christmas from London to Yorkshire, because they have to be at work on 27 December and they cannot get a train back on Boxing day. There are also the issues of the environment and of loneliness—not everyone relishes being at home for 72 hours at a stretch, in some cases on their own. I appeal to the Minister: let us have Boxing day trains, as in the franchise, on Boxing day 2019. I think he can be the man to deliver that.

We have not yet heard much of London North Eastern Railway in this debate. I understand that it has promised to have seven direct trains to London, which were meant to start in May 2019—previous transport Ministers have assured us that they would. My understanding is that they will now start in the autumn of next year, and I wonder whether the Minister can confirm that today. Lots of businesses in Bradford are really looking forward to those direct trains to London.

Finally, I want to share a railway success story, which is about the role of heritage railways. They will be running across Yorkshire during the holiday period. My distinguished predecessor Bob Cryer was instrumental in saving the Keighley and Worth Valley Railway, and my distinguished predecessor Ann Cryer is president of that railway. I have to report to Members that its “Santa special” on Christmas Eve is completely full—even the local MP cannot get a ticket. I am assured that if there are any cancellations, tickets will be available on Facebook.

Mr Sheerman: Bob Cryer used to shovel coal on the train. Has my hon. Friend been doing that?

John Grogan: There are many ways in which I cannot live up to my distinguished predecessor Bob Cryer, and that is just one of them.

10.3 am

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is always a delight to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan), and I particularly agree with his comments about Northern, which were very well made. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) on securing this timely debate. She set out very clearly the appalling statistics of what has been happening over the past six to nine months in Yorkshire and the suffering that passengers have had to endure.

I want to talk specifically about TransPennine and First Hull Trains. Both companies are part of FirstGroup, which made millions in profit in the last financial year. I will give some experiences of passengers. The first reads:

“Happy Bank Holiday weekend, TransPennine Express. I'm sure we'll have a good one too when my husband eventually gets on your train service from Leeds to Hull. He's still sat on the platform. It's the fifth night in a row, and he has missed his son's bedtime.”

I have also had constituents write to me to say that they are moving away from Hull because of the unreliability of the service when they want to commute to Leeds. On overcrowding, which has become an issue over the past year:

“If you want intimacy but you're too scared to seek it out, take a TransPennine Express train instead, and press yourself against four strangers for two hours.”

TransPennine Express decided earlier this year as part of its timetabling changes that it would increase the length of the journey from Hull across to Manchester by adding four additional stops. When questioned about this by the Hull and Humber chamber of commerce, TransPennine apparently said that the

“timetable development will enhance connectivity to and from Hull.”

It actually adds about 15 additional minutes to the journey. There was no consultation or discussion—TransPennine just decided to do this themselves. This does not fit with the northern powerhouse—connectivity between the great cities of the north. It should be reducing journey times, not increasing them.

When we three Hull MPs asked to meet Leo Goodwin, the head of TransPennine Express who has a pay package of £360,000, he would not. In fact, when we had the meeting with the chamber of commerce, we empty-chaired him: we had a chair with his name on, because he would not come and talk to us. We shamed him into coming to

[Diana Johnson]

explain to us why TransPennine had taken that action. It is clear that there are cancellations and there is late running, and people are being squashed in like sardines on the service from Leeds.

In Hull, we feel like we are the end of the line and often forgotten. We are not getting new trains; we are getting refurbished trains as part of the TransPennine refurbishment stock. The city of Hull does not have a direct train to Manchester airport, but Scarborough—a small and important town—does. We now have longer journeys across the Pennines due to the changes that TransPennine made, and we do not have a direct service from Hull to Liverpool—the area that we know is the spine of the northern powerhouse.

I would like the Minister to respond to our requests. We think that we should have a half-hourly additional express service from Hull and a direct link to Manchester airport. I also want to mention TransPennine Express, because it runs Hull station on behalf of Network Rail. We have been voted the ninth-worst station in the UK by Passenger Focus. We had £1.4 million spent to improve facilities that were supposed to be for city of culture in 2017, but which did not finish until 2018. We have smaller waiting rooms, smelly toilets and gaffer tape over the signage in the station. We have a Christmas tree that was put up and then surrounded with bollards and hazard tape. The lack of pride that TransPennine has in our station just beggars belief. We have had no station manager for months; we have had remote management from Huddersfield.

Paula Sherriff: I have a similar problem at Dewsbury. We do not have any toilets in our stations, and TransPennine Express have suggested that my constituents and passengers using the station should use the pub nearby. For cultural and other reasons, many people are not comfortable going into the pub to use the bathrooms. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a disgrace that a very busy station should not have any toilet facilities in this day and age?

Diana Johnson: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There are real questions for the Department for Transport about whether TransPennine is meeting its franchise specification.

We were really proud in Hull to get the open-access operator Hull Trains in September 2000—we had to fight to do so. It has been a brilliant flagship open operator service since 2000, but it has really deteriorated in the past 12 months. It has only four trains, which are constantly being taken off to be repaired. They are class 180s—people who know about these things have told me that they are not fit for purpose for the route that they travel every day on the east coast main line. Customers are so frustrated at the cancellations and the services that stop at Peterborough or Doncaster. They do not feel that Hull Trains is giving them fair information in good time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who unfortunately cannot be here this morning, has asked me to say that Hull Trains is due to get new trains at the end of 2019, which is very welcome. However, we think that First Group needs to put pressure on to get those trains to us sooner. The past 12 months have been disastrous for

Hull Trains' customer relations. We need those trains in Hull as soon as possible. The managing director told me that she might be able to get an additional train from somewhere else after Christmas. That is welcome, but Hull Trains really needs to sort itself out. I am pleased that the Minister, a Yorkshire MP, is in his place, and I hope we will start to see some real changes over the next few months in rail services in the north.

10.10 am

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) on securing this important and timely debate. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson). Nobody here needs reminding how terrible a year this has been for rail passengers in Yorkshire and across the north. Since the introduction of the timetable changes in May, we have seen what the Transport Committee rightly called a

“period of intensely inconvenient, costly and, on occasions... potentially dangerous disruption.”

Northern Rail, which serves Bradford on the Leeds-Bradford, Airedale and Wharfedale lines, has provided especially poor service. Since the new timetable was introduced, an average of 2.5% of trains have been cancelled, and 4.6% have operated in our region with fewer carriages than planned. On a typical day, about 100 to 200 passengers are left behind at stations in Yorkshire. They are stranded and are late for work and critical appointments that they need to get to. Unfortunately, despite the criticism that the train operating companies and the Department for Transport have come under since May, we have still not had a significant improvement in service levels. In fact, *The Yorkshire Post* found that rail punctuality is even worse now than it was in the immediate aftermath of the timetabling change. In November, only 62% of TransPennine Express services and 67% of Northern services arrived on time. Eight months on from the initial problems, it is shocking that the industry appears not to have got a grip on this issue. Passengers in Bradford and across Yorkshire have experienced almost a year of delays, cancellations and disrupted service. Despite that, fares continue to rise above inflation. It is simply not good enough; we deserve better.

As the Office of Rail and Road reported, the responsibility for the fiasco must be shared between the train operating companies, Network Rail and the Department for Transport. Each failed to prepare for the changes, and there was a clear lack of leadership at all levels.

It is also worth looking at the longer term causes of the crisis. There has been a persistent and longstanding underfunding of transport infrastructure in the north. As well as addressing the immediate problems with the performance of train operating companies, the Government must commit to revising the way that rail investment decisions are made. As a start, they should commit to working with Transport for the North to deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail as a priority. Bradford, like other towns and cities across the north, urgently needs that high-speed rail link to meet growing demand and fulfil our economic potential. It is only by investing in rail infrastructure, planning for future timetable changes

and ensuring that passenger interests are at the heart of our rail system that we will prevent a repeat of the unacceptable service we have seen in recent months.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend referred to the work of the Transport Committee, which looked at timetabling and rail infrastructure investment. Does she share my concern that, according to the figures for the national infrastructure and construction pipeline, planned spending on transport per capita in Yorkshire is set to be the lowest of all the regions? It was not only lower in the past, but will be lower in the future—in 2017-18 and 2020-21?

Judith Cummins: I share my hon. Friend's concern, and we all share her outrage.

Mr Sheerman: It is really simple: deep into the 21st century, towns and cities in Yorkshire should be connected by a regular, good, safe service that everyone can depend on. How can it be that my constituents and I cannot get to Bradford easily from Huddersfield? Why has the line between Huddersfield and Wakefield been closed, with a tremendous impact on those cities? Will my hon. Friend join me in going on those trains and waving banners?

Judith Cummins: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. It is an immense frustration for me, as a Bradford MP, that we are not properly connected with the rest of the north. That causes problems and limits my constituents' learning, development and job opportunities, which are crucial to a city like mine.

10.15 am

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) for securing this important debate on a subject that concerns so many of our constituents and impacts negatively on the quality of their lives.

Here we are in Westminster Hall. The Chamber is prepared, the Chair is in her place and the Clerks are ready to give advice. The Westminster staff have ensured efficiently that everything is in readiness for our debate. We are on time and we have enough seats. Members and Ministers are prepared. It is the expectation that that will happen. When my constituents buy a ticket for a rail journey or a season ticket, which will be subject to another price hike of more than 3% in January, their expectation is that there will be a regular, accessible train service with enough carriages and available seats. Their expectation is that the trains will get them to their destination on time without stress or discomfort. Those are not unreasonable expectations. They expect that that will happen, just like this debate.

Sadly, the reality for my Colne Valley constituents travelling on the TransPennine route to either Leeds or Manchester is that they are packed like sardines on trains with not enough seats available. There are frequent cancellations and severe delays. For the privilege of all that, they pay among the highest fares in Europe.

Slaithwaite and Marsden are two of the worst-performing stations in the country. Recently at Slaithwaite, 4% of trains have run on time. In the same period, 6% of trains were cancelled. It is not right that there is a greater chance of a train being cancelled than running on time. There are frequently two or three-hour gaps in service. That is what commuters in my constituency face

daily. They struggle to get to work on time, and some have been issued formal warnings. They spend less time with their families because they need to leave earlier, or they struggle to make childcare arrangements to accommodate unpredictable service changes. Many have told me that they are reluctantly starting to drive to work because the services are so unreliable. The human cost is significant, and I do not believe the Government fully comprehend it.

This is not just about individuals. Businesses in my constituency have felt the impact since the chaos began in the summer. Rail user groups estimate that usage at peak times is down by about 30% since the timetable change. People may be less likely to visit our picturesque villages and support our local businesses if they cannot guarantee that they will be able to get home after their visit.

I have been working with local rail groups—Slaithwaite and Marsden Action on Rail Transport and Stalybridge to Huddersfield Rail Users Group—along with my hon. Friends the Members for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), to campaign on these issues and advocate for a better service. I have met the Secretary of State three times. In our most recent meeting, he agreed to facilitate a discussion between rail user groups and senior rail officers about improving co-ordination between Network Rail and train operators. It was accepted that the poor accessibility at Marsden station is unsatisfactory and that, to address it, temporary ramps should be put in place as soon as possible. I will not hold my breath.

In the meantime, my constituents are returning to their cars, changing jobs or even moving away from our lovely Colne Valley villages. They want to be home in time to put their children to bed or pick them up from nursery. They want to get to work on time or catch their flight to go on holiday. Those are not unreasonable asks.

One way commuters in my constituency are using their additional time while they stand on cold platforms is by sharing their experiences with rail companies and me on social media. I would like to share some of the feedback I have received on Twitter. Jane said:

"This morning I forked out £2,572 for my annual season ticket to Manchester. Tonight I arrived into Huddersfield 21 minutes late and missed my hourly connection. It's not good enough."

Lisa said:

"People need to wake up and see what impact the May timetable changes have had on our villages. All I want for Christmas is to be able to get to work on time. #unhappycommuter."

Bob said:

"The timetable's changed but I think they just blew it. They still can't get trains t'stop at Slewit!"

Ouch.

We are coming up to Christmas. A present for my Colne Valley constituents would be on-time, regular and accessible trains, with enough seats and space for passengers, and affordable ticket prices. Instead of the 12 days of Christmas, we have the 12,000-plus delays of Christmas. Colne Valley people deserve better.

10.20 am

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley

[Stephanie Peacock]

(Thelma Walker). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) on securing this important debate. As a fellow Yorkshire MP, I share her concerns, as well as those highlighted by all hon. Friends present, about the unacceptable train services in our region. She spoke very well and highlighted that she knows only too well the problems with those services. We all receive huge amounts of correspondence from rightly dissatisfied constituents.

Time and time again, constituents share with me the unacceptable number of delayed or cancelled rail services. People in Barnsley are forced to endure—particularly at rush hour—the ancient, overcrowded and overpriced trains that they are packed into when one eventually arrives. Many are forced to spend a fortune on alternative travel arrangements on top of the already inflated rail season tickets for which they have paid nearly £2,000—the annual cost between Barnsley and Leeds, for example.

I will use this opportunity, as so many hon. Members have done, to share some of the stories that constituents have shared with me. One wrote to me about the toll that the substandard rail services are taking on their mental health, as delays consistently cause them to arrive home late and miss out on family life. Another voiced his worry that his son, who is working his first job at a shopping centre little more than half an hour away, is forced to leave hours early to make it on time, and still faces termination to his employment because he cannot manage to do so. That is, quite simply, completely and utterly unacceptable.

Those people are just trying to go about their daily lives, get to work on time and get home again. Instead, they are continually out of pocket, let down, and possibly even laid off because of the appalling mismanagement of our rail services. We saw the chaos caused by the timetable changes earlier this year, which so many hon. Friends have talked about. Since then, we have seen no progress. We have had more delays, more cancellations, and the same antiquated trains.

What is more, my constituents in Barnsley East are told that spending per head in Yorkshire and the Humber has actually fallen under the great northern powerhouse project, while it has doubled in London. Is it any wonder that nearly two thirds of the public back taking our rail services out of the hands of these dodgy profit-driven private companies and back into public control, to be run in the interests of the customers who depend on them?

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Last, but certainly not least, I call Tracy Brabin.

10.23 am

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you Dame Cheryl; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), for securing this important debate. Our constituencies are both served by the trans-Pennine rail route and we face many of the same issues.

The local rail network is vital to many of my Batley and Spen constituents, and crucial for our long-term economic prosperity. Its importance has increased since 2010, as our bus services have been slashed due to a lack

of Government investment. The town of Batley—home to the only active railway station in my constituency—lies between Leeds and Manchester on the trans-Pennine rail route, but as one constituent who commutes from Batley every day succinctly put it, the service “has descended into farce”. What should be a simple commute has turned into a recurring nightmare.

Every time I visit Batley station, commuters are eager to share their anger: anger at the packed train that does not stop and whizzes past; anger at the cancellation announced seconds before the train is due to arrive; and, for those lucky enough to cram themselves on to a carriage, anger that they are paying so much for the privilege. Now, almost eight months on from the timetable debacle, I discover that Batley station is ranked in the bottom 15 in the whole nation for performance. Over the last six months—bear in mind that Batley is a small station—459 services have been cancelled. Less than 10% of services overall have been on time.

Barely a week goes by when a constituent does not alert me to yet another failing. Just last week, I was contacted by several people who were furious that the direct TransPennine service from Batley to Manchester had been removed without their knowledge. They only made the discovery as they arrived at the station on Monday morning. They now have to change in Huddersfield, subject to further potential delays and cancellations.

Such chaos and uncertainty are damaging to my constituency. People have to make frantic phone calls to employers with the familiar message, “I’m going to be late, again.” Children wonder where their parents are as they struggle to get back in time to collect them. Some are considering uprooting their families from the communities they love out of exasperation. Those are not just stories, Minister; they are people’s lives.

After several meetings with Ministers on Transport for the North, Northern and TransPennine, it is clear to me that the issues go way beyond just reliability and performance. Shamefully, Batley station does not have permanent disabled access. Of the 16 stations in the district of Kirklees, only eight can accommodate disabled passengers. Those people are effectively barred from travelling independently, and miss out on the amazing culture and opportunities in nearby cities. The Equality Act 2010 requires that all station operators take reasonable steps to ensure that they do not discriminate against disabled people. Hopefully, the Minister will update us on the precise action that the Government are taking to ensure that operators meet this crucial legal requirement.

Underpinning all of this is the infrastructure, which is sadly lacking. Detailed plans for the long-promised electrification of the trans-Pennine route remain as elusive as ever. When I inquired earlier this year, the Secretary of State refused to tell me whether the whole route would be electrified. Perhaps the Minister can venture a response. Although I welcome the much-vaunted introduction of new rolling stock to our network—which, incidentally, has been delayed until next spring—given the existing infrastructure, I fear it will have little effect on reliability.

Batley station is only as welcoming as it is thanks to the attentions of a fantastic group of volunteers called the Friends of Batley Station. They have spent weekends planting flowers and creating a café, with the backing

of local businesses, such as PPG and Batley Bulldogs. Volunteers, however, cannot give us a better service. We desperately need long-term strategic investment.

The latest analysis by IPPR North shows that transport spending has risen twice as much per person in London as in the north since the launch of the northern powerhouse. Last year alone, public spending on transport in London was three times higher than in Yorkshire and Humber. The so-called enhancement package of £15 million to be used across the north, which was announced by the Government last month, amounts to little more than a drop in the ocean. That is unacceptable and indicative of the chronic under-investment in the north.

Where do we go from here? Transport for the North's strategic transport plan, which includes plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail, has some exciting and potentially transformative proposals, but I feel that more work needs to be done to ensure that towns feel the benefits, along with cities. That plan will of course need the Government's backing to become reality. We were promised an interconnected northern powerhouse, yet it remains a challenge to get from one town to the next. Franchisees, such as TransPennine and Northern, have serious questions to answer, but the buck stops with the Government and, ultimately, with the Secretary of State for Transport.

The Minister will no doubt repeat the "record investment in transport" mantra, while failing to note that the lion's share of investment has gone to projects in the south. Will the Minister tell me when exactly the people of Batley and Spennings Dale will see significant investment in the rail services on which they rely? My constituents are sick and tired of feeling like second-class citizens, and deserve clear answers on an issue that will have a deep and long-lasting impact on our community.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Thank you. We will now move on to the Front-Bench speeches. I call Rachael Maskell.

10.29 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Dame Cheryl; it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair—you have heard the sheer anger of our constituents about the state of our railways. Today's debate could have been called, "Why we desperately need an alternative Government to run our railways." We have a detailed worked-up plan that will address the real challenges that commuters face on a day-by-day basis.

My hon. Friends the Members for Batley and Spennings Dale (Tracy Brabin) and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) highlighted that this is not just about personal stories, but about lives having to change because of a failure of timetables and the governance of our railways. We know the particular difficulties that people have had because of the halting of the electrification programme, which has had a catastrophic impact. The timetable fiasco resulted from that—

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: I will just begin my speech, if I may.

There are excessive fare hikes, poor infrastructure, franchise changes and no certainty for the future. The Williams review critiques how dreadful the whole infrastructure is and how it is imploding around our constituents, who want only to turn up at work in time and to live out their lives. This is a disgrace.

Kevin Hollinrake: Rather than calling for a change in Government, would our constituents not prefer us to work on a cross-party, constructive basis to try to solve the problems? Much of the debate has been very constructive. Would that not be a better way forward?

Rachael Maskell: The reality is that the Government are not interested in the detailed solutions that we have been working towards for eight years to put the railway system back together, working across the industry with all stakeholders. That is why we need to move forward. If the Government want to join us in that, we would welcome that conversation, but to date they have blocked us. There is a real difference in policy. I note what the hon. Gentleman says, but also what my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) says. We need to look at the penalties that should be placed on these rail companies, such as freezing fares where there has been rail failure. It is wrong that people pay more for more failure on the railways.

The reality is that the Government have failed. Their ideology that is driving this forward is falling apart. Under the new model of publicly owned railways that we will put in place, we will see long-term security, long-term planning, long-term investment and stability for the whole rail sector.

We know about the inequality. We have heard the statistic about how London and the south-east have had so much more investment than we have in Yorkshire. There are consequences when we do not see the resources there. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) said, let us think about the vitality of connecting Sheffield to Leeds and Manchester—connecting the major cities of the north. In fact, the connectivity between Leeds and Manchester is the same length as the Piccadilly line. Think about the frequency and the reliability of the Piccadilly line compared with what we see at the moment.

