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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 20 December 2018

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

EU Trade Agreements

1. **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What estimate he has made of the number of trade agreements that the UK is party to as a result of its membership of the EU that would be rolled over on exit day in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal. [908317]

6. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Which countries that the EU has a trade agreement with have notified his Department of restrictions on their ability to offer the same terms in a future trade agreement with the UK. [908324]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): We will replicate existing EU free trade agreements and their preferential effects with partner countries as far as possible, while making the technical changes needed to ensure that agreements can operate in a bilateral context. We will inform Parliament and the public when agreements have been signed.

Tom Brake: First, I wish you, Mr Speaker, other Members and staff a very merry Christmas.

I would like to do something that I do not often do: thank the Secretary of State, his Ministers and his staff for organising a very helpful series of all-party briefings to Members. They are very welcome and informative.

The Secretary of State will know that as a result of our EU membership, we have 35 free trade agreements in place, 48 partly in place, 22 pending, and 100 sectoral arrangements with the US that go beyond World Trade Organisation rules. I would like to hear the Secretary of State say precisely when he expects all those to be rolled over.

Dr Fox: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. It has been extremely useful to have been able to raise, across the House, the understanding of complex trade issues that have not always been within the UK Government's remit in recent years.

As the right hon. Gentleman rightly says, there are a number of agreements. My Department is responsible for some of them, some are the responsibility of the Department for International Development, and some are the responsibility of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—they cut right across the whole Government. We are making very good progress across a whole range of them. Of course, we have now initialised the first of those major trade agreements, with Switzerland, which is responsible for almost a fifth of the total trade within those agreements. Others will follow. The discussions are very often commercially quite sensitive, so we will inform the House when we have signed agreements, and not before.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Mr Speaker, like the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), I wish you, the staff, Ministers and everybody else a merry Christmas and a happy new year. Have any countries indicated a preference for the UK delaying Brexit without a deal?

Dr Fox: Not directly in the discussions that I have had with other countries, but there is clearly a desire to have an agreement, so that there is time during the transition of these agreements before they become a more bespoke relationship. The two-year implementation period set out in the Government's proposals would enable that, so that is clearly preferable for both sides.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that if we leave with no deal, the sun will still rise on 30 March, Britain will remain a premier global trading nation and the current booms in exports and inward investment are set to continue?

Dr Fox: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his usual patriotic and optimistic tone. He is right that the country is in the middle of an export boom; our exports are at an all-time high. In the first six months of the year, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the United Kingdom was second only to China in inward investment. It is truly a very positive picture, and we will be able to build on that, whatever our relationship with the European Union.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): On behalf of our Front Benchers, may I extend Christmas greetings, particularly to the Secretary of State and his team? Mr Speaker, in Prayers this morning, your chaplain referred to the perseverance of the wise men; I think we all need that.

What assessment has the Secretary of State made of potential trade partners being unwilling to conclude new roll-over agreements with the UK because of most favoured nation clauses in agreements that they have concluded with other countries, to which they are unwilling to give the same trade preferences as they do to the EU? I am thinking of countries such as Singapore, which might be unwilling to give other Trans-Pacific Partnership countries the same access to their telecoms market that the EU has enjoyed.

Dr Fox: We discuss matters with other countries on a case-by-case basis. None of them has said to us that they do not want to continue to have an agreement with the United Kingdom; that is entirely understandable, as

we are the world's fifth biggest economy. Where we are able to translate elements into a bilateral context, we are doing so. We are working through those agreements. We are making good progress, and I will report to the House as and when each of them is signed.

WTO: Food Security and Agriculture

2. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with members of the WTO on global (a) food security and (b) agricultural trade. [908319]

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): I add my Christmas wishes to you, Mr Speaker.

Both issues have been covered recently in discussions with World Trade Organisation members. For example, agricultural global value chains were considered at the recent G20 trade and investment working group. As a supporter of the rules-based multilateral trading system, we believe that WTO members must continually look for ways of strengthening the system.

Kerry McCarthy: I understand that a number of important WTO member states have objected to the UK and EU splitting tariff rate quotas post Brexit. At the end of October, the Secretary of State announced that the UK would be entering into general agreement on tariffs and trade negotiations. Is that another illustration of the fact that we cannot unilaterally negotiate trading arrangements post Brexit with other countries, and that it requires agreement? It looks like it will be an incredibly lengthy and tortuous process that will not have quick results.

George Hollingbery: The hon. Lady will know that the vast majority of nations represented in the WTO accepted the deposit of our schedules. Some did not and we are entering article 28 negotiations with them, as is completely normal. We can trade on those schedules as deposited until then—the European Union has been trading on uncertified schedules since 1995, so it should not impede our trade. Yes, negotiations will continue to agree those tariff rate quotas.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): You have had a bit of a week, Mr Speaker—we all have. May I take this opportunity to wish you a very restful Christmas and a happy new year?