We have heard tales of woe from across the trans-Pennine route. We have had a downgrade of the downgrade that was already planned—that came out of the board meeting a week or so ago. That downgrade will have serious consequences, because the Government have removed vital reliability from the service. Not only have we lost freight elements, as my hon. Friends have mentioned, and journey time savings—my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) highlighted how journey times will extend with more stops on the line—but we have lost the reliability factor. That means that the only marker that will have an upgrade is capacity, because there are larger trains. Even then, we will not reach the potential on that line.

Dirty diesel is being put on the route as opposed to full electrification—the only thing that will deliver the reliability that is required. We have heard that this is all part of a stepped process: in control period 6 we will see some of the upgrade, and it will be completed in CP7. Will the Minister tell us what certainty there is that in more than 10 years' time—we must remember that timeline, because we need connectivity today—CP7 will bring about that full upgrade of the trans-Pennine route? That is the crucial route for the north and we need the upgrade now.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North highlighted the appalling state of stations. We must remember that stations are places of service—they are where people wait and they need facilities. Public

[*Rachael Maskell*]

toilets are a basic public health necessity and they must be there to meet passenger needs. We need to make sure they are put in place. We also need to make sure that our stations are accessible. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen about the situation in Kirkstiles, where only eight of 16 stations are accessible. We have heard about Marsden station from my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), and about Mirfield station. I was with Leonard Cheshire just last week at York station—even there, there was only one information point in the whole station. If a passenger is in need, where do they go? It is unacceptable.

We heard about the Equality Act 2010, but we must remember that it has been 23 years since the passing of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which called on stations to make reasonable adjustments. Quite clearly, that is shameful. We are nearly a quarter of a century on and we still deny disabled people the right to access railways. It is not just physical adaptations that are needed; we need to change the environments to accommodate neuro diversity. I suggest that the Minister talks to the TSSA, which is a leader in this field, about how we can accommodate autism and other such things, and make sure that our stations are supportive of people with sensory impairments.

Let me give the Minister a gentle reminder: guards are on trains not just to close doors, which is vital for passenger safety, but as the passenger champion to make sure passengers are safe—whether disabled or non-disabled—throughout their whole journey. It is vital that the Government get to grips with this agenda and ensure that passengers are looked after, as it is a public service, and that guards are back on our trains. It is an easy dispute to resolve, yet the Government seem so entrenched in their ideology that they do not want to move forward on this issue.

Our new model of public ownership will have the passenger at its heart. We will make sure that we take decisions in an integrated way, closer to where the passengers are, that power and resource are in the right place, and that we plan for the long term. We have a 30-year lifetime of infrastructure and rolling stock to make proper investments, to make sure there is a smoothing of skills, and to ensure good employability across the industry. Whether with operations, maintenance or enhancements, we will make sure that we timetable in such a way as to sustain our railway, so it does not fail passengers.

We want real investment in new technologies. It is heartbreaking that we go back to old technologies on our railway systems, because we see such advances taking place elsewhere in Europe and in the world. Yet in the UK, we are still stuck on Victorian railways. We have to move that agenda forward, because that will deliver the reliability that our passengers need and demand from this Government.

We have great opportunities ahead of us; we have heard Northern Powerhouse Rail mentioned. That will get the vital connectivity into Bradford if we have anything to do with it. We will make sure that the north is properly connected and has that modal shift where people move from road to rail—not just passengers, but freight. We have a real crisis with our environmental

and carbon footprint. We have to see a modal shift. That will bring about the connectivity that hon. Friends talked about with bus services, making sure the whole system works together. We have the National College for High Speed Rail in Doncaster. I urge employers to make the best use of that academy as we move forward.

Finally, I want to talk about the franchising system. There is recognition that the whole system is broken. The train operating companies are self-serving; they have not provided the essential public service that, perhaps, was envisaged in the beginning; and they are certainly now orientated on profit. Rather than go through the franchising process, the Government have created 12 direct awards, and we clearly need to move on. We need real integration and Labour's policies will be a catalyst to providing that essential connectivity for the sake of our economy and our environment, and to ensuring that people's lives are restored and put back in order.

10.40 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I thank everybody who has contributed to this passionate debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) on securing it.

We all agree on the importance of our region and the critical role that rail plays in helping it reach its full potential. I have listened to representations about rail services on the network in my home county, and I wish to set out a few thoughts about what went wrong, how the Government responded, and our plans for the future. We have heard powerful speeches about how the problems experienced across rail in the north last summer impacted on people's lives—whether that was people getting home or having access to work, healthcare and so on—and I entirely recognise and agree with that. There is a personal dimension to this, as well as a bigger economic one.

Paula Sherriff: If that is the case, and if the Minister recognises the impact that the chaos had on people's lives, why is he allowing the fare increase from January?

Andrew Jones: I will come on to talk about fares and plans for the future, but let me focus on some of the points raised today. A number of colleagues raised a point about disabled access. As we know, our rail transport infrastructure is primarily Victorian. Successive Governments have run an Access for All investment programme, and that has continued, including a £300 million extension in the next control period. We published our inclusive transport strategy last July, which for the first time included work on hidden disabilities. As colleagues may remember, I was in the Department for Transport a couple of years ago, and we had our first ever conference on mental health and transport. That was a significant moment—I was pleased that we went calling as it attracted so much attention. Work on making our transport system more accessible and easier to use for people with disabilities, including hidden disabilities, is central, and I am sure no hon. Member here would disagree with that.

One underlying point has been that the quality of rail performance in the north has been unacceptable. That is correct; it is clearly the case. Following the May timetable change we had a very difficult summer on our railways, but lessons have been learned, especially in

regard to future timetable changes, which we have already started to implement. A timetable change on 9 December landed significantly better than the changes in May, and I will expand on that shortly.

The problems in May had a number of causes, including the impact of engineering works. Long delays to the two electrification schemes in the north-west impacted on Northern, which had planned for those schemes to be completed, but they were not. It then had to completely re-plan its timetable in less than half the normal time, together with associated staff training and changes. However, we have made some headway on that. A change on the scale of that in May was, quite frankly, coupled with insufficient time for planning, which of course impacted on passengers. It was a complete failure right across the industry. That is why we set up a full inquiry into those timetable changes, chaired by the independent regulator, the Office of Rail and Road, under Professor Stephen Glaister. He has published interim reports, with a final report published just a few days ago, and the Department are reviewing its recommendations. As I said earlier, lessons from that incident must be learned, and the impact on passengers must be placed at the centre of every planning decision.

Thelma Walker: In a former life I was a headteacher, and I used to work out the timetable in the summer term to set out where the children would be and with which teacher. I never had classes with no teacher in September because I thought strategically. Who is responsible for the chaos that happened under this timetable? As a former headteacher I would have taken responsibility if I ended up with two classes and no teacher, or just one teacher. Who is responsible?

Andrew Jones: As the hon. Lady knows, we have a system in which individual rail companies and the regulator have collective responsibility for these things, and that is what failed.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: I have given way a lot, and I have a lot to get through if I am to get to the answers. I will make a bit more progress before I take more interventions.

The May timetable change was a significant problem caused by ambition not being followed through with sufficient time to implement it properly—that obviously did not happen in the school of the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker). In September we appointed Richard George, a respected industry figure, to co-ordinate and lead efforts by the operators and Network Rail to look at performance across the north. He is reviewing the performance of the region's rail network and making recommendations to improve reliability. His focus will be on operational improvement in the short and medium term.

Mr George is an independent expert, and he will act on behalf of railway customers to assist organisations in delivering organisational improvements. He will have a facilitation role in helping industry to reach the right decisions and focus on improving passenger services. He has already helped to highlight particular problem areas, and he will provide his conclusions in the new year. In the meantime, Network Rail has established a programme management office, so as to prepare better and to improve management of future timetable changes. An early recommendation from Network Rail was that

it would be prudent for most of the changes planned for December 2018—including those in the north—to be deferred until May 2019. As colleagues have noted, we accepted that recommendation.

The modest changes that took place on 9 December were designed to improve performance, especially that of TransPennine Express through Yorkshire. I am pleased to report that the results in the first week—I recognise that these are early days—were encouraging, with TPE's punctuality for the first few days 15% higher than the equivalent period in the previous week.

Several Members mentioned the compensation offered for the problems in May, and we took early action to ensure that passengers were compensated for the disruption they experienced. Not everybody was disrupted, but there was disruption in many parts of the country, not just the north, and those who were delayed significantly were able to reclaim money under the delay repay scheme. We required Northern and TPE to establish compensation schemes targeted at the people affected. That meant that the compensation was more generous, and money was put back into passengers' pockets more quickly. More than 14,000 claims from season ticket holders and regular travellers on Northern and TPE services have been submitted, and £1 million has been paid in compensation to date. This week the delay repay scheme was extended to cover delays of 15 minutes. That focuses on helping people to seek redress if something goes wrong, but our focus now is on improving reliability and the operational performance of the railways, so that we do not need such compensation schemes.

Industrial relations were raised, and that issue is having a significant impact on the economy right across the north of England, not just in Yorkshire. In an effort to break the deadlock, leaders from Transport for the North and I recently made clear a shared desire to have a second person on board Northern trains, not just on the platform. As I have said, if we need to change the franchise contract, I will not block that in any way. Indeed, we will go further and play our part in helping to develop a funding package to cover any financial implications from such a change. In looking at the dispute, I see that Northern and the Department for Transport have confirmed that individual jobs are secure and pay is secure right up to the end of the franchise. There can be change with respect to having people on trains. All those changes are what people who travel on the networks are looking for. In view of that, I call on the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers to suspend the strikes and get talking again. I want the company and the union to sit and talk, and to bring things to a conclusion.

The Williams review is a significant piece of work. It is a root and branch review of the rail industry, led by the independent Keith Williams. We are seeking ambitious recommendations for reform that will ensure that the rail network delivers greater benefits for passengers. The investment from the Government and the private sector must result in improvements for passengers, to provide better capacity, better trains and more frequent services.

Tracy Brabin: I am really looking forward to reading the Williams review. Will it cover disabled access from stations?

Andrew Jones: Passengers are at the heart of it. The point is for customers to be at the heart of the rail network, which of course includes such access, but I do

[Andrew Jones]

not think that there will be any debate in that area. We all want there to be improved access. The points that the hon. Lady made about stations in her constituency are true—and they are, I am afraid, true for many of us. That is why Governments of different colours over successive generations have continued to invest in disabled access, and will continue to do so.

The Williams review is important in making sure the rail network is fit for the future. We have had huge success within the rail industry in the past 20 years, with the number of passengers more than doubling. Each year 1 billion extra passenger journeys are taken. However, we must ask ourselves whether the network is structured for the future, to allow for growth.

John Grogan: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: Yes—although I am going to run out of time.

John Grogan: On the question of future growth, will the Minister agree to a meeting in January with one or two Members who are interested in Boxing day trains for 2019?

Andrew Jones: I am always available for colleagues and am happy to arrange meetings. I know that engineering work is going on around the Christmas period this year, and I shall be going to see it. That is affecting the possibility of running Boxing day trains this year; but let us look to the future. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

We shall shortly run out of time for debate, and I want to spend a moment looking ahead. I gently remind colleagues who talk about a lack of investment in the north that although I have some sympathy as to investment, a little caution is required in taking snapshots of figures. The figures for London reflect Crossrail, but analysis of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority figures for planned central Government spending on transport infrastructure in the four-year period we are now in—from 2017 to 2020—shows that the northern regions will have a higher spend than the southern ones.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: I am going to run out of time in a minute.

Lilian Greenwood: On that point, please.

Andrew Jones: My goodness—go on then.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the Minister for giving way. The point is important, because he talks about the northern regions, but this debate is about Yorkshire. As I said earlier, Yorkshire and Humber is set to receive the lowest level of spending of any region, according to his figures, at £726 per head compared with £1,026 in London and £1,139 in the south-east. It is much less than the spending in the north-west and west midlands, which will alter the figures. Yorkshire and Humber is losing out.

Andrew Jones: That was a repetition of the point that the hon. Lady made earlier, so I do not need to address it.

I gently remind hon. Members that we had a zero-growth franchise, which was put in place by the Labour party, and we are playing catch-up on under-investment. Labour Members may say that Labour invested steadily when it was in government, but the evidence is the exact opposite. We had a zero-growth franchise and are catching up from it. Let me consider what that catch-up might look like.

Although 2018 is clearly a year that passengers in the north would wish to forget, we should not overlook the fact that train services in the region will be changing fundamentally. A significant amount of investment will bring passenger benefits. On the infrastructure side, the electrification between Manchester and Preston, which I mentioned earlier, was finally energised last week and the first test trains are now operational. [Interruption.] It will benefit services across the north. That is my point. Electric passenger services will be phased in during the spring. Across the region platform lengthening is under way. Of course I recognise that performance is not good enough, and that is why we have made a change in the control period 6 budgets and priorities. Under CP6 there will be a budget of £48 billion. That covers the period from 2019 to 2024. The priority was moving away from enhancements to catching up on core reliability—the maintenance of the network.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister address the issue of the trans-Pennine route and the fact that reliability has now been taken off the table as part of the CP6 upgrade? It is vital that it should be put back on the table, to ensure that we get the connectivity that we need between Manchester and Leeds.

Andrew Jones: If I get time I shall come on to the trans-Pennine upgrades, but the core purpose of the CP6 investment, which is a record from any Government in British history, is to increase reliability and punctuality.

The key thing that passengers will notice is new trains. New rolling stock will come in on Northern, TransPennine Express and London North Eastern Railway networks in the coming months, including the removal of Pacers by the end of 2019. By this time next year the vast majority of the 500 brand new carriages committed by Northern and TPE will have been delivered, and the remainder will have been completely refurbished. TPE will have introduced its new Nova trains on the north trans-Pennine route and all the Pacers will be gone from Northern. There will be more services to add to those already delivered, especially at weekends; there will also be later last trains in the evenings and earlier first trains on Sundays. Elsewhere, LNER will begin introducing its new Azuma trains next year.

The trans-Pennine upgrade is a huge Government initiative—a £2.9 billion upgrade covering York to Leeds and Manchester. It is one third of the expected rail upgrade investment in the next control period, so it is a significant point. By the way, freight has been mentioned, and it is of course still under our consideration for northern trans-Pennine.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: No, because I am running out of time. I have 50 seconds left.

We have a trans-Pennine upgrade that is bigger than anything ever considered or delivered by Labour. We are delivering it for the north in a way that has never been considered before.

Northern Powerhouse Rail, which some have called Crossrail for the north, is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The scheme is being developed for the north by the north—by Transport for the North—and the Government have given a budget to help it to do that. Crossrail in London was mentioned as if money were piling into it. The money that has gone into Crossrail was, of course, a loan. Transport for London needed that loan to help it deliver the project. It was not a grant.

Of course, it is fair to say that rail services across Yorkshire and the north as a whole have not been good enough. That is entirely understood, but I want to leave colleagues in no doubt that we recognise the importance of the Yorkshire rail network and that steps are being taken to improve it. More than that, I hope that in a year's time passengers will be able to experience the change as investment comes on stream, and the benefits to match our vision for a 21st century railway in Yorkshire.

10.58 pm

Paula Sherriff: I am incredibly disappointed by the Minister's response. He did not respond to a number of points. Once again it seems that sorry is the hardest word. He can be in no doubt—he must have heard loud and clear—that things need to improve and must improve. *[Interruption.]* He is chuntering from a sedentary position. I am not sure what he said, but I sincerely hope that we shall not be here again in six months reporting on a lack of progress, or further deterioration. Yorkshire towns and cities will no longer tolerate being second best, and I hope that he has heard that.

I am grateful to all the hon. Members who took part today, including the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). I am sorry to single him out, but there are 17 Tory MPs in Yorkshire. Where are they? One has turned up today—and the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) has turned up in the past minute. It is not good enough. Does that mean that rail services in the rest of Yorkshire, represented by Conservative MPs, are fantastic? *[Interruption.]* Well, not all of them—where are the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), and the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns)? The Minister has heard the stories of human suffering and misery, social mobility, mental health and life chances. My constituents and others in Yorkshire deserve better.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Second Home Ownership: Cumbria

11 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered second home ownership in Cumbria.

It is a pleasure and an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl.

My constituency is an awesome place, with the Lake district, the Yorkshire dales, the Arnside and Silverdale area of outstanding natural beauty, the Cartmel peninsula and the rolling hills of south Westmorland alongside the stunning old grey town of Kendal. It may come as a surprise to some that we are Britain's most popular visitor destination outside London, but it comes as no surprise to us; we know we are awesome, and we are delighted that over 40 million people a year visit us because they agree. Some 60,000 people work in Cumbria's tourism industry, an industry that is worth £3 billion a year to the economy, and last year the Lake district was granted UNESCO world heritage site status, which has already seen a further increase in visitor numbers to our area in the year just passed.

We are proud to be a place of welcome and a place of warmth and generosity. However your Cumbrian journey begins, however you chose to stay with us, we are glad you are with us, and that includes folks who have a second home. However, this debate is an opportunity to face up to some facts: while we want to extend nothing but kindness and acceptance to all, including those who have a second home in Cumbria, I cannot ignore the fact that the rights of those who can barely afford a first home are being eroded by excessive and increasing second home ownership in so many of our communities.

I will start by clarifying what we mean by the term "second home". When we use that term, we do not mean holiday lets, which are a significant part of the all-year-round tourism economy. A second home is a property owned by someone whose main home is elsewhere and who lives in that second home pretty rarely, maybe for a few weeks or weekends a year. There is no getting away from the fact that high numbers of second homes rob communities of a permanent population and the consequent demand for local services. They rob those communities of life and vitality, and they can rob them of the resources they need to be sustainable.

Second home ownership also contributes to pushing up house prices beyond what is affordable for most local families. There are 3,819 registered second homes in South Lakeland, but that is unlikely to be even half the picture. Given that second home owners, thankfully, no longer benefit from a council tax discount, they no longer have a financial incentive to register their property as a second home. It is assumed, then, that the majority of owners now simply do not register at all, and 3,819 is therefore likely to be a colossal underestimate. Anecdotal evidence suggests that second home ownership has risen significantly since the time when there was an incentive to register, from 7,000 properties in South Lakeland in 2006 to a likely figure of around 10,000 second homes or absentee-owned properties today.

Ten thousand homes. That is 10,000 homes that do not have a permanent occupant, 10,000 homes not sending children to the local school and 10,000 homes

[*Tim Farron*]

not providing weekly demand for the post office, bus service, pub, church or village store. When second home ownership gets to a critical level, the absence of a permanent population begins to have tangible consequences. Schools in places such as Satterthwaite, Lowick and Heversham have closed because there was not a year-round population big enough to sustain them. Several of my schools today have fewer than 30 pupils. They are brilliant schools, but every time a house in the village is sold to a second home owner, they see their future becoming a little bleaker.

Bus services have been pared back out of season in the Lakes and the Cartmel peninsula for the very same reasons. The village store in Backbarrow closed 18 months ago and awaits a new buyer as the number of full-time residents in that village continues to dwindle. With not enough kids going to local schools, not enough people visiting the local shops and not enough people using the local bus service, it all means that those services end up becoming non-viable and that beautiful places can become empty places, with communities struggling to survive.

Over the weekend, I visited a small hamlet in the Lakes—I will not name it—where there are a dozen houses, precisely half of which are second homes. All the residents of the remaining six properties are pensioners and, as it happens, are under serious threat from their private landlord, who is contemplating evicting them to sell the houses as holiday homes. I am dealing with that matter separately, but even as things stand, each of those residents fears being the last one left as their community dwindles away. A few weeks previously, I met an older gentleman in the Rusland valley who exemplified their fears. He was the last permanent resident of his small hamlet. The only people he ever saw were the people who came and went, renting the homes in his neighbourhood; I would not exactly call them neighbours. He was isolated and, frankly, deeply unhappy.

Last week I made an early-morning visit to the Troutbeck Bridge Royal Mail sorting office, to thank the team for their immense work in the run-up to Christmas. While I was there, the manager of the sorting office told me of an older lady who had been found by the postie, 18 hours after she had had a fall. The settlement near Ambleside where she lived was almost entirely second homes and she was the only full-time resident. She no longer had any neighbours, and in this extreme case that could have cost her her life.

The Government have talked a lot in recent times about loneliness. It is something we are all the more conscious of as a society as Christmas approaches, when the absence of community and family are felt so acutely. Despite their loneliness agenda, the Government have so far done nothing to address the fact that second home ownership is leaving vulnerable people in the shells of once-thriving communities. Those are homes that should be lived in, not just maintained.

The problem affects larger communities too; I could list countless other examples in communities such as Hawkshead, Coniston, Grasmere and Dent, each with around 50% of its properties not lived in all year round. Then we have Elterwater, with a staggering 85% of its properties owned by those who are absent for most of the year. Hon. Members will be unsurprised to hear that Elterwater's post office closed a few years ago.

It is no surprise that the loss of vital services so often follows the loss of a permanent population. To put it bluntly, excessive second home ownership kills villages. We are a resilient and proud people in Cumbria, working hard to make our own luck. I think of the community-run shop in Witherslack, the community-run post office in Storth and the affordable housing groups in Coniston and Grasmere—all proof that local people are determined to fight against the tide and keep our communities alive and thriving. It feels to me that this is another of those issues that the Government overlook because they have taken their eye off the ball, trapped in the dark forest of Brexit and incapable of focusing on the day-to-day challenges that our country faces.

I am determined to give our communities the best chance to defeat the threat of second home ownership and I am here to tell the Minister that this is a problem that can be solved. The good news is that there is a clear set of actions that the Government could take if they wanted to, to breathe life back into our communities—three actions in particular. First, they could close the business rates loophole that incentivises even greater levels of absentee second home ownership. At the moment, some second home owners are avoiding local taxation altogether. They claim their second homes are let for holiday accommodation, but then make no real effort to let them out at all. As a result, they can bring the homes within the business rates system, instead of paying council tax on them. However, because their “business” will have an income of less than £12,000 a year, it will qualify for small business rate relief, and therefore no council tax or business rates will be paid at all, so no contribution whatsoever will be made to local services. This, frankly, is a scam, and one that hurts communities like mine.

I commend the Government for launching a consultation on tackling this loophole, but it seems to me that they could take action now, and that the action they need to take is pretty obvious. The Government should bring the law in England into line with that in Wales, where an owner needs to prove that their property has been let for a minimum of 70 days per year in order to qualify as a business. At a stroke this would mean that thousands of second homes would be brought into paying tax and contributing towards the local communities that they damage by their absence.

Secondly, the Government could give local authorities the power to levy higher council tax on second homes. Earlier this year, the Government announced that they are introducing provisions to allow local authorities to triple the council tax on homes left empty for five to 10 years, and to quadruple it on those empty for more than a decade. That is a welcome move, but it raises the question of why the Government have not extended those powers to second homes. If they were to do so, councils could choose to set a higher rate of council tax on second homes in those places where there is a threat to the sustainability of the local community.

Closing the business rates loophole and allowing local authorities to increase council tax on second homes would have some impact in dissuading people from buying second homes in those towns and villages that are most under threat. I suspect that someone who can afford at least £500,000 for a second home will not be put off by another £2,000 or £3,000 a year in council tax, but the key purpose of these moves would be to

secure additional funds, to be used to provide compensatory subsidies to schools, post offices and bus routes suffering from the lack of a permanent population, and to pump-prime new affordable housing developments for local families, to give those communities a fighting chance of reviving and surviving.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing the debate. He puts forward worthwhile suggestions on how to sustain local villages. However, loneliness is also an issue, as he referred to. Does he feel that church groups and organisations can play a key role in sustaining those people who live on their own in small, dispersed communities? Does he feel that, along with sustainability, the Government should also address loneliness and the role that churches can play?

Tim Farron: I think that churches play a big role in communities, and not only in that they are often physically present and can be the last thing that survives as a community centre in a village whose permanent population is contracting. The challenge to Christians is to look out for those lonely people in need. A church is more than just a building, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

Across South Lakeland, average house prices are 10 times average household incomes, and in some villages it is 20 times. I am determined that local families in Cumbria should be able to live and to make a living in the communities that they grew up in. The new homes that could be built by those additional funds could make a vast difference to thousands of local people. In the last few years, South Lakeland District Council has enabled the building of 1,200 new affordable homes for local families in places like Grasmere, Ambleside, Hawkshead, Sedbergh, Windermere and Coniston. I get letters from residents in those communities who are the polar opposite of nimbys: “In my back yard, please” say so many people throughout our area who want their village to survive and thrive.

Thirdly, although taxation measures will make a difference, the Government should act on planning law. Second homes should be made a separate category of planning use. If I wanted to change my home into a chip shop, my kids would be utterly delighted but I would have to apply for planning permission for change of use. However, if I wanted to sell my home to someone who would use it as a bolthole for four or five weekends a year, I could do so freely, yet in a very real sense the use of that home would have substantially changed.

To turn a first home into a second home should require planning permission from the local council or the national park, and I would expect planners to say a flat no to such applications in one of the many communities already under the greatest threat and pressure from excessive second home ownership. By taking this action, the Government could enable an immediate cap on second home ownership and would, over time, allow second homes to move back into being permanent family homes, rebuilding, reviving and renewing our communities.

One feature of representing an awesome place is that the problems we face can often be disguised—easy to miss at first glance as we are blinded by the glory. The blight of excessive second home ownership is one such example. It is a blight that I want the Government to

tackle today. I want you, Dame Cheryl, and the Minister to come on holiday to the lakes and the dales, to enjoy Cumbria and to know that you are welcome. The Minister of course does not need inviting to the dales, but he will get my point.

I do not want any second home owner out there to think that I am having a personal go at them. I am not. However, my job is to fight for our communities so that they can remain awesome. I ask the Minister to do those three things without delay, to help us to keep them so.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind invitation.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing the debate. He is my constituency neighbour, and I know that it is often difficult for him to live in the shadow of beautiful North Yorkshire. However, he did a commendable job of explaining how his constituency plays a good second to North Yorkshire, and I pay tribute to him for that.

The hon. Gentleman has raised second home ownership regularly, both with me and in the House. His passion for and knowledge of the subject is well known and was firmly on display this morning. Second home ownership is a particular concern for his constituents, who live in an authority that ranks seventh in England in terms of the proportion of second homes. He knows that I have a local familiarity with concerns about second home ownership, with a particularly high prevalence of it in the Yorkshire Dales national park.

Residents living in areas where second homes constitute a significant proportion of the housing market can find themselves facing a particular set of challenges. Some believe that second home ownership exerts pressure on the affordability and availability of housing for local residents. It is also perceived to present a hurdle for aspiring first-time buyers looking to put down roots in their home community. Furthermore, vacant second homes can have an adverse impact on community cohesion and the long-term viability of local services and amenities.

However, we must not lose sight of the benefits that second home ownership can bring, or the possible diverse reasons for purchasing a second property. Second homes can boost local economies and tourism and provide employment opportunities, while also encouraging regeneration. In some cases, individuals may not use local services for parts of the year but will continue to contribute to their upkeep through the payment of council tax, freeing up local resources to benefit the local community. The Government are not in the business of being directive when it comes to an individual's choice of where to purchase property.

There may be various reasons for second home ownership. Although second homes and holiday homes are often conflated, second homes may be properties in use to enable an individual to access employment in the local area. That said, the Government recognise that second home ownership can present various challenges, which is why we have taken various steps to mitigate

[*Rishi Sunak*]

them. I would like to spend some time outlining those and address the hon. Gentleman's specific points as well.

The first issue is the second home council tax discount. Under the coalition Government, working in partnership with the hon. Gentleman's party, we empowered authorities to vary or remove entirely the second home council tax discount, in the light of local circumstances. Local authorities have made extensive use of that change: 94% of second homes no longer receive any discount, and that is the highest proportion in the past five years.

The second step was the empty homes premium. Under the coalition Government, we also worked with the hon. Gentleman's party to introduce a discretionary empty homes premium of 50% on properties that have been empty and substantially unfurnished for two years or more. This year, 299 out of 326 billing authorities charged a premium on almost 62,000 empty homes. We recently took that further, with cross-party support to put in place legislation to enable a 100% council tax premium to apply when a property has been left empty for more than two years, and for higher premiums for longer timeframes. I am sure that that will be another valuable tool for authorities to use in addressing their local housing market, including empty second homes.

Tim Farron: I apologise for interrupting; I am very grateful for what the Minister has said. Will he acknowledge this point? I can tell him that in a constituency such as mine, the number of empty homes is in the hundreds and the number of second homes is in the thousands. Surely, therefore, the action needs to be taken at least as much on the latter as on the former.

Rishi Sunak: I very much take the hon. Gentleman's point, but I point out that I am going through a range of measures and that in different parts of the country second homes and empty homes can actually be conflated. London, for example, is a slightly different case, as he will know, and I appreciate that in Cumbria and my constituency it is not necessarily the case. However, what I referred to is part of the toolkit that local authorities can use to tackle this particular issue, and it demonstrates the Government's progress in the general area of ensuring that homes are available for those who need them in the areas that they want to live in.

The third step along the path was to tackle the issue of holiday homes and business rates. Second homes are not the same as holiday lets, but in some circumstances a second property is purchased as holiday-let accommodation and, in the case of holiday-let accommodation, properties are assessed for business rates, rather than council tax, if they are available for short-term lets for 140 days or more per financial year. Any property registered for business rates may qualify and, indeed, is likely to qualify today for small business rate relief.

Concerns have been expressed by many local authorities and hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), that some second home owners may be exploiting what has been termed a loophole to reduce their local tax liability by declaring that a property is available for let, but making little

realistic effort to let it out, potentially giving them access to small business rate relief and thereby meaning that they pay no rates or council tax whatever. It is only right that genuine holiday-let businesses can apply for the relief to which they are entitled, and we should not overlook the genuine benefits that short-term lettings can bring. However, I and the Government take extremely seriously any suggestion of council tax avoidance. That is why, following a commitment in the last Budget, we have launched a consultation on the local tax treatment of holiday lets; it runs until 16 January.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the example in Wales, and he was right to do so. It informed my thinking as we designed the consultation; indeed, the questions posed in the consultation are very much suggestive of an approach that has been adopted in Wales. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has already been encouraging his constituents to respond to the consultation, and I know that he supports the measures referred to in the consultation to strengthen the criteria under which holiday lets are liable for business rates.

The fourth measure to tackle the problem that we are discussing involves stamp duty. Moving beyond council tax, the Government have raised stamp duty rates for those buying additional homes. Since April 2016, anyone purchasing a second home has paid a stamp duty charge three percentage points above current rates. There were more than 300,000 first-time buyers in the past financial year alone; that is an increase of more than 5% on the year before.

Tim Farron: The Minister is being generous with his time. I acknowledge that what he refers to is an important and welcome move by the Government, but of course the money raised goes to the Exchequer. The communities that suffer as a result of this issue are the local communities. At the same time, they have seen a 40% reduction in local government funding. Therefore, if we are taxing—however we do it—those who are fortunate enough to have a second home, surely the money should be spent in the communities that suffer.

Rishi Sunak: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and actually the next thing that I will talk about from the toolkit of things that the Government are doing is community housing plans and how the Government are directing the centrally raised money specifically into communities, such as his and mine, that have a high prevalence of second homes. But before we get on to those details, I will finish on stamp duty. It is worth noting the other significant support for first-time buyers in the form of the total removal of the need to pay stamp duty on homes worth up to £300,000. That will benefit many people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. The Government will also consult in January on a new stamp duty land tax surcharge of 1% on non-residents buying residential property in England and Northern Ireland, to help to control house price growth and so help to ensure that residents of the UK can get on the housing ladder.

As the hon. Gentleman said, money should be channelled back into local communities, and I am pleased to tell him that that is exactly what is happening. The Government's community housing fund has allocated part of the additional revenue raised from the higher stamp duty rates to areas with the potential to deliver

community-led housing. That specifically includes areas, such as his and mine, with high rates of second home ownership. The community housing fund will make £163 million available across England between April 2018 and March 2020, and has already provided funding for numerous schemes since 2016. I think that this addresses the hon. Gentleman's idea of a council tax premium to generate funds. This is already happening in his own constituency: £2.36 million has been allocated to South Lakeland District Council in the first year of the scheme, in recognition of its position as one of the authorities with the highest density of second homes and most affected by issues of local affordability. The money included £90,000 towards sheltered housing in Windermere, funding for the Helsington Community Land Trust to provide additional homes in Brigsteer, and salary funding for a community-led housing officer post. I am sure that those schemes will be warmly welcomed by the hon. Gentleman and others across South Lakeland, and I look forward to seeing how the local authority plans to use the remaining grant that it has to support further such schemes.

The final issue is neighbourhood planning. The planning system now enables local residents to put in place neighbourhood plans that manage second home ownership—notable is the one in St Ives. It is right that local residents should have the opportunity to express their views on the design of their areas, including the second home ownership of new builds, and ultimately to approve neighbourhood plans via a referendum. I am pleased to say that more than 700 such plans, including a number across the wider Lake district, are now in force.

I want to touch on the hon. Gentleman's point about planning. I hope that he will forgive me: as I am not responsible for planning policy, I cannot answer him directly, but I spoke this morning to my hon. Friend the

Minister for Housing, who is responsible for planning and who is looking forward to his meeting with the hon. Gentleman. I hope that the hon. Gentleman can raise that particular issue with my hon. Friend. I am aware that the current case law around planning says that decisions on planning applications can be made only on the basis of a land use planning consideration. It is not clear that case law says that a switch from a primary home to a second home constitutes such a change, but the hon. Gentleman can discuss that with my hon. Friend.

To conclude, I am sympathetic to the issues raised by the hon. Gentleman. He makes a powerful case in representing his constituents and highlighting second home ownership constructively and positively. Although it is important to recognise that second home ownership can take different forms and deliver benefits, the Government recognise the potential issues faced by communities with a high proportion of second homes. That is why the Government have put in place the wide-ranging measures that I have set out. I hope that the hon. Gentleman agrees that although the dynamics of individual choice and local housing markets are complex and best addressed at local level, the Government have been proactive over the past few years and, indeed, very recently in playing our part to help to address the issues. I look forward to continuing the conversation on this issue with the hon. Gentleman, his colleagues and others and with local authorities and communities so that we are doing everything we can to ensure that our local communities remain thriving, vibrant places that we are all proud to call home.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Heritage Action Zones

[SIR DAVID CRAUSBY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered town centre heritage action zones.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I am grateful to have secured this debate. I called it primarily because of the welcome decision by Historic England to create a Stoke-on-Trent ceramic heritage action zone.

The HAZ will focus on the historic centre of Longton, a market town in my constituency, the conservation area of which is currently described as “very bad” but “improving” on the heritage at risk register. The area retains much of its ceramics industrial heritage, and my constituency has the largest number of surviving bottle kilns. It is not alone on that list: Trentham mausoleum in the west of my constituency is on it, too. However, we are confident that Trentham mausoleum, the only grade I listed building in the city of Stoke-on-Trent, will soon be leaving the heritage at risk register following significant refurbishment works and the securing of its future through community arts use. However, it is not certain that Longton town centre will be leaving the heritage at risk register any time soon. As such, Longton will be the focus of my speech, but many of the issues it faces will be relevant to other town centres up and down the country that have, or aspire to have, heritage action zones.

Stoke-on-Trent is made up of six historic market towns, each with their own centre. I shall return to the implications of that in my list of asks to the Minister. Longton has a strong industrial past and we want to have a strong industrial future, too. Thankfully, after decades of decline, Longton is currently enjoying a manufacturing renaissance, including in the ceramics industry. That has seen parts of the Aynsley factory—the Sutherland works—brought back into use recently. There are many such great buildings from the Victorian years of our greatest success that need to be brought back into use, to deliver success in the future. At the same time, it is only through success that those buildings will have a sustainable future, so they need to be brought into sustainable use to encourage businesses and footfall into our town centres.

Sadly, in places where post-war regeneration has happened, historic buildings have too often been pulled down and replaced by things that can only be described as crude. Historical features have been blighted by out-of-place modern features, which are not in keeping with the historic architecture. I understand why planning permission was granted; there is often a feeling that a site with any economic activity is better than a site with none. However, the cumulative effect of out-of-place developments since the second world war is a town centre that has come to close to losing its sense of place altogether. That is why what is left of the historic town of Longton town centre is a conservation area, and why I am determined that the five-year HAZ will succeed in delivering a much longer-term legacy.

From the front door of my constituency office, I can tell I am in Longton. It has the characteristic view of high Victorian architecture, rich in ornamental features and details—some Italianate, some partly gothic—and lots of traditional red brick and tiles, as is common in the Potteries, with window placements of carved stone. It is a mix that says: Longton, the Potteries and Stoke-on-Trent. However, the view from the back door of my office is of a carpark and a modern retail shed, which could be pretty much anywhere in Europe. It is not distinctive—same new, same new.

If we are going to attract more visitors, more shoppers and more businesses, we need to do better at presenting our uniqueness, which can only come from those integral historical features. Our local tourism appeal will never come from looking like everywhere else in the world; it must be in looking like Longton and the Potteries—the home of bottle ovens and pottery works. That is one of the key paradoxes of globalisation: when people can go anywhere in the world, their preference is to see places that are like nowhere else on earth. Celebrating, preserving and enhancing our local distinctiveness is fundamental to our sense of place, sense of destination and sense of identity. It is fundamental to the sense of local pride that we have something special to offer the world.

With suitable heritage interventions, Longton has the potential to be a thriving commercial centre for the south of Stoke-on-Trent. There are 224 outlets within the town centre and a total of 65,000 square feet of floor space, about one fifth of which is, unfortunately, vacant. That is substantially higher than the regional average of 12.1%. The residential population within a 2.5 km radius of Longton is more than 80,000, but very few people live in the centre itself. One of the key objectives of the HAZ, therefore, is to focus on housing within the key urban conservation area, restoring heritage buildings creatively for residential use in the high street and getting more people living in our town centres above shops once again. Often, this means reinstating shopfronts that are more in keeping with the local architectural style and restoring access to flats above shops that have long since fallen out of use.

As in many town centres, the lack of occupation has been one of the key inhibitors to maintaining heritage buildings. Thankfully, urban living is back in vogue, particularly in quirky buildings, but modern expectations for communications, plumbing, insulation and so on will need to be met. The private rental sector outside the HAZ area is already relatively strong, with many renters paying monthly rent of twice what a mortgage repayment on the same property would cost. However, much of that is old terraced housing, and there is a singular lack of private rented apartments. There is a market yet to be made.

It often proves exceptionally difficult to get property owners to convert properties in town centres to residential use. Where there is a market for residential conversions, the up-front cost of converting much of the stock available can prove, in a low-value market, to be considerably more than the post-conversion values. There has been an unwillingness in the private sector to take the necessary risks where the market is untested and lower value, and therefore market-making measures are needed to de-risk development and incentivise conversions. That has been provided in part by the housing infrastructure fund, but further investment in road and rail links to potential

housing sites would always be welcome. I was especially pleased to see the Government announce the future high streets fund as part of the recent Budget. That could provide critical support in helping to address the viability gap in converting historic town centre properties into alternative uses.

It was also fantastic to have my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), the Minister with responsibility for high streets, visit my constituency recently, to see for himself and speak to local retailers about the challenges faced in our town centres. The HAZ can play its part by getting the town joined up in the ambition to move forward. However, alongside it we need incentives to address market challenges and viability constraints, and I hope the future high streets fund can provide those. A clear plan of action to increase residency, new businesses and footfall in our town centres can stimulate and leverage the increased private investment that our property market needs.

Improvements are also needed to the local public realm, Longton's public transport network and the sense of liveability and visitability that a prospering urban centre needs to improve. It is not just about regenerating the high street in Longton; two town squares—Times Square and Union Square—do not function as visitable destinations at the moment and need improving. Dominating Times Square is the imposing Longton town hall building, which dates back to 1863. It is great to see Stoke-on-Trent City Council investing £1.9 million in plans to bring the historic Longton town hall building back into use. The building was saved by the local community from demolition in 1985 and is now, thankfully, grade II* listed. This important building will now provide a hub for the south of the city, to enable people more easily to access services in one place. There will also be investment in the fantastic adjacent Victorian market and improvement to facilities, including new public toilets.

Re-establishing the civic nature of our town squares could also establish a welcoming heritage route for visitors through the town to Gladstone Pottery Museum. Sightlines could also be opened up to the heritage landmarks of St James the Less church and the Sutherland Institute, which houses Longton library. It would, of course, mean having to improve the local traffic, with better public transport, and I hope that the existence of the HAZ will focus minds on that.

That is particularly pertinent now that we have secured funding for Stoke-on-Trent through the transforming cities fund, as outlined in the Red Book, and I thank the Government for their work on that. Getting the right balance of vehicles and pedestrians will be necessary to make the HAZ a success. I hope that the transforming cities fund will help better to join up our public transport links, and especially to improve bus links, which are severely lacking. There is plenty of capacity for numerous cultural and leisure uses, including niche retail, dining, start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises—private sector investment that can be leveraged if we get the basics of attractive buildings and the public realm right.

I note that in Historic England's excellent publication, "Heritage and the Economy 2018", evaluation evidence from the Derby partnership scheme in conservation areas revealed that footfall grew between 12% and 15% in the partnership scheme area while it fell by 26% across the country. I understand that Derby's partnership

scheme involved grants for the sympathetic renovation of historic shop fronts using local tradespeople over an eight-year period. That is the kind of success that Longton traders—key partners in the HAZ—are keen to replicate.

Longton is on the same train line as Derby, and it can easily compete with that city if it draws the right lessons about best practice. We also need to establish better rail services for Longton. That was the focus of my last Westminster Hall debate a few weeks ago, which my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) also contributed to. I am glad that the Department for Transport has taken that message seriously and recognised the huge economic potential for growth in local rail connectivity.

That matters because Stoke-on-Trent is on the up, and we want to keep it that way. It is a city enjoying a modern industrial revolution in its traditional and new industries. It is one of the fastest-growing and best places to start a new business in the UK. Some of our key ceramics manufacturers have grown by more than 50% in the last few years. Heritage buildings in my constituency are once again full, with pottery manufacturing just one of the productive activities taking place there.

We are much more than ceramics, however; we have learned that we have to be. The economy in Stoke-on-Trent is more diverse than ever. Manufacturing is booming in the city and there have been significant advances in hi-tech, digital and research. There is an increasing vibrancy in the wider area, with two growing universities, Keele and Staffordshire, one of which is based right outside Stoke-on-Trent station.

The HAZ has to provide invaluable opportunities for academic research, such as the 3D scanning that has been undertaken of bottle ovens. That fascinating process has underlined the fact that no two bottle ovens are the same. They are all listed, of course, but only as "bottle oven", because not enough detail has ever been known about them. Most are grade II listed, and at Gladstone Pottery Museum they are grade II* listed. The HAZ has an important role to play in filling the gaps in our city's collective knowledge about those important historical features.

The city's living industrial heritage is catalysed by a burgeoning tourist industry, which also has massive potential for growth in Stoke-on-Trent. According to VisitEngland, and backed by Historic England, the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery is the sixth most-visited free attraction in the west midlands in 2016. Visitor numbers increased by more than 25% from 2016 to 2017, to 176,000. The attraction of Stoke-on-Trent to tourists is clearly strengthening and I want to ensure that the south of the city—Longton, Fenton, Meir and Trentham—shares in that success.

As Historic England rightly stressed to local partners, the fundamental purpose of the HAZ is to increase the number of people who come to visit Longton and see and enjoy the heritage that is preserved there by the work of the HAZ. It is important to note that the HAZ is in addition to existing plans for heritage-led regeneration. As the authentic capital of world ceramics, Stoke-on-Trent has much to offer in destination-based tourism and experience-based tourism—for example, there are opportunities to have a go at throwing a pot in the actual potteries.

[Jack Brereton]

I look forward to VisitBritain running campaigns to bring international visitors to our area. Many already visit the award-winning World of Wedgwood in my constituency. The percentage of overseas visitors that it attracts is more in line with a London attraction than other sites in the midlands. Bringing those visitors into Longton, with its authentic Potteries skyline, would be great for local traders, who are only too keen to welcome more visitors to the town.

Tourism is not just about overseas visitors. We can do much to support VisitEngland to boost domestic tourism to Longton as the home of the Gladstone Pottery Museum and the largest collection of remaining bottle ovens in the Potteries, as I have said. My first ask to the Minister is this. What communication channels are there between Historic England, VisitEngland and VisitBritain to ensure that the heritage action zones in the regions will be promoted by professional tourism marketers based in London?

Historic England has rightly made it clear that the purpose of Longton's town centre HAZ is to increase visitor numbers. Will VisitEngland and VisitBritain be primed to help with that? The benefits of UK tourism are overwhelmingly enjoyed by London. I do not begrudge our capital city its success, but I hope that we can have help where it is due to grow our tourism on the back of it.

Sadly, Longton has lost a lot of its bed space. Some hotels were pulled down altogether to make way for retail units that are now empty; others have been converted into office space. Much hotel accommodation was originally provided with travelling merchants in mind, as in most places across the country, and in our case it was linked to the ceramics trade. Staffordshire as a whole has one of the lowest levels of hotel beds per head of population, despite the increasing demand, which means that, amazingly, some hotels now charge London prices.

We are starting to see growth in that market. There are new and expanding hotels in Stoke-on-Trent, such as a Hilton under construction in the city centre as well as the expansion of Premier Inn and a Best Western in Meir Park. I hope that the HAZ will make Longton a more attractive destination for growing business-related markets. We certainly need to stimulate investment from accommodation providers for tourism and business travel.

Down the road in Leek, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), a great example of a heritage building, the Victorian Talbot hotel, is being saved and revived by Premier Inn to suit contemporary demands and expectations for modern hotel accommodation. That demonstrates the potential to convert historic properties to new uses.

If Premier Inn, Travelodge—or Wetherspoon, for that matter—or any of the other modern hospitality companies that sustainably save and revive historical buildings would like a tour around Longton and my constituency, I would be only too delighted to provide them with one. When such properties are empty and up for sale, it is right to be proactive in encouraging potential new owners who might find that the vision of the HAZ conveniently aligns to their existing business model.

I note that tourism is the latest industry to explore a sector deal and that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is keen to secure such a deal. Indeed,

the Department stipulates that it must focus on accessible destinations with good accommodation, which is precisely what Longton can be if all the work is joined up properly. If we were to achieve a sector deal for ceramics that involved the proposed new international research centre for ceramics, we would need increased availability of accommodation for business travellers.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for meeting me last week to discuss that aspect of the ceramics sector deal and the bid to Arts Council England for investment from the cultural development fund to dramatically improve creative facilities at Staffordshire University. I am glad that he is keen to visit my constituency to see how the various projects supported by his Department can link with the council and local enterprise partnership frameworks to maximise efficiency and impact.

That is a reminder that the HAZ does not exist in a vacuum. It complements other projects and developments in the city, and it needs to knit in with other Government initiatives and the work of national public bodies. For example, the HAZ in Longton could be complemented by attractive partnership work with Network Rail. That is my second ask: can the Minister bring any pressure to bear in cross-governmental tourism forums for Network Rail and train operators to be plugged into the HAZ project?

The iconic girder rail bridge in Longton is a local landmark, and it is as much a part of the sense of place and destination as the impressive town hall and Victorian market opposite. The potential for increased rail and passenger numbers is significant. The railway arches could also house commercial enterprises—as, indeed, they did previously.

Rail needs to play a much bigger role in the future success of our city to get people from place to place locally and to make it more accessible for visitors and tourists, so any support that the Minister can offer for Stoke-on-Trent's bid for Access for All funding for Longton station and to improve local rail services would be welcome. The platforms at Longton station can only be reached using stairs, which makes access to the HAZ by alternative means of transport especially difficult for people who are less mobile or who have a disability. More generally, improved rail services would significantly encourage more tourists to visit the area, and especially to visit Gladstone Pottery Museum.

As a further ask, can the Minister comment on any possible links between the HAZ projects for preserving heritage buildings and Sir Roger Scruton's commission on beauty? The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government announced last month that the first aim of the Building Better, Building Beautiful commission is

"To promote better design and style of homes, villages, towns and high streets, to reflect what communities want, building on the knowledge and tradition of what they know works for their area."

There seems to be an obvious crossover with what we are trying to achieve in Longton. We want to ensure that the buildings of the past, which make up the character of our area, have a future, and that modern design is respectful and complementary, adding to the urban fabric of our communities.

Business improvement districts may also have a role to play in ensuring that there is investment in making our town centres more welcoming environments. A BID

is currently being developed for the city centre. If it is successful, I hope that it will be followed in other town centres across Stoke-on-Trent.

As I have mentioned, there is real potential for the future high streets fund to address the gap in viability of converting some of our historic buildings for future use. I also ask the Minister what opportunities he sees for town centre HAZ schemes to benefit from the future high streets fund announced by the Chancellor in his latest Budget. Where there are issues of viability, it is important that sufficient capital is available to help to incentivise and match fund private investment.

I will also touch on the support that the Heritage Lottery Fund can give through its townscape heritage grants. In 2016, we submitted a bid to HLF for funding and the west midlands HLF committee identified the Longton town centre townscape heritage programme as a high priority. Unfortunately, however, it was rejected at the second round by the HLF townscape heritage decision panel. My understanding is that it was rejected because such funding is allocated on a geographic basis. Since nearby towns had received funding previously, we missed out, no matter how good our bid was.

That cannot be the only justification for the refusal of a high-priority bid. That refusal has meant that the restoration of a number of prominent historic properties within the conservation zone has not been able to go ahead. I ask the Minister to consider closely the criteria for the future awarding of HLF grants, to ensure that Longton and the other towns that make up the Potteries do not miss out on the funding that is needed to restore important historic buildings and bring them back into use. We have a significant number of heritage buildings that are at risk and in a poor state of repair. They need support if they are to have a meaningful future.

In conclusion, the town centre HAZ is a great opportunity to put Longton firmly on the tourist map. Local partners are working with Historic England to agree a plan, managed and chaired by a board, to kick-start the process of bringing historic buildings back into use. I cannot stress enough the importance of that work in a town such as Longton, which is turning a corner and keen to share its successes as a city that is on the up.

We can save the heritage buildings that make people want to visit us by restoring them for alternative commercial and residential use. That would increase footfall, bringing people back into our town centres, benefiting local retailers and providing jobs. A town centre HAZ gives property owners a welcome forum to ask for advice from the local council and Historic England. It can also inspire new entrants to the local property market, who can secure the future of our heritage buildings with sustainable commercial uses. It is essential that we incentivise property owners to convert properties for new uses, ensuring that the important historic fabric of our town centres has a long-lasting future.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): As a former landlord who once owned a historic building, I can attest to what my hon. Friend is saying. The upstairs rooms of that building were offices, but they are now being turned into flats. Does he agree that such work should not just be an isolated case in the north-west of England, but should be rolled out across the land?

Jack Brereton: Absolutely; we need to ensure that historic properties up and down the land are converted for alternative uses, so that the future of those buildings is preserved for posterity.

Other bodies need to play their part. National tourist boards should be primed to encourage more people to visit and stay in our area, and to enjoy the many local tourist attractions right around the city.

I finish by saying that if the Minister would like to visit Longton, I would be delighted to show him how we are putting his policies into action. I look forward to hearing his response to this debate.

2.54 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this debate and particularly on bringing into the open the examples of town centre heritage action zones that he has mentioned. Of course, he concentrated on heritage-led regeneration and it was right for him to do so. However, he also concentrated on the need to use buildings to their greatest effect, stressing the importance of bringing buildings back into use as we go through the process of improving town centres.

The starting point for me on this issue is how all of this activity can help to show, first, that we can breathe new life into the high streets of our towns and, secondly, how we can help to regenerate people's shopping experience, eating experience and just the experience of enjoying a good environment in which to take a stroll, enjoy sport or whatever.

I look at this issue wearing two hats. First of all, I look at it wearing the hat of an archaeologist, which I was until a little while before I came into this House, and I also look at it wearing the hat of a planning expert. I use the term "expert" loosely; it is a term that is applied to me, rather than one that I apply myself.

I will consider the archaeological perspective first. We need to stress that people are genuinely interested in the archaeology and the history of the place in which they live. If I ask someone in one of the two towns in my constituency what their impression of the town is, they will always refer to some moment of history in describing how the town has grown.

Neither of the two towns in my constituency has become a town centre heritage action zone: the Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that neither Henley nor Thame fall into that category. I know that he does not wish for us all to use this debate as an opportunity to lobby him to include our own towns within a HAZ, but let me not disappoint my colleagues by staying away from that subject. I do not actually mind which one of the two towns the Minister chooses—he could even choose both—but it would be nice to have one in a HAZ.

I will stay on the subject of archaeology for a little longer. We have a development in the centre of Henley, just off the market square, that has had to have archaeological excavation before the planned buildings can be put up. That excavation has revealed a fascinating pattern from the 12th and 13th centuries, which shows how the town developed. It did not develop in an ad hoc

[John Howell]

way; instead, it developed on a medieval plan in a very focused way. The medieval planners were obviously very good at setting out the town. It would be really nice to believe that, in encouraging people to use Henley town centre and to enjoy the heritage there, some way could be found to include that find within the developments that will go up on that site, rather than just referring to it in the name of the street or by changing the name of that particular part of the town. That is an important element to bear in mind.

Since invitations are being given out to the Minister, I urge him to come to Henley and see that site for himself, so that he can hopefully put Henley forward as one of the next towns on the HAZ list.

I said that I approached this wearing two hats. The other hat is that of a planner, and somebody who was very much involved with the Government in producing the national planning policy framework in its original form and commenting on its second form. I wonder whether the Minister would take my advice that this issue needs to be looked at again. We do not judge planning applications in this House; that is the function of the local district council. However, when I go around the country in my role as Government champion for neighbourhood planning, I am astonished at the appalling glass, concrete and steel buildings that have gone up in our town centres. I do not want our town centres simply to become pastiches of what they were at a set point, but it is important to stress that there is good design from the 18th, 19th, and indeed 20th centuries that helped to shape town centres and give credibility to their status as heritage locations. When the Minister looks at heritage action zones, he ought to include buildings that were built in those times.

None of these proposals, on their own, will overcome the issues that have been raised by the internet. None of them will overcome the habitual appearance of nothing but charity shops on our high streets, except in Henley where they are matched by the number of coffee shops—it is always possible to get a decent cup of coffee in Henley. However, they will go a long way towards helping overcome some of those issues and talking about the pride of the place, making that town's heritage part of its future. For that reason, I urge the Minister to look carefully at those issues when he comes to the next list of heritage zone areas that he will bring into force, or rather that English Heritage—sorry, Heritage England; I am falling back into old money—will bring into force when it next thinks about this.

3.2 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on highlighting the opportunities that town centre heritage action zones offer to towns such as Congleton, which I have the privilege of representing. Indeed, I believe that Congleton would be an ideal candidate for such a scheme, because the funding and support provided would add real value to the energy that is already demonstrated in the town by volunteers, councillors, council staff and local businesspeople. That energy already makes Congleton a pleasant and enjoyable place to live, work and visit. However, the heritage action zone scheme—£40 million announced this autumn

to improve up to 60 historic high streets, over a four-year programme of high street improvements and cultural activities—could, I believe, add an extra bonus to the work that is already being done locally.

Congleton has a strong community life. Only recently, the pedestrian area of the town centre has been beautifully improved, which has added much to the enjoyment of shopping within the town and the opportunities that local retailers have to promote their produce. In addition, there are many activities in Congleton throughout the year, a few of which I will touch on in a moment. Congleton town centre itself, opposite the historic town hall, has a number of buildings in the Lawton Street conservation area that would benefit from the support that the town centre action zone could provide.

Congleton is of real historic interest, and there are many towns across the country like it: places that local people know are enormously interesting and attractive, but people outside those towns are often unaware of. They are places where people who live within a short distance—an hour or so—could come to spend a pleasant day out, or even a weekend. My belief is that some added investment in the town centre would act as a catalyst to providing additional tourism opportunities at the weekends. For example, just a few minutes out of town, we have Brereton Heath country park; Little Moreton Hall, the black and white timbered National Trust property; and Astbury Mere, where young people go sailing and there is a beautiful park for dog walking. All of these areas, combined with greater interest and support in the town centre itself, would mean that we would attract visitors not only for a day, but for a weekend. Why travel long distances to enjoy a break away when often, within a short distance of where we live, there are some really interesting historic towns? However, as Heritage England has said, those towns are often unsung outside of their immediate area.

Congleton has a great history. It was a mill town in the 1700s, and as well as making silk, it was almost unique in producing a material called fustian, linked with velvet cutting. Ribbon weaving started in Congleton in the 1750s, and continues to this day with Berisfords Ribbons, which is a key business in the town and a member of the very active East Cheshire chamber of commerce, based in Congleton. I hope that the Minister will visit Congleton to see what an ideal candidate it would be for a town heritage action zone. Jackie MacArthur, the town centre marketing manager for Congleton, is based at the town hall, and like her colleagues, she does a tremendous amount to support the life of the town. She has said:

“Congleton is very proud of its heritage and is getting geared up to celebrate 750 years of its charter (2022)”—

in fact, it is in its 750th year since the mayor was established as we speak.

“The town held its first heritage and antiques festival this year. The town has a fine Grade 1 listed Georgian Church...built between 1740 and 1742...one of the finest examples of a Georgian church interior in the country.”

I am pleased to say that that is currently undergoing major restoration work, costing over £350,000, which underlines the historic value of the property.

The town has aspirations to improve other buildings in the town centre area, including the cenotaph and Bradshaw House, built in the 1820s, which I have spoken about before in this place. It would make an ideal

location for Congleton Museum, but it is currently unoccupied, and has been for some time. It is a historic grade 2 listed Georgian building; it is a few yards from the town hall, so it is right in the centre of the Lawton Street conservation area. It is currently owned by Cheshire East Council, and it would enable Congleton Museum, which has now been in existence for 17 years, to expand.

Congleton Museum, a charitable trust run entirely by volunteers, is now the area's leading museum in collecting and analysing archaeological finds. It has been entrusted with the care of important hoards from wider afield, but it simply has inadequate room to display them. Its status has brought about many partnerships with the national museum community, including the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. However, it desperately needs to move from its current cramped premises at the back of Congleton town hall into new premises, and as I say, Bradshaw House would be an ideal building for it to move into. That would provide not only museum space, but a café and plenty of room for school visits, which the museum currently hosts but could offer much more of if that move could be made. If Bradshaw House could be renovated, that would be an important and practical way in which a town centre heritage action zone could make a difference for the people of Congleton. The local energy that exists needs that additional national support to make it happen.

I want to touch on two or three of the events that Congleton holds to give a flavour of what happens throughout the year. On 24 November we had our Christmas lights switch-on. It was a whole day of organised events and thousands of people came to the town centre of Congleton. We had a Christmas market in the streets and the town hall full of charity and school stalls. We had a lantern parade, the lights switch-on and fireworks. I pay tribute to the town hall centre staff and all the volunteers who made it happen.

As another example of the rich depth of cultural activities, on Saturday I will be at the Congleton Choral Society's Christmas concert with the philharmonic brass ensemble in the town hall. It has several concerts a year, and I am privileged and honoured to be president of the choral society. Its performances really are of an exceptionally high quality. Any visitor who wants to spend a weekend in Congleton and its surroundings would enjoy visiting the buildings and the more recognised tourist attractions, and almost every weekend there is a concert or a show at the Daneside theatre, which is a very active local theatre in walking distance of the town hall.

Visitors during much of the year can enjoy the incredible floral displays across the town. Council staff, councillors and volunteers are tremendously committed to putting in hours of time over the year to create an attractive town for people to live in and visit. I commend the town because last month for the eighth consecutive time we won the gold large town award at the North West in Bloom awards ceremony. Also, the town was overall champion at the Cheshire Community Pride awards, and at the end of October achieved a gold award at the national Britain in Bloom awards in Belfast: a real accolade for the townspeople of Congleton.

As a historic town, Congleton could not be a more appropriate place for a town centre heritage action zone. I unashamedly invite the Minister to visit. I look forward to meeting English Heritage representatives to discuss how the town could benefit. Its website states:

“Working with local people and partners, including local authorities, Historic England is helping to breathe new life into old places that are rich in heritage and full of promise—unlocking their potential and making them more attractive to residents, businesses, tourists and investors...through joint-working, grant funding and sharing skills...places will be recognised and celebrated for their unique character and heritage”.

I do not think there is a better place than Congleton for that to happen.

3.13 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I do not intend to distract the House for very long because we have had a good and thorough debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing it. We did not hear much about Wedgwood in his 23-minute speech, but it is entirely appropriate that a representative from Wedgwood's hometown secured this debate.

As we know, Wedgwood was one of the great pioneers and entrepreneurs of the industrial revolution, but his field of interest extended far wider than simply the business of pottery. He was a great civic entrepreneur. What he created in Etruria was a model not only of modern factories, but of modern communities. He was a civic entrepreneur with a great interest in civil engineering, so his great push behind the Grand Union canal literally changed the economic geography of our country by providing the crucible of the industrial revolution in the west midlands, with new access to the ports, particularly the ports of Liverpool.

This debate needs the inspiration of great forebears such as Wedgwood. That is a long way of saying that I think the starting point for this debate and the consensus on which I want to start is the idea that our heritage and history bring us together. A deepening understanding of the place around us helps us to develop a sense of our own place in the world around us. That is why heritage action zones are such a good idea and I, too, add my congratulations to Historic England and its partners in local authorities and elsewhere on introducing and developing the initiative. We can learn a great deal from it.

Heritage action zones are particularly important for the Opposition, because we know now that culture is an important driver of modern economic development. We have seen it in towns and cities around the world. We saw it in spades in the extraordinary year of culture in Hull and we are now seeing it in the great city of Coventry, superbly led by my friend, the leader of Coventry Council, George Duggins. Many of us relish what will go on in Coventry. I hope the Minister will have the opportunity to spend some time there and draw out some of the lessons from that successful council's leadership to inform others.

I want to add a particular note about industrial heritage and its role in town centre action zones. I agreed very much with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South when he underlined the importance of that particular aspect of town centre heritage. I commend the superb report written and presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), who chairs the all-party group on industrial heritage. He

[Liam Byrne]

underlines the way in which industrial heritage can often be better protected and celebrated by ensuring that there are good development plans for town centres. The history that we find in our town centres is often one of the big magnets—one of the big draws—and therefore one of the secrets to economic development in the years to come. My hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen wrote:

“Industrial heritage has to be accessible: both physically, and to our modern, diverse communities.”

That is a lesson that we are now seeing incorporated in some action zone plans.

However, we have to be honest about the challenges. The scale of the fund, £55 million, comes nowhere near close to filling in the gap carved out by a 32% cut in council funding over the past few years. As the son of a planner, I feel quite strongly—this will echo some of the comments that we have heard this afternoon—about bad planning decisions scarring the urban landscape taking shape around us. Very often, such decisions are made these days because there are no planners left. In the great city of Birmingham, for example, very few people are left in the planning department. As for the number of architects now employed by local authorities, once upon a time I think half the country’s architects were employed by councils, but now there are very few left. I am afraid that that has implications for the quality of planning decisions and the urban environment that we will leave to the people who take our place.

Equally, we have to be realistic about the economic pressure that now weighs heavily on our high streets. That is of enormous importance to this House. Our high streets contribute some £100 billion to our economy and employ some 21,000 people. It is not a marginal issue in the debates that we have about the future of our economy; it is of critical importance.

The Heritage Lottery Fund, through its programme, “New ideas need old buildings”, made the point that our historic quarters are very often the crucibles of new ideas, new businesses, new jobs, new potential and new opportunities, which is something that we see in my home city of Birmingham. In the jewellery quarter, for example, ably represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), we see a flourishing of small business that has helped to ensure our city is now the second biggest home for start-ups outside London. If we wander around the jewellery quarter, we see a lively amount of economic activity as new businesses begin to flourish.

In conclusion, I want to make three points to the Minister—advice, perhaps, from the Opposition. I have two general points and one specific point. I will follow others in adding to his list of good ideas that need much closer attention. The first is that, given the economic pressure on high streets and the scale of cuts that have been made in local authorities, the Minister and those of his poor officials not currently engaged in no-deal planning in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport would do well to look at Labour’s idea for a £1 billion cultural capital fund to put in their bid to the comprehensive spending review next year. If the House believes that culture has a critical role to play, not just in equipping the country for the digital economy, but in making sure that we put the requisite level of investment

into the ideas we have discussed this afternoon, it will not happen for free. Local authorities are not geared up to supply the funds that are needed. Therefore, it is important that a good strong culture bid goes to the Treasury from the Department next year.

The second idea that I urge the Minister to look at is the *Daily Mirror*’s high street fightback campaign. The *Daily Mirror* has done a good job, zeroing in on a concern that is of huge interest around the country. It has been well backed by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and its general secretary Paddy Lillis, and it has developed a common-sense manifesto of ideas, such as free bus travel for young people, free wi-fi, good bus routes, a register of landlords for empty shops, and regular reviews of business rates. Those are good ideas, which the Department should champion if it wants to advance the agenda set out by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South.

I want, finally, to make a point about Birmingham. As the Minister will know, the second biggest civic collection outside London is in Birmingham. The civic collection of art and historic artefacts is worth something like £2 billion—there are about £1 billion-worth of paintings, and about £1 billion-worth of objects. Many of the objects are now languishing in a warehouse in Nechells that has a leaky roof and is prone to floods.

Why on earth are we allowing High Speed 2 to develop, in the middle of our city, something that looks like a shed, with limited design and cultural potential? Why are we not using that massive-scale investment in a brand new High Speed 2 station, at the heart of the industrial revolution, to create the greatest science museum in the country? Why do we not designate the area around Curzon Street a heritage action zone? Why do we not use the hundreds of millions of pounds of new investment to create a space enabling us to take the objects out of the warehouse—artefacts going back to the days of Boulton and Watt—and build a facility that means that anyone who arrives on the high-speed train in Birmingham knows they are arriving at the home of the industrial revolution? The director general of the Science Museum and others from our home city will lobby the Minister about that in the coming months. However, some positive vibrations from the Minister about the notion would be welcome this afternoon.

3.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure, as Heritage Minister, to respond to the debate on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government. I offer my sincere thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for securing the debate, and to all the hon. Members who have given their valuable input.

Our heritage is a vital resource for this country. It gives places their character and individuality. We know from research that the density of heritage assets is highly and positively related to the concentration of firms in a local economy, and that distinctive and characterful working spaces are a pull factor for businesses. It seems counter-intuitive to some people, but high-tech modern businesses function well, and their staff enjoy working, in heritage buildings. Those buildings are a tremendous draw to any area. It is estimated that creative and cultural industries are 29% more likely to be found in a listed building than in a non-listed building in

England, so we should look after and value our listed buildings, and recognise them for the assets that they are. In 2017, the heritage sector alone provided estimated total gross value added of £29 billion, which is equivalent to 2% of national GVA.

John Howell: I used to run a film production company and we chose to locate it in the Temple. The people who came to visit us were most impressed because we were the only film production company there, and there was all the surrounding heritage to see and enjoy.

Michael Ellis: We see that in many cases. Heritage buildings are an attraction to all types of business, including high-tech ones. The importance of our heritage was fully recognised in “The Culture White Paper”, published by my Department in 2016. It was the first White Paper on culture to be published by any Government since 1965. It made commitments to several new schemes, including Historic England’s heritage action zones, which several Members have spoken about today. As colleagues know, the zones are a flagship scheme to target areas of untapped potential, bringing historic places back to life to attract residents, tourists, businesses and investors, and to create economic growth in villages, towns and cities across England.

The scheme, like many of the schemes in the White Paper, champions a joined-up approach whereby Historic England works in partnership alongside local partners such as local authorities and local businesses. A first round of 10 heritage action zones was announced in March 2017. They included Sunderland, Nottingham, Hull and Coventry—the latter two were of course selected as the UK city of culture for 2017 and 2021 respectively—and Walworth in London, which was one of my first visits when I took my present ministerial post in January. I also enjoyed a visit to Coventry this year.

A further eight heritage action zones were announced as part of my Department’s heritage statement, which was published this time last year. The second round included Stoke-on-Trent, where, of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South has his constituency. I congratulate him again: I understand that he is the youngest MP of his intake—I am sometimes mistakenly seen in the same way. [*Laughter.*] I do not know why everyone is laughing.

My hon. Friend is a heritage star, who cares very much about heritage and his constituency, which is reflected in the fact that he secured the debate, and in the speech he made. I understand that Stoke-on-Trent City Council is due to refurbish Gladstone Pottery Museum as part of the heritage action zone. That will of course help to attract further visitors. I recommend that if it has not already done so, the pottery museum should contact Arts Council England about eligibility for the museum development grant programme, which provides a network of advice and support for all accredited museums. There could be some suggestions for increasing visitor numbers, and for financial sustainability.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South mentioned VisitEngland and VisitBritain. VisitEngland’s role is primarily about developing tourism products, as in the successful £40-million Discover England fund. That £40 million is put into a fund by the Government to encourage tourism outside the London area. Domestic marketing is not part of its current remit, although I am

considering that at the moment. Tourism to the area is not one of the primary focuses of the heritage action zone initiative. It is a secondary focus; we obviously want tourists to visit. When the projects within heritage action zones start to become more public facing, Historic England will work with local and national organisations including VisitEngland to encourage tourism. We very much want that. Tourism is doing well in this country and numbers are healthy and increasing, but we always want more. Historic England is monitoring the outputs of the heritage action zone programme against a set of programme indicators and surveys.

Historic England has completed a full year of data collection for the first 10 heritage action zones. I believe that monitoring data for round 2, which includes Stoke, is currently being collected by Historic England, so it is still a bit early to evaluate the impact on visitor numbers in those areas. I applaud the work of my hon. Friend in supporting the heritage action zone in his area, and the work he has done to support that growing industry in his constituency.

Officials from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and from my Department are currently working with the ceramics sector to explore how they can support the industry. I was delighted that last month the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport announced the Government’s intention to deliver a sector deal with the tourism industry. We have entered into negotiations with the industry about what precisely that will look like, and we have asked it to come to us soon with a strong offer to help increase skills, accessibility and data sharing. When that sector deal is concluded, I am convinced that the tourism industry across the country will benefit. Potential rail improvements to aid tourism are a matter for Network Rail rather than my Department, but we work closely with the Rail Delivery Group—I think I met it earlier in the year—and I will ask my officials to discuss the matter further.

Historic England welcomes the Building Better, Building Beautiful commission as an addition to the range of initiatives taken in recent years to improve the quality of design across England—something I think we all want. That will help to raise awareness of the importance of design in regeneration, and support a sense of community and place. His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales has done a lot and encouraged a great deal in that area, and the commission is a very good thing.

I was pleased this year when the impact of heritage-led regeneration through the heritage action zones scheme was recognised in the Grimsby town deal. Indeed, the Greater Grimsby heritage action zone was announced as part of that town deal, highlighting the many links between heritage and this Government’s industrial strategy. I am sure there is more to be done in other areas.

Hon. Members can imagine my delight when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in the Budget £55 million of funding for my Department for heritage high streets. The Government are working in many ways, and in many different shapes and forms, to help the high street and deal with the issues raised by internet shopping. That £55 million for heritage high streets was very positive and, as hon. Members will know, part of a wider £675 million future high streets fund—a very large sum. Some £40 million of that fund will provide a most welcome boost to

[Michael Ellis]

Historic England, an arm's length body, to run a purely high streets-focused heritage action zone programme, beginning in 2019. I see that as a major success of which I am very proud, and that Budget commitment from Her Majesty's Treasury shows just how much the Government recognise the importance of the country's heritage. It is a major investment.

Since 1998, the Heritage Lottery Fund has invested significant amounts of national lottery funding in townscapes. I encourage everyone to participate in the national lottery because those good causes, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, are a positive thing. Since 1998, a minimum of around £300 million has gone mainly, but not exclusively, to townscape heritage and townscape initiative programmes. HLF decisions are taken at arm's length from Government. A couple of colleagues mentioned my input and offered me very generous invitations to visit various parts of the country, but such decisions are taken at arm's length from Government—perhaps that is just as well when my hon. Friends ask me these things—and we are, quite rightly, not involved in the grant-making process, which is done independently.

The heritage action zone scheme aims to bring in funding from across the sector, and others, for local benefit both economically and—just as importantly from my perspective—for the historic environment. A heritage action zone can apply for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, although not for a part of a project that is already being funded as part of the heritage action zone initiative. Therefore, Historic England could fund one part of a project, and the Heritage Lottery Fund another. There is nothing to stop that happening. Indeed, round 1 heritage action zones are sharing Historic England funding of £6 million, and benefiting from a further £18 million secured in match funding. About £1 of investment from Historic England generates further investment from the public and private sectors of £3.10—more than triple—so it is worth doing.

We must have regard to the public purse and—unlike previous Governments—to spending within our means in all the things we do. However, we must certainly have

a very special regard for heritage, and I thank again all hon. Members who have contributed to today's debate. I would be delighted to visit the Stoke-on-Trent heritage action zone, and indeed Henley and Congleton if the diary allows. My Department is looking at some possible dates next year for either the Secretary of State or me to visit Stoke-on-Trent.

3.36 pm

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for his kind and helpful comments. He recognised how important heritage and heritage buildings are to our economy, as well as the wider value of investing in our heritage. I am pleased that he mentioned the White Paper and the support given by the Department for that agenda. I thank him for his suggestions, particularly those on Gladstone Pottery Museum and the help that could be given to its programme of improvements.

I thank the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) for his comments. I did not agree with everything, and I hope he will not mind if I correct him on one thing. Although the modern-day factory and museum are in my constituency, Wedgwood was born in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) in Burslem, which is one of the other five towns that make up the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent. He was not born in Longton, I am afraid.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for their contributions, and particularly for sharing their knowledge of their constituencies and the importance of that heritage. Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who mentioned the importance of converting properties.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered town centre heritage action zones.

3.38 pm

Sitting suspended.

Leaving the EU: UK Orchestras

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect on UK orchestras of the UK leaving the EU.

I am delighted to be serving under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Christopher, and to see the Minister and the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) and the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) in their places.

British orchestras are a global success story. They tour around the world, forge new markets in emerging economies and contribute to UK soft power and cultural exchange, but Europe is their most important marketplace. They are particularly worried about the prospect of a no-deal Brexit, which could put the survival of some well-known British orchestras at risk. Even with a deal, if the UK is going to leave the EU, orchestras need assurances, particularly ahead of the forthcoming comprehensive spending review. I understand from the conversations I have had that the key concerns are: first, the risk and danger of increased bureaucracy and costs associated with European touring after Brexit; secondly, funding, particularly given constrained public support; and, thirdly, the difficulty in recruiting and retaining EU nationals. I will take each of those points in turn and put six specific questions to the Minister.

I turn first to the increased difficulties in touring. Touring is intrinsic to the business model of British orchestras. Additional costs from controls on migration could price UK orchestras out in quite a fragile marketplace. Extra costs could include medical insurance, because of the loss of the European health insurance card; carnets for transporting musical instruments, if we are not in the customs union; border delays; and the cost of work permits. The planning cycle for orchestras is often more than two years ahead of performance, so contracts with promoters in the European Union have already been signed far beyond March of next year. Fees have been fixed. Additional costs from Brexit could push already contracted tours into loss.

Recognising the additional costs that orchestras will face, has the Minister had any discussion with the Treasury about increased public funding? Some EU promoters have chosen not to book UK orchestras because of uncertainty about Brexit.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Fortunately, the instrument I play, the organ, cannot be put into the back of a van, but other instruments can. We need a firm indication that musicians will still be able to travel in order to make their concert schedules.

Stephen Timms: That is not the first issue that comes to mind when one thinks about the challenges ahead, but it is an important one, and it is absolutely right for the hon. Gentleman to raise it.

Public funding for British orchestras has been cut sharply since 2010, as has funding from devolved Governments and local authorities, and there has been a cut of up to 30% from Arts Council England. Since

2016, the orchestra tax relief—I have no doubt the right hon. Member for Wantage had something to do with that—has been vital to the financial sustainability of orchestras, but at the moment we do not know whether British organisations will continue to be eligible for funding through Creative Europe or the other EU programmes, so UK Government investment is absolutely vital to orchestras, concert halls, festivals and promoters. What assurances can the Minister give at this early stage about funding for culture in the forthcoming comprehensive spending review?

Corporate sponsorship is down since the 2008 downturn. Arts and business incentive schemes saw corporate sponsorship rise to a total of just over £170 million in 2006-07, but it fell after that. In 2011-12, it was down to £113 million. Figures have not been published since then, but reports from orchestras suggest that it has continued to decline since. Can we look at new opportunities for incentivising corporate sponsorship? The Association of British Orchestras has proposed a tax incentive for investment in cultural organisations along the lines of the existing tax credit for research and development. Is that an idea that is being pursued?

Unlike in other countries, orchestras from the UK do not get any financial support for touring. They tour on an entirely commercial basis, so they are relatively expensive for foreign promoters. That is particularly difficult in new markets where the costs and risks of touring are greater. Might there be consideration of a new international touring fund in the new era?

I turn to recruitment and retention, which we have been discussing in the House this afternoon with the Home Secretary as he published the migration White Paper. British orchestras, operas and ballet companies rely on guest artists, conductors, soloists, singers and dancers being able to travel in and out of the UK, often just for a single engagement. Orchestras may have to replace an artist who has cancelled because of illness or injury at very short notice, and the replacement artist needs to be somebody who knows the particular role or repertoire. There may well be nobody suitable in the UK.

A lot of orchestral musicians—permanent or freelancing—are overseas nationals. The average percentage of EU nationals in UK orchestras is 8.3%. In some well-known orchestras, they account for more than 20% of the permanent musicians. The Government have rightly included principal and sub-principal orchestral musicians on the shortage occupation list. That means that orchestras can recruit under the tier 2 points-based system from outside the European Economic Area without recourse to the resident labour market test. Other players are subject to such tests, but the Association of British Orchestras has secured an extension to the recruitment period of up to 24 months, recognising the rigorous and lengthy auditioning and trialling process that is required. Recruitment under the points-based system is bureaucratic and costly, and orchestras are worried that if that system is extended to Europe after Brexit, as is proposed, there will be major new red tape and costs for them.

The salary threshold for entering the UK with an initial job offer is £30,500, which is above the average starting salary for non-soloist musicians in lots of orchestras, particularly outside London. The threshold for obtaining indefinite leave after five years is £35,000 a year. Public spending cuts mean that orchestral salaries have flatlined

[Stephen Timms]

and roles in orchestras may well not meet those thresholds. We have heard from the Home Secretary that there will be a year's consultation around exactly how the arrangements will work, but I think the Minister will recognise the concerns that orchestras have, if they are to continue—as they must—to attract global talent. Orchestral musicians are highly skilled, but they are not highly paid.

The Association of British Orchestras, UK Theatre and One Dance UK have written to the Minister with responsibility for the arts, the hon. Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), urging him to work with the Home Office to secure an exemption for highly skilled performing arts workers who earn below the £30,000 threshold in the proposed Brexit system, and to clarify the position of freelance musicians. That letter requested a meeting. Will he or the Minister who is responding to the debate meet the organisations who signed the letter to discuss that concern?

There is a worry about social security contributions. In the EU, a UK orchestral musician uses an A1 form to prove that they pay social security contributions in the UK, which exempts them from paying social security and health insurance in other EU countries when they are on tour. If, after Brexit, UK musicians no longer have access to the A1 system, it is likely that additional social security deductions of 15% to 20% will be taken from their pay. The financial viability of touring might well be wrecked. Will Ministers seek to ensure continued access to the A1 system after Brexit, perhaps through a bilateral agreement of the kind that is already in place with Switzerland? The recent political declaration commits to maintain

“reciprocal arrangements on the future rules around some defined elements of social security coordination.”

That form of words is not binding, and it is not clear to which elements they refer. I wonder whether the Minister can assure us that the A1 system will be included in those elements that should have reciprocal arrangements, and that steps will be taken to ensure that there will be no additional delays to issuing A1 certificates, because delays could be problematic as well.

There is a longer-term worry that recruitment problems will be compounded as higher education institutions attract fewer students from the European Union. Like many specialist performing arts institutions, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama recruits 20% of its students from the European Union, but already the number of applications from the EU has fallen. It was 495 in 2015-16, but it is 385 in the current academic year. UK institutions' ability to be world class will be reduced if the skills pipeline of the sector is diminished by our leaving the EU.

We have heard a lot about the impact of leaving the European Union on manufacturers and banks. There will also be a major impact on orchestras, but that has not been widely debated. I am grateful for the opportunity to air these important concerns. The arts and creative industries are estimated to account for 800,000 jobs in London alone.

Let me just recap my questions to the Minister. Has she had any discussions with the Treasury about higher public funding to offset new costs for orchestras that

arise from our leaving the European Union? What assurances can the Minister give at this early stage on funding for culture in the spending review? What progress has been made in considering tax incentives to encourage support? What consideration has there been of the possibility of an international touring fund? Will Ministers meet relevant organisations and consult them on exemptions to the salary thresholds for visas?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I call the Minister.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): What about me?

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Did the right hon. Gentleman indicate that he wanted to be called in this very short debate?

Mr Vaizey: I certainly did.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): In that case—if it has been agreed with the promoter, and the Minister has received notice—I call Ed Vaizey.

4.12 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Thank you very much, Chair. It is a remarkable display of your flexibility, and another reason it is such a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the second day running. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing this important debate and on putting the case for supporting our orchestras so effectively. I also congratulate the Minister—it is extraordinary that as the right hon. Gentleman was speaking, her Christmas card arrived in my inbox, drawn by Jessica Stinton of Ridgewood High School in Stourbridge. Jessica is now written into the record in *Hansard* for her beautiful picture of robins. The motto is:

“A time for everyone to come together.”

I think that this debate is a time for everyone to come together to support our orchestras, and the arts more generally, as we go through the turmoil of Brexit. The challenges that our orchestras face are also faced by many different arts organisations—perhaps not professional organ players, who might find it harder to tour, but certainly people in the visual arts—[*Interruption.*] I can feel that I have provoked my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). If one wants to know about the quality of Oxfordshire's cultural sensibilities, it is worth noting that only Oxfordshire MPs have turned up to this debate voluntarily.

John Howell: My right hon. Friend is right to speak of the quality of Oxfordshire MPs and to say that I am an organist—I think that adds to our contribution to the arts as Oxfordshire's dedicated MPs. I want just to correct him on one thing: he is right to say that I cannot fit my organ in the back of a trailer, but many churches and halls around Europe have organs that can be used, provided that it has been arranged in advance.

Mr Vaizey: That is true. Yesterday I was at the Battersea Arts Centre, which houses a Wurlitzer organ—the largest electric organ of its type in the UK. I hope that my hon. Friend will have the chance one day to play that organ, which is currently being restored.

I digress. The point that I wanted to make is that while I was delighted to receive the Minister's Christmas card electronically, a physical Christmas card is more tangible—just as a wonderful recording of an orchestra is a brilliant thing, but we ultimately aim to see it perform live. That is why the touring of orchestras is so important, and why British orchestras have seen more than a million more people attend live performances in the past eight years. Another important point is that our orchestras are very much part of this country's soft power, as are all the arts. In my role as trade envoy to Vietnam, I was lucky enough to see the London Symphony Orchestra perform in Hanoi this year—that is one example. That is why I hope that the Minister will focus on the arguments that have been put forward by the right hon. Member for East Ham on the need to support orchestras and their ability to tour once we have left the European Union.

The right hon. Member for East Ham put some questions to the Minister, and I want to quickly outline three important themes. The first is obviously the physical ability to tour. We know that some of our orchestras have already lost bookings in the EU because of uncertainty about Brexit. It is not clear what future work permits might look like or what impact future customs arrangements might have on the movement of instruments between borders. We do not know how delays at the borders might impact on touring or what additional costs might come about from the loss of access to the European health insurance card. A whole host of uncertainties surrounding the physical aspect of touring in the European Union after Brexit need to be addressed.

The second point that the right hon. Member for East Ham touched on is that there will no doubt be an increase in costs for our orchestras, should they wish to tour in the European Union. It costs a lot to go on tour—I think it cost the London Symphony Orchestra about £1 million to do their south-east Asian tour. The costs are relatively low to tour in the European Union at the moment, but they will increase. The right hon. Gentleman was right to call on the Government to start to look at a fund to support international touring, perhaps with support from the Foreign Office or even from the Department for International Development. I was lucky enough to see the London Symphony Orchestra teaching in Hanoi as well as performing.

The third point that the right hon. Member for East Ham made is that the physical movement of people is important for orchestras. Something like 20% of musicians in our top orchestras come from the European Union. The salary threshold of £30,000 does not necessarily reflect the kind of salaries that are earned by people who are starting up their careers, or even by senior members of orchestras. When I was a Minister, I experienced some of the difficulties of getting artists from outside the European Union into the UK to perform. Those kind of obstacles really need to be looked at and overcome. I hope that, as well as considering a touring fund, the Minister will work with the Arts Council England to ensure that there is a special immigration section staffed by experts, who are able to wave through visas as quickly as possible to ensure that touring can be as friction free as possible.

Mr Chope, I thank you for the opportunity to make my points in this very important debate—while focused on orchestras, it is also a model for the wider debate on the future of cultural exchange between the European Union and the UK after Brexit.

4.19 pm

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing a debate on this very important matter. I thank him for advance sight of his speech and questions.

The Government take extremely seriously our responsibility to champion and support our world-leading orchestras, which connect us to more than 400 years of creativity from across the world—particularly within Europe. I agree profoundly with the right hon. Gentleman about the value, success and soft power that our orchestras represent. They help to educate young people and contribute significantly to our cultural life and economy. We take none of that for granted, and we have a range of policies that support our orchestras.

In England, the Arts Council invests more than £25 million a year in orchestras, and related classical music organisations and activities, through the national portfolio. In 2017-18, Arts Council England awarded more than £2.8 million to a range of classical music projects across England through its lottery-funded Grants for the Arts programme, and more than £10 million through strategic funding programmes.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about new tax reliefs. Although that is a matter for the Treasury, I will comment on it as much as I can. The Government keep all tax reliefs under review. Any proposal for a new tax relief must be assessed for its effectiveness, wider economic impact, ability to stand up against abuse, and cost to the Exchequer. I am pleased to note that the orchestra tax relief, available across the UK, was introduced in April 2016. The most recent statistics for the relief show that, since its introduction, 205 productions have benefited and have received £6.6 million-worth of support from the Government.

On other future funding, the spending review will set the first funding envelope after the UK has left the EU, and will look at all Government spending. It gives us the opportunity to look at UK priorities and argue significantly for the hugely important area of culture, including, of course, performing orchestras. The Government have made clear our intention to undertake that spending review in 2019. Leading up to the review, we will continue to listen to the concerns of the sector, and of course we will consider any spending in the light of implications following our exit from the European Union.

The UK Government value the UK's thriving cultural landscape and have listened to the sector's concerns about the European market. We will continue to be in close dialogue with the sector, and we will seek a far-reaching relationship on culture and education with the European Union that is mutual beneficial for the UK, the EU, our cultural communities, including orchestras, and our citizens.

Some leading classical musicians have expressed concerns about the future as we leave the European Union, and those concerns have been represented in this debate. I assure them that their voices are being heard. My Department is working hard to ensure that Departments across Whitehall understand what our orchestras need from our future relationship with the EU, and what they need in terms of contingency planning in the

[*Margot James*]

unlikely case that we leave the EU without a deal. In either case, we are confident that the creativity and resilience of our orchestras will continue and thrive.

Right hon. and hon. Members have touched on a range of challenges for orchestras, and I will address them in turn. It is tragic that some orchestras have lost bookings on account of Brexit, as we heard from the right hon. Gentleman and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey). The movement of people is important. A key challenge for our orchestras is how the rules about the movement of people might change. Those concerns have been raised, and I want to address some of them, particularly in the light of the White Paper, which was published this afternoon.

The White Paper is an invitation to interested parties to express their views. I trust that the right hon. Member for East Ham will make his views on the issues pertaining to orchestras apparent during the consultation inspired by the White Paper. In the future, it will be for the UK Government and Parliament to determine the domestic immigration rules that will apply. The Immigration Bill will bring migration from the EU under UK law, enabling us to set out future immigration system in domestic legislation. The movement of people is clearly important to the orchestras of our country. We will continue to work with the Arts Council, and we will look at the proposals it is making for visa waivers in this sector.

In the immigration White Paper, we set out further detail on the system, taking into account the recommendations of the Migration Advisory Committee's report on European Economic Area migration in the UK. The future system will focus on high skills and welcoming talented and hard-working individuals who will support the UK's economy, enabling employers to compete on the world stage. The Home Office is launching a year-long engagement to enable business and other stakeholders, such as orchestras, to shape the final details of policy and process.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether my colleague, the Minister for Arts, Heritage and Tourism, would meet with the Association of British Orchestras. Following the publication of the White Paper, he will certainly be able to meet the right hon. Gentleman and the Association of British Orchestras to discuss this matter in greater detail.

Orchestras have expressed concern about the salary threshold. Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman mentioned the Migration Advisory Committee threshold of £30,000. We will discuss with businesses what a suitable salary threshold should be. If a skilled job is considered to be in shortage in the UK, a lower salary threshold is likely

to apply. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned that skills do not necessarily relate to salary, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is well aware of that.

Sir Christopher, should I allow a little time for the right hon. Gentleman to sum up?

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): If you allow any time, it will be wasted. Under the rules, there is no right of reply for a Member introducing a short debate.

Margot James: I apologise. I am never clear on that point.

As hon. Members pointed out, it is not only the movement of people, but the movement of objects, that is important to orchestras. They move a huge amount of equipment around with them, much of it valuable, historic or both. They work on tight timeframes and are under pressure not to separate musicians from their instruments for long periods. I am aware that some musicians are worried that new customs processes will lead to increased cost, delay and inconvenience, which could disrupt touring schedules.

Hon. Members will know that the Government's plan for EU exit aims to preserve frictionless trade for the majority of UK goods. Furthermore, in the political declaration, the UK and the EU recognise the importance of the temporary movement of objects and equipment in enabling co-operation in the cultural and education sectors. That, of course, includes musical instruments.

Orchestras are also concerned about customs processes in the unlikely case that the UK leaves the European Union without a deal. I hope hon. Members will understand that the issue of customs processes in the event of no deal is a broader, but no less important, issue than the one before us today. My Department has been working closely with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to understand the pressures on our orchestras to ensure that we are prepared and that communications reach the right people and contain the information they need to allow orchestras are prepare.

Another challenge that was raised is the importance and value of EU funding programmes to the UK's cultural sector, including orchestras. Creative Europe provides support for international cultural relations and creative projects. Collaboration is vital for culture to thrive. Creative Europe has demonstrated that international partnership enables the cultural sectors to share expertise, build relationships and produce exemplary creative works.

As the Prime Minister made clear in the White Paper on our future relationship with the EU, the UK wants to build on our long history of working together to continue to produce and promote excellent culture.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Public Service Pensions: Government Contributions

4.30 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the reduction in Government contributions to public service pensions.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. This debate is important to highlight the impact, across the public sector, of the reduction in Government pension contributions.

The Government are implementing a further reduction in the discount rate for public service pension schemes from 2.8% to 2.4%, which will take effect in 2019-20. Clearly, the reduction in Government contributions to public sector pensions is going to increase the strain across the public sector. Although the changes will have an impact across public services, for the purpose of the debate I will focus mainly on the police and fire services.

The reduction in Government contributions to public sector pensions will clearly add further strain to our frontline services, which have faced huge financial challenges, following eight years of Tory austerity. By 2021, police services will be expected to find around £420 million in order to set a balanced budget—that could mean losing a further 10,000 police officers. The change is also estimated to cost fire services £150 million by 2023, which is roughly equivalent to the cost of running 150 fire stations for a year.

To provide a bit of background, in the 2016 Budget the Chancellor announced a discount rate reduction from 3% to 2.8%, with effect from April next year. The Treasury decided more recently, however, that a further reduction—to 2.4%—was required. In September 2018, the Government said that the Departments and devolved Administrations would need to meet, in full, the increase in costs in the 2016 Budget announcement. The Treasury has advised that public bodies will be supported in meeting unforeseen costs in the 2019-20 financial year, when the changes first take effect, but compensation beyond the first year cannot be guaranteed.

Public service providers would have to increase employer contributions to the Treasury with no guarantee that additional moneys would be compensated beyond 2019-20. If public bodies were not compensated for the increased contributions beyond the first year, that would mean an indirect spending cut. Affected employers will therefore be forced to make costly changes without any certainty that Government funding for frontline services will be proportionately increased in years to come.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for securing this important debate. Does he agree that although it is right and proper that NHS funding is ring-fenced until 2023-24, other frontline services, such as firefighters and the police, must also have the same protection as a matter of right, in recognition of the type of work that we call on them to carry out—to protect and serve?

Gerald Jones: I agree. All our emergency services do important work on our behalf, and that work needs investment. They cannot do that important work while worrying about how they are going to fund it.

There are significant concerns that the Treasury has introduced the changes as back-door spending cuts for already tightly squeezed public bodies and those delivering public services. In 2016, the trade union for senior civil servants, the FDA, said:

“It’s only three months since departmental budgets were set and yet departments are now expected to deliver an additional £3.5bn of savings in 2019/20 through another efficiency review...By announcing a change to the discount rate on public sector pensions—without any consultation—they are effectively removing a further £2 billion from public services and transferring it to the Treasury to give the illusion of a surplus”.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. On the cuts that he refers to, the South Yorkshire fire and rescue authority concluded in its financial plan that combined with the cuts and the 10 years of austerity, the pension contribution hikes will leave it no choice but to reduce fire services, with an increased risk to people and property as a result. Does he agree that the pension changes pose a clear and direct risk to the safety of our constituents?

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Emergency services, such as firefighters and the police, are highly regarded and do important work on behalf of all our constituents. Safety will be an issue if the finances are not put in order to ensure that the accounts allow firefighters to continue their important work.

Earlier this year, the trade union Prospect said:

“Public sector employers will have to find additional resources to reflect these changes...However there is a real danger that Treasury will not recycle this money back to public service providers; that this process will, in effect, be a hidden cut to public services.”

As I said earlier, the discount rate change is estimated to cost firefighters £150 million by 2023, based on figures from the Office for Budget Responsibility. That is the equivalent of running 150 fire stations for a year. In 2017-18, employer pension contributions accounted for 7% of the total net expenditure among fire and rescue services in England, and for 7.6% of it in Wales. In England, local government settlement funding for the fire authorities is forecast to decrease by 15% between 2016-17 and 2019-20.

The impact on police is equally stark. By 2020-21, the police will face a financial black hole as their pension liability rises by around £420 million. The chair of the National Police Chiefs Council has warned that it could amount to a loss of a further 10,000 police officers, because the police are legally obliged to set a balanced budget. The recently announced settlement offers no certainty on the issue.

The National Police Chiefs Council is reported to have sent a formal letter to the Treasury saying that it will seek a judicial review of the Government’s proposals, and it is protesting against the fact that forces will have to find an extra £417 million in just two years’ time to pay for an increased minimum contribution to officers’ pension pots. That figure is set to rise from 2% to 3% by 2019 and, as I said, equates to the funding of around 10,000 officers a year. In response to an urgent question on 6 November about liabilities for the police pension schemes, the Minister said that funding arrangements for 2020-21 onwards would be discussed as part of the spending review.

[Gerald Jones]

I have covered the national picture, but I will highlight the local impact on my constituency. Two-thirds of my constituency is covered by South Wales police. The gap in that force for 2020-21, and for every year after, is likely to be around £7 million. If that burden is dumped on police forces, it will effectively be another massive cut to police budgets and lead to a further cut in police numbers. Those changes come on top of the additional £20 million that South Wales police have to find for local policing, having lost about a third of the police grant since 2011. In south Wales, the changes would be the equivalent of 130 fewer police officers on the streets, on top of the 444 officers who have already been lost since 2010.

The Home Office appears to have accepted that the police budgets are under severe constraints and, in the absence of central Government money, flexibility is being granted to raise local police precept to help to offset an enormous sustained challenge to police funding from seven years of cuts. Raising ever-increasing amounts from council tax payers, however, is not sustainable. Will the Minister fight to restore police funding to sustainable levels in the planned comprehensive spending review? Will he promise that the gap in funding for police pensions will be paid in full by the Government, having accepted that the police pensions costs increases cannot be funded from existing police budgets for 2019-20? I ask the Minister to note that the Home Affairs Committee said that the police funding formula must be addressed urgently. Can he assure us that that will also be tackled in the comprehensive spending review in 2019?

The other third of my constituency falls within the area of Gwent police. In cash terms, the changes add £2 million of extra costs to its budget in 2019-20—although some of that will be offset by the Home Office—and a further £3 million of extra costs in 2020-21. That totals around £5 million, recurrently. A recurrent pension pressure of £5 million for the Gwent force equates to 100 police officers in Gwent communities. It would be necessary to increase the local precept in Gwent disproportionately, by about 8% by 2021. Such figures are not sustainable and would transfer ever more pressure to local council tax payers.

As I said at the start of my contribution, the changes will impact across the public sector. I have focused on police and fire, but I will highlight briefly the effect of the recent changes to the teachers' pension scheme on universities throughout the UK. The Treasury appears to have shown little awareness of the significant impact that those changes would have on universities and students, and has failed to commit any additional support for the institutions affected. I accept that the Minister will respond on behalf of the Home Office, but I hope that he will convey our concerns to his colleagues. I understand that the Government themselves estimate that the changes will mean additional pension costs of £142 million, shared across only 70 of the modern, or post-1992, universities. That will clearly place huge strain on budgets that are already under significant pressure.

Today, I hope that the Minister will be able to offer some good news to our overstretched public services. We all acknowledge, I know, that public services—our public servants—and our emergency services in particular, work incredibly hard on our behalf and deserve our thanks and appreciation. However, public services cannot survive on thanks and appreciation.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not share my concern about the lack of consultation with the devolved Administrations? He might have seen correspondence about that, because the lack of consultation is actually against the UK Government's statement of funding policy.

Gerald Jones: I very much agree with the point made by the hon. Gentleman. We are talking about significant amounts of money, and maximum consultation should be required, at the very least. As I have said throughout my contribution, such figures are too unsustainable to be transferred to local budgets anyway.

As I said, our public services cannot survive on thanks and appreciation. Investment is required to sustain the services that we already have. The Government need to come to the table and outline what support they will offer to address the problem. Our public services—our emergency services—have suffered enough.

4.42 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Christopher.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) for securing this important debate. I am grateful to him because he is shining a light on a very important issue that Parliament has not given enough attention to. The reduction in Government contributions to public sector pensions from 2.8% to 2.4% will have a huge impact and place additional strain on our already overstretched public services, unless the Government take action to ensure that public bodies are compensated for their additional contributions.

By 2021, police services will be expected to find an extra £420 million, which equates to the loss of a further 10,000 police officers if all the authorities set a balanced budget. The change is also estimated to cost our fire services an extra £150 million by 2023, which is equivalent to running 150 fire stations. The problem seems particularly acute when it is placed alongside the cuts to local government, because the poorest local authorities in this country have borne the biggest cuts—my own authority in Durham will have seen a massive 60% cut in its budget between 2010 and 2020. If the Government do not compensate our local authorities properly for the measure, we will see a further negative impact on our public services. In our own local communities, we all know how stretched the police and fire services already are. It is important for them to be funded adequately by the Government.

As we heard from my hon. Friend in his excellent and comprehensive contribution, at the moment the Treasury is giving no guarantee that the additional moneys will be compensated beyond 2019-20. According to Treasury analysis, the measure is expected to increase employer contributions by £1,970 million in 2019-20 and £2,005 million by 2020-21. We are not talking about a small amount of money that those bodies can easily plan for; those are huge sums of money that will really impact on the delivery of our public services. We are asking those public services to plan for the future with no real idea of what their budget will be. To assist with effective planning, if nothing else, the Government need

to come forward with information about what they will do about compensating for those additional contributions, because none of us wants to see further damage done to our public services.

My hon. Friend alluded to a further problem, namely what is happening to our universities, which are not being compensated at all for the additional contributions that they have to make. For the teachers' pension scheme, the Treasury agreed to compensate schools and colleges—again, only for the limited period for which it is compensating everyone else, up to 2019—but not universities, which run such schemes for their lecturing staff. Furthermore, that particular problem exists only for the new universities, so apart from anything else the Government are being extremely unfair. They are singling out the post-1992 universities for particular trouble, and they are simply not looking at the huge impact on university funding.

University funding has already been affected by the freeze in tuition fees with no additional money coming through from Government, and now we have the additional pension contributions. Again, we are not talking about small amounts of money. The increase in the teachers' pension scheme is one of 7.3% to employers, bringing their total contribution up to 23.68%. That has a massive impact on university budgets. For the civil service—while we are at it, we might as well look at this, too—there is a 6.1% increase for civil servants and a 6.22% increase for the NHS. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, that will have a huge impact on the NHS.

I am always pleased to see the Minister in his place, but given the nature of today's debate, a Treasury Minister should have come to this Chamber to answer on behalf of the Government why they have produced additional uncertainty for all the public services, including the civil service and the NHS, by not giving them an assurance of compensation for the increased contributions. Furthermore, a number of us have been asking questions for a while about why the new universities are being treated so unfairly, and we need an explanation from the Government. That has not been forthcoming to date.

The Universities and Colleges Employers Association has said:

“The proposed employer contribution increases will without doubt have a detrimental impact on universities, their staff and their students at a time of great uncertainty and we would urge the Treasury to reconsider.”

I endorse that message, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

4.49 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I will keep my speech short since, as is well known, for the last week I have been struggling to make speeches because of my sore throat. You will be pleased to know, Sir Christopher, that the House of Commons nurse recommended whisky—I will take advantage of that this evening.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) on securing this important debate. This issue will have an impact across public services, particularly public sector employers. I consider pensions to be deferred pay, so we should always look carefully at any changes to be made to public service pensions. A lower discount rate would, in the absence of other charges, result in higher contribution rates that public services across the board are expected to absorb.

As hon. Members have said, the employers currently in unfunded public sector pension schemes are the NHS, state schools, and the police and fire services. Any change in the discount rate would have an impact on those contributions. The UK Government announced they would fund most Departments' additional costs incurred by the September 2018 changes for the 2019-20 year. Beyond that, Government's position appears to be that meeting costs would form part of the spending review discussions.

The letter I referred to in my intervention on the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney was from the then Welsh Government Finance Minister—now First Minister—in a joint letter with Derek Mackay, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Finance. It lays out the concerns to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. As I understand, she indicates that it is her intention to meet 100% of all costs related to the valuation of the health pensions scheme in England only. That leaves the devolved Administrations having to meet that cost, at the expense of public services. As I said, that is at variance with the UK's Government's statement of funding policy, which states that any measures with an impact on devolved responsibilities should have prior engagement and consultation. The fact that there was no prior engagement and consultation is of great concern to Members in the devolved nations, as it certainly should be.

It is quite clear that the public sector across the board has been hung out to dry, with little time to prepare to meet the additional costs of the revised discount rate. Hon. Members explained rather well the impact that would have on their services locally and the potential money that will have to be found to fund public services. The potential cost to public sector jobs was a point very well made by the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods). I agree with her that a Treasury Minister really should have responded in this debate. With all due respect to the Minister—I do not know whether he got the short straw in a raffle—the Treasury should be here because it was a Treasury decision. That we have someone from the Home Office—with all due respect to the Minister, who I like—is somewhat baffling. Members have to hold Government Ministers to account, but we always like to have a debate with the correct Minister answering questions.

I would like public sector pension arrangements to be fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament. I am sure that colleagues in Wales, having seen this disaster, will probably share that view. There is real concern across the public sector that is shared across the board by Opposition members. I look forward to the Government's response.

4.54 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) for securing such a vital debate.

The decision to reduce Government contributions to public sector pensions is highly flawed. I will give a short introduction to the damaging reforms, before outlining their flaws and seeking some clarifications from the Minister. The Government's SCAPE—superannuation contributions adjusted for past experience—discount rate expresses the amount of central Government funding committed to public sector pensions. In the 2016 Budget, the Government announced that they would reduce

[Karen Lee]

their contributions from 3% to 2.8%. Then, without further consultation, they announced a further 2.4% reduction to contributions. The Treasury has acknowledged that the reform is a result of the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasting lower long-term economic growth rates—in spite of that, we are told we have a booming economy.

It is vital that the reform is not mistaken as a necessity, much like the wider incorrect assertion that austerity was a necessity. The reform is the Conservatives' ideological response to lower growth caused by their austerity programme, which incidentally took place alongside tax cuts for the very wealthy. It would seem that the country can afford tax cuts even if it cannot afford to properly fund our public service pensions—something I find really reprehensible. That policy must be understood within the Government's wider agenda.

The effects of the reduction cannot be understated: it will mean a reliance on employers to increase their contributions to ensure public sector pensions continue to receive sufficient funding. Importantly, the Treasury has made no guarantee that additional funding will be provided beyond 2019-20 to help to compensate employers. Let us see this policy for what it is: a pay cut—yet another pay cut—for our local public services, under the guise of fiscal tinkering. The Treasury even acknowledged that in 2016, when it announced that Departments and devolved Administrations would have to foot the cost.

Although we are reassured—I am sure the Minister will reaffirm once again—that employee contributions will not be impacted, let us be completely honest: staffing costs will increase and public services will keep having to do even more with fewer resources. We hear a lot of praise for our services, especially at Christmas time, but let us remember that no one can spend a pat on the back. To clarify, the Government's policy aims to force costly changes upon our crippled public services with no future certainty of financial support. It might be expected that after studying the work by the Treasury's own advisory teams, the Minister would raise various objections with the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary. Estimates forecast that the reduced pension contribution will require employers to increase their contributions by £1,970 in 2019-20. I am extremely concerned that the cost will be met through back-door spending cuts for public sector budget that are already at breaking point.

The Government heard concerns from the FDA in 2016 about budgets being set across the public sector. Now, an additional £3.5 billion may have to be found through another efficiency review. This is a direct transfer of funding from our public services into the Treasury. That may as well have been an additional tax on our public services, which have been starved and deprived of funding for years. One would hope that the money would be reused and invested in areas where our public services desperately need funding; although that still would not be sufficient, the rationale would make sense.

However, the reality will be much different. Like the last eight years of Tory rule, we can expect corporate tax cuts alongside prolonged austerity. We know who suffers the most from those. The effects of this policy on the police service were discussed in the Adjournment debate in November by my right hon. Friend the Member

for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden). Although I will not repeat a lot of the powerful points that Members have already raised, it is important that a crucial element is identified: the substantial financial pressure will be too much for the current budget settlements to sustain.

The current chair of the National Police Chiefs Council, Sara Thornton, raised concerns about the incurred cost on the police service. She stated that forces are organising their medium-term forecasts, which means that forces in England and Wales may need to find an extra £417 million from existing budgets by 2020-21. I find it very uncomfortable that while the Government present the narrative that they are addressing the shortage of police officers, this policy may result in the equivalent of 10,000 job losses and severe damage to the sustainability of local police forces.

The fire service will be put under immense pressure if this policy is implemented. The service has suffered swingeing cuts for eight consecutive years now, and in 2017-18 employer contributions equated to 7% of English fire services' net expenditure. Office for Budget Responsibility figures estimate that fire services across England will suffer from cuts of at least £150 million by 2023, which will be absolutely devastating for the service. I speak to firefighters, the Fire Brigades Union and councillors often; I am sure the Minister does too, so he should know full well the devastation that such cuts may cause. He may well have heard the same concerns that I have been privy to.

That sum of £150 million is the equivalent of running 30 fire stations for five years or paying the annual wage of thousands of firefighters, but alongside that, local government settlement funding for fire authorities in England is forecast to decrease by 15% between 2016-17 and 2019-20. As of March, fire and rescue authorities in England have £61.2 million in unallocated reserves. How can they be expected to pick up the bill without central Government assistance?

The situation of fire services is very worrying. We have heard Matt Wrack, who as general secretary of the FBU really ought to know what he is talking about, assert numerous times that budget cuts are putting our communities' safety at risk. The Minister is hearing that from true experts in the field, and I do not think it can be doubted. We can see the risks of additional cuts. The Merseyside fire and rescue service has been forced to cut overnight cover at six stations. The Tyne and Wear fire service has been forced to consider new cuts in its integrated risk management plan, having already been forced to save £25 million since 2010. Surely neither would do that if they had any other choice.

I would like the Minister to explain what measures he intends to implement to cushion the blow to the fire service's budget post 2019-20, and whether he has assessed the consequences of the pension reform on specific fire services across the UK and across different regions. Furthermore, will he undertake to implement a funding review for the fire service alongside the pensions consultation?

5.1 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. As a humble foot-soldier

in the Government, it is not for me to reason why I drew the straw for this debate. I assume it is because I am the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, and I understood that the primary concern of the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), as was reflected in the debate, was the impact on emergency frontline services. It is a great pleasure to respond to the debate, and I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing it. It is an important debate, because it throws a spotlight on two important issues.

The first is how we ensure that public pensions are funded in a sustainable way to protect the value of the pensions of those of our constituents who work in the public services; I know the Labour party cares about that and I would not want to give the impression that it does not. It is entirely legitimate to probe and ask questions about the impact, particularly on emergency frontline services, which we recognise on a cross-party basis are stretched and under pressure. This is an entirely legitimate debate and I welcome it.

The hon. Gentleman rightly asserted that our emergency services deserve our thanks and respect—particularly at this time of year but, frankly, every week and every month of every year—but they also deserve a decent pension, and our constituents as taxpayers deserve full debate and reassurance on how those pensions will be funded in a fair, sustainable way that strikes the right balance between the contributions of the central taxpayer and the local employer. That is what underlies the Treasury position, as I will explain. I hope to reassure the hon. Gentleman and others that the Treasury, which is not here to explain itself today, and the rest of the Government are doing everything we can to help our emergency services in particular, but also other Departments, to manage any uncertainties in terms of unexpected costs in 2019-20. I will go into some detail on that.

Quite rightly, the hon. Gentleman and others voiced concerns about what happens after 2020-21, but they will know that the fundamental truth is that at that point we will be into a new comprehensive spending review period. That is an extremely important moment in setting the framework for longer-term funding, not just for our emergency services, but for other Government Departments. I can give the hon. Gentleman my absolute assurance, if I continue to be Minister at that point—we live in uncertain times—that I am determined, as I have said publicly and as my boss the Home Secretary has said publicly, to ensure that the emergency services are properly resourced against demand and risk. That includes a need to ensure that they have the resources necessary to meet their obligations to public pensions.

The hon. Gentleman will understand that at this moment in time, no Government could give absolute reassurances about what the next CSR period will bring, but we have signalled clearly that increased employer contributions to public pensions from 2020-21 will be taken care of in the CSR. In the meantime, the Treasury has set aside £4.7 billion, which I think would seem to all our constituents to be an extremely large number, to help Departments cover unforeseen additional costs in 2019-20. I will go into some detail on the areas of my direct responsibility, police and fire, because concerns have been expressed about people in those services from both sides of the Chamber.

Before I address those concerns, I acknowledge an important point made both by the hon. Gentleman and by the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) about concerns within the community of universities. That is not my area of direct responsibility or expertise, but I undertake to write to the new Universities Minister on their behalf to highlight the concerns expressed in the debate and to ask him to respond to the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney in the light of those concerns.

To give a bit of context, the Government—I am sure with cross-party support—want to make sure that public sector pensions remain among the best pensions available, especially for police officers and firefighters, in recognition of their role. We are determined, as any Government would be, to make sure that the cost of providing pensions is fair to the scheme's members, the employers and taxpayers. I think any Government would take the same approach. We want to be sure that they remain affordable and sustainable for generations to come. That is the context of the changes announced to the discount rate at the Budgets in 2016 and 2018. As the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) said, they were based on the latest independent Office for Budget Responsibility projections of GDP growth.

The changes to the discount rate have resulted in an increase to public sector employers' contributions to their pension schemes, including the police and firefighters' schemes. The hon. Lady was quite right that the intention was not to increase the members' contribution rate. I confirm that that is not being contemplated. It is an increase in employers' contributions. Critically to the point of this debate, the Government have provided financial support for additional pension costs that could be reasonably expected to be unexpected. The extra funding is £98 million for fire in 2019-20 and £153 million for the police. As I have said before, funding levels for future years will be considered as part of the spending review. That is inevitable, given where we are in the funding cycle for Departments.

A lot of concern was expressed on behalf of both the services. I know the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney is aware of the police funding settlement that I proposed last week, although obviously it has not been passed by Parliament. That recognised the additional pension costs to the police. He mentioned a number of more than £400 million. Actually, in 2019-20, the additional costs to the police system would be approximately £330 million. He will be aware that the overall police funding settlement enables up to £970 million of additional investment in our police, although that depends very much on what individual police and crime commissioners do on the precept.

The hon. Gentleman will also know that this funding settlement sees the first increase in the Home Office grant since 2010. The proposed funding for South Wales police, for example, which faces the pressure of additional pension costs of £6.8 million next year, is an additional £3.3 million in Government grant and £3.1 million in specific pension grant, while the police and crime commissioner, Alun Michael, will have the flexibility to increase the precept up to £12.7 million, making a total of £19.1 million. I hope he will welcome that.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about Gwent police, which I know partly covers his constituency. The funding settlement enables additional public investment of up

[*Mr Nick Hurd*]

to £8.5 million in Gwent police, which faces pensions pressures of £2.9 million. He will be aware, because he will have heard me bang on about it, that Gwent police is an outlier, with £56 million in reserves—more than 45.3% of its total funding. Those reserves have increased since 2011.

I hope the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that the provisional police funding settlement, which is yet to be ratified by Parliament—I hope he will support it—goes well beyond meeting the specific additional pension costs and tries to support police forces both with their cost pressures and in their ambitions to increase capacity. That is part of a broader funding settlement that proposes a substantial increase of up to £970 million in the police system, compared with additional pension costs of £330 million.

I should also note that the police funding settlement talks about a word that never comes up in these conversations, but that is important for all our constituents, who ultimately pay for all this through their taxes: efficiency. The shadow Minister views austerity as ideological but, after eight years of austerity, that we can still sit down with our police leaders and agree £120 million of further cost savings through smarter procurement—they are spending our constituents' money—tells us that we are still not at the end of the journey of making sure that our public services are efficient. Where the police lead, the fire service will undoubtedly follow, not least as they are both under the guidance of Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services.

Gerald Jones: We have had eight years of austerity. I come from a local authority background myself, and identifying efficiencies at first is relatively straightforward, but it gets more difficult over time. The Minister mentions reserves, and I know that some areas have reserves. However, there is a big difference between reserves earmarked for certain projects, which all local authorities, police authorities and others have, and undisclosed reserves, which are much lower for many organisations. The point about reserves is that, once they are spent, they are gone. They are there for a rainy day; they cannot be used as part of a recurring budget. It is unfair for recurring expenditure to fall on council tax payers to an even greater level than it does already.

Mr Hurd: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point and I absolutely respect his local authority experience. I am certainly not in denial about the financial pressures, particularly on our police system but also on certain fire services as well. He is right that, in the early years of needing to get back to living within our means and controlling public expenditure, some fruit was easier to pick than others, and it gets harder. However, I was making the point that we are talking about £120 million of savings agreed by the police—this is not a Home Office number—over the next two years through collective procurement. That is just smart buying.

The hon. Gentleman will know very well, and it is the same for the fire service, that a fragmented system of more than 40 different forces each doing their own thing—buying helmets, uniforms and equipment independently—is not necessarily the most efficient route to getting the best value for our constituents. All I am saying is that,

even after eight years of tightening and reducing budgets, we can still find £120 million left on the table because of inefficient procurement practices. I hope he welcomes that. That money was effectively being wasted and can be better used for frontline service delivery. I hope he agrees.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hurd: I will be delighted to give way to the hon. Lady. I have very happy memories of her shadowing me very effectively many years back.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I thank the Minister for those comments. I accept his point about efficiencies. However, we are really talking about the overall size of the cake. The police force and the fire authority in Durham have already significantly reduced in size since 2010, to the point that they struggle to run an effective service. We can talk about procurement and efficiencies, but the pressure on our public services is enormous. That has to be the starting point of these discussions.

Mr Hurd: I have the greatest respect for the hon. Lady and I absolutely understand the point she makes. She will not have followed all my public utterances over the last two years or for however long I have been in this role, but I acknowledged right from the start, after listening to the police and fire services, that the frontlines of our emergency services are stretched. I have said so publicly. The actions I have taken through the police funding settlements last year and this year demonstrate, frankly, a move from cuts to increased investment, in direct response to conversations I have had, not least those with frontline officers expressing their frustration about how stretched they are. I absolutely accept that point.

Of course, £120 million, in the context of the £970 million funding settlement, is still at the margin, but the central point is that we cannot give up pushing those who spend public money to demonstrate that they spend it in the most effective way. It is not Government money; it is our constituents' money. They pay it in taxes and expect it to be used properly. We will not let up on that, because £1 saved through smarter procurement is £1 that can be used for more effective frontline delivery.

I will talk about the implications for the fire service, because that was the main thrust of the shadow Minister's points. I reassure her that, as we work towards the next comprehensive spending review, the Home Office will do a similar exercise to that which we have done with the police—I will be leading this—to genuinely try to understand the demand on the system, both in terms of the demand on the core statutory duty and also the financial pressures that the system is under. We will ask tough questions on efficiency, the use of reserves and all the things that we debate, but we only do so because we are ultimately stewards of public money—it is not Government money, it is taxpayers' money—and that is our job. I am absolutely determined, through the CSR, to make sure that both the police and the fire service have the resources they need. I have shown through my words, and more importantly through my actions, that we have responded to those messages about genuine stretch and pressure on the frontline.

In 2019-20, single-purpose fire and rescue authorities will see an increase in core spending power of 2.3% in cash terms. The additional employer pension costs for

the fire service will be an additional £10 million in 2019-20. The Government will cover the rest of the increase by providing an additional pension grant of £98 million. Standalone fire and rescue authorities, excluding Manchester, will be able to raise an additional £38 million in 2019-20 if all fire and rescue authorities increase the precept by 3%. We believe that will allow fire authorities to meet their financial pressures and continue to invest in key capabilities.

In addition, fire and rescue authorities hold significant financial reserves, which have increased—this is the point—by over 80% to £545 million between the end of March 2011 and the end of March 2018, which is equivalent to 42% of their core spending power. I will always refer to that, because there needs to be proper transparency and accountability.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), who is no longer in her place, talked about the pressures on South Yorkshire. Again, its core spending power increased by 1.7%. It sits on reserves worth almost 50% of its core spending power, and those reserves have increased by £9.5 million since March 2011. Like most fire authorities, it is starting out on the road to independent inspection and it is, I understand, in tranche 3 and will be inspected in summer 2019. One of the things it will be inspected on is efficiency. It will be interesting to see how it comes out of that inspection.

In relation to the police, I genuinely believe that the combination of the specific pension grant, the increase in the Home Office grant, the efficiency savings that we have agreed to realise, the high level of reserves that still remain in the system and a financial settlement that enables increased investment of up to £970 million in 2019-20, if fully realised—it does depend on the actions of police and crime commissioners—will mean that as a country we will invest over £2 billion more in 2019-20 than we did in 2015-16. While Labour MPs continue to make comparisons to 2010, the reality is that since 2015, the Government have recognised that the demand on the police system has risen and become more complex, and we have responded with additional public investment.

Finally, I hope that I have reassured hon. Members that the Government are working closely with both the policing and fire sectors, to ensure that they have the resources to enable them to do their challenging work efficiently and effectively. Alongside that, we are taking steps to ensure that the future funding of public pensions is affordable, sustainable and well balanced.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the reduction in Government contributions to public service pensions.

5.22 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 19 December 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Higher Activity Radioactive Waste

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington):

As a pioneer of nuclear technology, the UK has accumulated a legacy of higher activity radioactive waste. The UK's radioactive waste inventory is currently stored securely at various sites. However, each of these sites requires constant maintenance and protection to keep it safe and secure. Geological disposal is internationally recognised as the safest way to dispose permanently of higher activity radioactive waste.

Today I am publishing the policy paper, "Implementing Geological Disposal: Working with Communities: An updated framework for the long-term management of higher activity radioactive waste". This document sets out the Government's overarching policy framework for managing higher activity radioactive waste through implementing geological disposal and how we will work with communities to find a location for a geological disposal facility. Alongside publishing this policy paper, the Government are also today launching a new national consent-based process to find a site to host a geological disposal facility (GDF).

A GDF will be a highly engineered structure at a depth of between 200-1,000 metres, which will be used to isolate radioactive waste behind several barriers to ensure that no harmful amount of radioactivity ever reaches the surface environment. The structure will feature vaults and tunnels built inside a suitable, stable rock, within which packaged solid waste in purpose-built containers will be emplaced and then backfilled and sealed.

The GDF will be a multi-billion-pound infrastructure investment and will provide skilled jobs and benefits to the community that hosts it for more than 100 years. Delivering a GDF to dispose permanently of the UK radioactive waste inventory is a responsible public service to future generations and will contribute to the Government's industrial strategy, which identified the key role the nuclear sector has in increasing productivity and driving clean growth.

There is no preferred location for a GDF and we are adopting a consent-based process to identify a suitable area to host the facility. A suitable site will be determined jointly by the willingness of a community to host a GDF and the suitability of the geology in the area. The process to find a location for the GDF will be led by RWM (Radioactive Waste Management Ltd, a subsidiary of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority), who will work in partnership with local authorities and other community representatives to find a suitable location. Local authorities will have a key role in the decision-making

process and will be required to test public support in the local area for a GDF being located there before construction can proceed.

The policy paper we are publishing today applies to England only. Although the "Working with Communities" consultation was published jointly by the UK Government and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland, as the Northern Ireland Executive is currently suspended, a decision cannot be made at this time on further involvement by Northern Ireland in the geological disposal programme. Future policy decisions in relation to geological disposal in Northern Ireland would be a matter for the Executive.

The Welsh Government consulted in parallel with the UK Government on a similar process for engaging with communities and is separately publishing a summary of the issues raised, and their response to the consultation. Scotland has a different policy for the long-term management of higher activity radioactive waste and is not participating in the geological disposal programme.

Alongside the policy paper, I am also publishing separately a summary of the responses to the working with communities policy consultation that took place between 25 January and 18 April 2018 and the Government's response to the key issues raised. The responses to the consultation demonstrated broad support for the approach to engaging with communities. We have accepted the feedback we received on the benefit of providing additional detail and clarity on parts of the process for working with communities, particularly in relation to the role of principal local authorities.

Alongside this, RWM is publishing a suite of documents that include detailed guidance on how they will work with communities and regional reports from its national geological screening exercise, which will provide communities with information about the geology across the country. RWM is also publishing a draft site evaluation framework document for consultation, which describes the factors that it will take into account in evaluating prospective sites for a GDF.

The response to the consultation on the draft national policy statement (NPS) for geological disposal infrastructure and the BEIS Select Committee report on the NPS will be published separately in due course, alongside a revised proposal for the NPS. Overall, the draft NPS is fit for purpose and contains the adequate levels of guidance and details needed by the developer.

[HCWS1217]

Energy Council

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): The Energy Council will take place on 19 December 2018 where the deputy permanent representative to the European Union will represent the UK.

The presidency will provide an oral report on those elements of the EU clean energy package which have already been agreed: the regulation on governance of the energy union; the directive on energy efficiency; and the directive on renewable energy. It will also provide an oral report on the state of play on those elements of the clean energy package which have yet to be agreed: the regulation on the internal market for electricity; the directive on common rules for the internal market in

electricity; the regulation on risk-preparedness in the electricity sector; and the regulation on the Agency for the Co-operation of Energy Regulators. An oral report will also be provided by the presidency on the state of play on the regulation on the Connecting Europe Facility.

The European Commission will give a presentation on the strategy for long-term EU greenhouse gas emissions reduction in accordance with the Paris agreement. This will be followed by an exchange of views.

Information will be provided by the presidency on the revision of the gas directive and by the presidency and Commission on the follow-up to the hydrogen initiative which was launched at the informal meeting of energy ministers in September 2018. The European Commission will provide information on European leadership in renewables in relation to marine energy and recent developments in the field of external energy relations. Information will be provided by the Italian delegation on the 2019 election of the next international renewable energy agency (IRENA) general director. The Romanian delegation will provide information on the work programme of the incoming Romanian presidency.

[HCWS1206]

CABINET OFFICE

Government Transparency and Accountability

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): Since 2010, the Government have been at the forefront of opening up data to allow Parliament, the public and the media to hold public bodies to account. Such online transparency is crucial to delivering value for money, cutting waste and inefficiency, and to ensuring every pound of taxpayers' money is spent in the best possible way.

In December 2017, the Prime Minister wrote to Cabinet colleagues setting out her priorities to progress the Government's transparency agenda. In support of this agenda, the Cabinet Office has created a central transparency data team to oversee transparency leads and publishers across central Government Departments.

Progress has been made by central Government Departments in publishing core transparency data. The Government also continue to look at how the range of information published by Government can be improved and made as useful as possible to the public, press and Parliament.

The following subject areas include documents and data that the Government are due to publish, or which have recently been made available.

Diversity in public appointments

In the public appointments diversity action plan published in December 2017, we published diversity data on current public appointees for the first time and committed to updating this annually. Figures for 2018 were published on 3 December 2018 on gov.uk alongside the report from the Lord Holmes review about opening up public appointments to disabled people.

Ministerial transparency

Alongside the routine quarterly ministerial data on external meetings, gifts, hospitality and overseas travel, the Government are publishing today an updated list of ministerial responsibilities.

The Government are publishing an annual update to the salaries of Ministers, which confirms the entitled and claimed salaries for ministerial posts, and reflects the ministerial pay freeze since 2010.

The Government are also making available the agenda and the meeting notes of July's co-ordination committee meeting between the Government and the DUP.

Transparency of senior officials and special advisers

Special advisers are a critical part of the team supporting Ministers. They add a political dimension to the advice and assistance available to Ministers while reinforcing the impartiality of the permanent civil service by distinguishing the source of political advice and support. The Government are currently reviewing how special advisers' terms can be made clearer and more consistent, such as by adopting a guide on parental leave rights. The Cabinet Office will today be publishing the annual list of special advisers and their costs.

Departments are also publishing routine quarterly data on gifts and hospitality received by special advisers, as well as information on special adviser meetings with senior media figures.

Alongside quarterly data on the travel, expenses and meetings of senior officials and on business appointment rules advice, the Government are also publishing the annual list of salary details for senior public officials in Departments and arm's length bodies earning £150,000 and above, reflecting the enhanced scrutiny we have put in place for these most senior posts.

Transparency in the civil service

The Government will be publishing new annual figures on gender pay differentials across the civil service. The overall civil service gender pay gap continues to narrow and we will continue to work hard to balance out wages at all levels of government.

The Government will be publishing the civil service people survey results. The people survey is an annual survey of our employees' attitudes and experiences of working in the civil service. The survey ran across 102 civil service organisations in October. A total of 302,170 people participated in the survey, an overall response rate of 66.4%.

The Government will also be publishing the 2018 fraud landscape annual report, which is part of their continuing commitment to be transparent in the way that they fight fraud in the public sector. The report highlights the progress the Government are making as part of their strategy to find more fraud in central Government, by initiatives such as raising standards and building counter-fraud capability.

The Government will also be publishing the annual state of the estate report, which gives an overview of progress made on improving the efficiency and sustainability of the Government estate during 2017-18.

Copies of the associated documents will be published on gov.uk and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1216]

Government Estate

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): I have today laid before Parliament, pursuant to section 86 of the Climate Change Act 2008, “State of the Estate in 2017-18”. This report describes the efficiency and sustainability of the Government’s civil estate and records the progress that the Government have made since the previous year. In 2017-18 the central estate reduced in size by 2% and is now 7.7 million square metres and central estate operating costs reduced by £22 million, in real terms. At the same time, vacant space across the Government estate is just 1.4%, compared to 7.1% in the private sector. The estate continued to contribute to sustainability targets set by the Government, showing a 39% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, a 55% reduction in paper use and a 40% reduction in waste since 2009-10. The report is published on an annual basis.

[HCWS1211]

DEFENCE

Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations Scrutiny Team

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of a letter that I have sent to Major General Simon Lalor, the chairman of the reserve forces and cadets associations external scrutiny team, to respond to the recommendations contained in the team’s 2018 report. I am most grateful to the team for their work.

[HCWS1210]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

25 Year Environment Plan

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove):

Draft Environment (Principles and Governance) Bill

This Government have made a commitment to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it. This landmark environment Bill—the first in over 20 years—will be an essential step towards this goal. We will support increased biodiversity and thriving plants and wildlife. We will continue to clean up our air and our water, creating a healthier environment. We will cut down unnecessary resource use and waste, reducing our impact on the world and shaping a more efficient, sustainable and competitive economy.

The draft Environment (Principles and Governance) Bill is one key aspect of this ambitious broader environment Bill that will be introduced early in the second parliamentary Session. These draft clauses will put environmental ambition and accountability at the heart of Government. It will create a framework for environmental governance, demonstrating this Government’s strong commitment

to maintain environmental protection as we leave the EU. The draft Bill applies to England and to reserved matters UK-wide.

First, these draft clauses include a set of environmental principles to guide future policy making. It also requires the Government to publish a policy statement which sets out how Ministers should interpret and apply these environmental principles. Ministers will need to have regard to this statement when developing their policies. Through this approach, we will firmly embed practical and proportionate environmental considerations in policy making.

Secondly, these draft clauses commit Government to have a plan for improving the environment and to regularly review progress on this plan, publishing a set of indicators. This creates a strong, long-term, economy-wide incentive for action on our landmark 25-year environment plan, which sets crucial changes in motion to improve the environment within a generation.

Thirdly, the draft Bill creates a new, statutory and independent environment body: the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP). This new domestic body will support and uphold standards as we leave the EU. The OEP will be able to scrutinise and advise on environmental legislation and the current 25-year environment plan; investigate complaints; and take enforcement action, including through legal proceedings if needed. Establishing the OEP will ensure that this and every future Government benefit from the expertise vested in a consistent, long-term, independent body on the environment.

In developing these draft clauses, we have drawn on the views and expertise of as many stakeholders and members of the public as possible. We held a 12-week consultation on “Environmental Principles and Governance after EU Exit” from May to August 2018. The monumental 176,746 responses we received are proof of the strength of public interest in this new legislation.

We welcome the forthcoming parliamentary pre-legislative scrutiny to ensure that these draft clauses makes the best possible contribution to protecting our environment as we leave the EU. By creating a new, independent body to hold the Government to account on environmental law, incorporating environmental principles in law, and committing the Government to making and reviewing plans to improve the environment, we are taking unprecedented steps forward to help secure a cleaner, greener future.

Water conservation report: action taken and planned by Government to encourage the conservation of water

Today I am also laying before Parliament the water conservation report. This report provides an account of the work done by the Government to encourage the conservation of water since the publication of the previous report in 2014. The report will also set out the Government’s current plans for water conservation and policy options for demand management in the future.

The report sets out the importance of demand management, including leakage, in securing resilient water supplies to respond to future challenges including climate change, population growth and the need to protect the environment better. These changes are needed alongside new water resources infrastructure, including reservoirs and water transfers, to provide a plentiful supply of water for future generations.

The report commits the Government to launch a call for evidence on setting an ambitious target for personal water consumption. Alongside this, we will hold a consultation to examine the policy options required to support the target. This will include exploratory questions around the labelling of water-using products, improving building standards, the future role of metering, and behaviour change including improving information for consumers.

The report also endorses the water companies' commitment to reducing leakage by 50% by 2050.

[HCWS1219]

Environment Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

The next EU Environment Council will take place on 20 December, in Brussels. I will be attending to represent the UK. The Scottish Minister for Rural Affairs and Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon MSP) will also attend.

On environment items, the main legislative focus will be on the partial general approach on the regulation on LIFE (the EU's financial instrument supporting environmental, nature conservation and climate action projects throughout the EU).

The primary focus for climate items will be a general approach on the regulation on CO₂ standards for heavy-duty vehicles, followed by an exchange of views on the Commission's long-term strategy for EU greenhouse gas emissions reduction.

Any other business (AOB) will include information from the presidency on the following legislative proposals:

- regulation on taxonomy;
- directive on single use plastics;
- regulation on persistent organic pollutants (POPs) (recast);
- regulation on the alignment of environmental reporting obligations;
- directive on drinking water (recast);
- regulation on CO₂ standards for cars and vans.

The Commission and presidency will then report on the following two recent international meetings:

convention on biological diversity (CBD) (Sharm EL-Sheikh, Egypt, 17 to 29 November 2018)—including an update from the UK on the outcomes of the London conference on the illegal wildlife trade held on 11 and 12 October;

COP 24 United Nations framework convention on climate change (Katowice, Poland 2 to 14 December).

The Commission will then provide information on the implementation of the EU strategy on adaptation to climate change.

Following this, there will be an update from the presidency on the outcome of two discussions held at the informal meeting of Environment and Transport Ministers (Graz, 29 and 30 October 2018):

the future of European environment policy—towards an eighth environment action programme;

Graz declaration—"Starting a new era: clean, safe and affordable mobility for Europe".

There are currently three member state led AOBs:

adoption of measures at EU level to create the conditions for discontinuing the use of environmentally problematic substances contained in plant protection products (tabled by Belgium);

intermediary sessions of the meeting of the parties to the convention on environmental impact assessment in a transboundary context (Espoo convention), and the protocol on strategic environmental assessment (SEA) (Genevea, 5 to 7 February 2019) (tabled by Lithuania);

the environmental and climate ambition of the future common agricultural policy (tabled by Germany, supported by Luxembourg).

Finally, the Romanian delegation will provide information on its upcoming presidency.

[HCWS1207]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

OSCE Ministerial Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):

Foreign and Commonwealth Office Director-General Philip Barton represented the United Kingdom at the 25th Ministerial Council meeting of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The Council was held in Milan on 6 and 7 December and hosted by Italian Foreign Minister and OSCE chairman-in-office Enzo Moavero Milanesi. The Council is the key decision-making body of the OSCE and was attended by Ministers and senior officials from across its 57 participating states. A number of new commitments were agreed at the Council, including on safety of journalists, combating violence against women, combating human trafficking (with a focus on unaccompanied children) and on control of small arms and light weapons and stockpiles of conventional ammunition. Strong focus at the Council was also maintained on the crisis in and around Ukraine.

Philip Barton's intervention at the Ministerial Council highlighted threats to sovereignty, threats of confrontation and threats to democracy and fundamental freedoms. He reaffirmed the United Kingdom's support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The United Kingdom continues to condemn Russia's destabilising actions in eastern Ukraine and their illegal annexation of Crimea. I have stated this position clearly at previous OSCE Councils, and recent events in the sea of Azov meant it was important to strengthen this message and call on Russia to release the 24 detained crew members immediately and unconditionally. The EU, US and Canada reiterated this request, with Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland directly challenging Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Russia's violations of international law. The UK co-sponsored a side event hosted by Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin on the militarisation in Crimea and the sea of Azov. Barton discussed with other officials how best to promote peace and stability in Ukraine and met FM Klimkin to highlight the UK's support for Ukraine. The UK is the second largest contributor of secondees to the OSCE special monitoring mission to Ukraine, with 68 UK citizens currently seconded, which plays a crucial role in monitoring the security situation. Following an international recruitment competition a UK secondee joined the mission this autumn as deputy-chief monitor.

The UK national statement also highlighted the need to work through the OSCE to resolve protracted conflicts. In Milan, Barton and other “Friends of Georgia” met Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani to express support for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Philip Barton also expressed strong support for the OSCE “Human Dimension”, underlining the importance of implementation of OSCE commitments on protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms for security and stability across the OSCE region.

In the Human Dimension there was significant progress at the Council on media freedom, with a consensus decision of all 57 countries addressing the role of the OSCE with respect to safety of journalists. The decision reaffirms the importance of free media and of protecting the safety of journalists, recognises the increased and evolving risks to which journalists are exposed and calls on all OSCE states to condemn unequivocally attacks and violence against journalists and take effective measures to end impunity for such crimes. This is the first new OSCE human rights commitment since 2014 and negotiations were led by the UK ambassador as chair of the OSCE Human Dimension Committee. OSCE representative on freedom of the media Harlem Desir welcomed the decision as a strong signal of support to journalists exposed to difficult conditions in the OSCE region and praised the UK role in helping to deliver it. The result is both timely and in line with the Foreign Secretary’s decision to raise the profile of media freedom as a UK policy priority.

In the OSCE’s political-military dimension, the UK, along with NATO allies, repeated calls for modernisation of the Vienna document, an instrument increasing transparency of military activities. Barton underscored the value of the structured dialogue as a confidence building process aimed at reducing risk and rebuilding trust. He regretted the Ministerial Council’s failure to agree a decision on risk reduction.

The OSCE is an important regional organisation charged with enhancing security and co-operation from Vancouver to Vladivostok, with a network of field operations in western Balkans, central Asia and the Caucasus. An important element in the international rules-based order, the OSCE’s substantial body of commitments extends across its comprehensive security remit. The UK welcomes the progress made in Milan to reaffirm the role played by the OSCE in this regard.

[HCWS1209]

Daesh

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The global coalition against Daesh has continued to make significant progress in recent months. Since counter-Daesh military operations began, the coalition and its partners in Syria and Iraq have recaptured the vast majority of Daesh territory.

Daesh now remain in control only of a small pocket of territory in eastern Syria. Progress has been made towards forcing Daesh out of Hajin town; the RAF and coalition forces are helping to consolidate contested areas and push out towards outlying Daesh positions.

In Iraq, we are proud to have played a leading role in supporting Iraqi security forces to liberate their country a year ago. A new Government of Iraq have now been formed following the elections in May. I congratulate President Saleh and Prime Minister Abdul Mehdi. We look forward to working with them and their Government.

In Syria, the conflict has entered its eighth year. Our ongoing counter-Daesh efforts there, while successful, are part of a wider context of a brutal civil war. We are playing our part in alleviating humanitarian suffering across Syria. We also continue to push for a negotiated settlement that ends the conflict and protects all Syrians. To that end, we remain committed to supporting the UN-led Geneva process.

As I have previously made clear to the House, the Government are prepared for Daesh to evolve and change its form as it loses territory. Over the past year, we have seen that beginning to take place. Daesh is no longer operating in the open. It is beginning to transition to a clandestine network.

Much remains to be done in the global campaign against Daesh and we must not lose sight of the threat from Daesh. This Government will continue to do what is necessary to protect the British people and our allies and partners. I will provide an oral update on our counter-Daesh efforts in the new year.

[HCWS1215]

Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I wish to inform the House that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, together with the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence, are today publishing the 2018 annual report on progress against the UK’s fourth national action plan on women, peace and security.

Published on 18 January 2018, the national action plan sets out the Government’s objectives on the women, peace and security agenda for the period 2018-22. This is the UK Government strategy for how we will meet our women, peace and security commitments under UN Security Council resolution 1325 to reduce the impact of conflict on women and girls and to promote their inclusion in conflict resolution and in building peace and security.

The report published today outlines our progress against the national action plan over the last 12 months, including our work in our nine focus countries of Afghanistan, Burma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia and Syria. It is centred around seven strategic outcomes where we expect to see progress over the five year duration of the NAP.

Electronic copies of the annual report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and it is available on gov.uk.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-12-19/HCWS1208/>.

[HCWS1208]

HOME DEPARTMENT

College of Policing

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The 2017-18 annual report and accounts for the College of Policing (HC 1767) is being laid before the House today and published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS1212]

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): On 25 April 2018 the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse published its interim report [HC 954]. I am pleased to announce that the Government are today publishing their response [Cm 9756].

Tackling the horrors of child sexual abuse is a priority for this Government. I warmly welcome the work of the inquiry in helping us to understand what has gone wrong in the past and learn lessons for the future. The interim report is a significant step in that process. We have responded to all the recommendations directed at Government. These cover: the child migration programme; the civil and criminal justice systems; the health sector; our international obligations; the police; children's homes; disclosure and barring; and support for victims and survivors.

I am particularly pleased to announce that the Government will establish a scheme to ensure that former child migrants receive a payment as soon as possible in recognition of the fundamentally flawed nature of the historic child migration policy.

I would like to pay tribute to all the victims and survivors who have come forward to share their experiences with the inquiry and without whom the inquiry's work would not be possible.

A copy of the Government's response will be available on gov.uk and copies will also be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS1213]

JUSTICE

EU Documents and Evidence Regulations

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Government have decided to opt into the amendment to the EU service regulation but not at this stage to the amendment to the EU taking of evidence regulation.

The Government recognise that both regulations underpin the effective operation of the EU civil judicial co-operation framework by providing rules that enable documents to be transmitted between and served in other member states and that enable evidence to be obtained from witnesses in one member state for use in proceedings in another member state.

The decision on whether to opt into these proposals was made in the context of the UK's objective to seek a mutually beneficial arrangement for the continuation of an effective civil judicial co-operation framework as the UK leaves the EU.

The Government are conscious also that there are a number of issues in both proposals that will need to be resolved during the negotiations, not least the question of the expense of the proposed system to digitise the means of transmission and communication under both regulations. It recognises that the time is right to consider updating both regulations to facilitate the greater use of IT but the exact way of doing that needs to be examined further.

While the Government are content to opt into the proposal regarding the service regulation, they decided that their concerns with the revised taking of evidence regulation proposal need to be resolved before the UK can consider participating in that proposal. In particular, the Government are concerned about the proposal's removal of the requirement of voluntary participation of witnesses giving direct evidence to a court of a different member state, and the resulting implication that coercive measures could be used in such circumstances.

Notwithstanding the opt-in decision relating to taking of evidence, the UK Government consider it is in the interests of the UK to participate in negotiations on the amendment of both regulations.

In the event of the negotiations leading to a successful resolution of the Government's concerns, and should the taking of evidence proposal be adopted during the proposed implementation period, the UK may decide to seek a post-adoption opt-in at that point.

[HCWS1218]

Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Ministry of Justice is today publishing a consultation paper: Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017 Implementing the Act. The paper seeks views on the Department's proposals for bringing the Act into force with the object of implementing the Act as smoothly and successfully as practicable. The consultation period will be eight weeks. The consultation paper is available free of charge on gov.uk.

[HCWS1214]

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