Does the Department for International Trade accept that what one needs for international trade is willing buyers and sellers? Has the Department made any estimate of how much lower food prices will be to British consumers if we leave the European Union without the withdrawal agreement?

George Hollingbery: The situation after a hard Brexit—is a no-deal Brexit—is a complex one and will rely on a large number of factors. Some Government policies have yet to be absolutely finalised. The pricing of goods in the UK market, particularly for food, is regarded as extremely sensitive, as indeed are the incomes and livelihoods of farmers throughout the UK who rely on selling those products.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

The memo published by the European Commission yesterday was clear that, if the UK leaves with no deal and ends up trading on WTO terms, customs declarations and other checks will be required on exports into the EU. Have the Government estimated how much that will cost UK business?

George Hollingbery: The Prime Minister has brought back a deal from Brussels. I believe it is the right deal for this country. If it is put in place, what the hon. Gentleman describes will plainly not be an issue.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Happy Christmas to you from Taunton Deane, Mr Speaker. [Interruption.] I thought I would get that in.

The EU is the largest trading partner for agriculture and food for this country and, under our relationship with the EU, agriculture has blossomed. Margins are very tight. Will the Minister give assurances that, in the worst-case scenario, agriculture will not suffer under WTO rules? In the best-case scenario, does he agree that accepting the deal is by far the best option for our farmers?

George Hollingbery: I apologise, Mr Speaker—I was not listening carefully to the question. I am told by my Front-Bench colleagues that the answer is yes and yes.

Mr Speaker: I think we appreciate the Minister's candour. There was no dissembling there, and we thank him for that.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Merry Christmas to everybody.

Will the Minister confirm that any future trade agreements will not undermine current environmental and animal welfare standards?

George Hollingbery: On this occasion I was listening and have the question in my mind. I deeply apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow)—she is listed as having another question.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has repeatedly made it clear in the House that we will not lower our standards in pursuit of free trade agreements. To reassure the hon. Gentleman, apart from anything else it would be business madness to do so. A lot of our exporters rely on Britain's reputation abroad for quality, and undermining it would simply not work. Further, large numbers of Labour Members did not vote for the comprehensive economic and trade agreement, which contained specific chapters—chapters 5, 23 and 24—that pursued exactly what he wants. Labour Front Benchers did not support it.

Free Trade Agreements

3. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What steps he is taking to consult on potential new free trade agreements. [908320]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): This year the Department for International Trade ran four public consultations on potential UK free trade agreement negotiations with the US, Australia and New Zealand,

and on potential accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership—otherwise known, snappily, as the CPTPP. The insights gained from our consultations will inform our overall approach and our stakeholder engagement plans during these potential free trade agreement negotiations.

Kevin Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership represents one of the most exciting opportunities for the UK post Brexit. Can he confirm that he has consulted with the necessary stakeholders and partners to ensure that we can begin talks on our country's accession the moment we leave the European Union?

Dr Fox: Ministers have been engaging with all 11 CPTPP members. I have recently spoken to a number of Ministers, including from Singapore, Mexico, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan, and the positive response to our engagement has been demonstrated by the supportive comments from some of the leaders of those countries—including Prime Minister Abe of Japan and Prime Minister Morrison of Australia—all of whom are very keen, as Prime Minister Abe said, to welcome Britain with open arms as soon as possible.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): But isn't the problem for the Secretary of State that these potential new free trade agreements will not be concludable until we know what the UK's trade relationship with the EU is? Does he not now have to admit that it is not possible, realistically, to sign or conclude free trade agreements with all those other countries, because it will be several years—maybe two, three or more—before we conclude our trade arrangement with the EU?

Dr Fox: Of course, the best thing that any of us could do is ensure that we have an agreement as soon as possible with the European Union, which Members of this House will be able to contribute to. Of course, if the House decides that we are not to come to an agreement with the European Union, there will be adverse consequences.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It has been very difficult for the International Trade Committee to scrutinise progress in the roll-over of current trade agreements because of the sensitivity of the negotiations. Will my right hon. Friend look urgently into establishing a confidential Commons Committee that has access to restricted negotiating documents, to ensure proper scrutiny of any talks over new free trade agreements?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, which she has also raised in the Committee. The Government are looking at ways in which we can improve scrutiny without undermining the confidential nature of the discussions that we have. I will want to discuss the issues with the Opposition as well to see whether we can have a robust system that is also secure. That would be to the benefit of the whole House.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): A merry Christmas from Feltham and Heston to you, Mr Speaker and to everybody else.

This week, I attended an interesting seminar by Global Policy Insights on trade with the Commonwealth pre and post Brexit. The Commonwealth accounted for 8.9% of UK exports a couple of years ago—roughly the same as UK exports to Germany. Could the Secretary of State update the House on what discussions his Department is having with Commonwealth nations on the potential of free trade agreements and on what success he is having?

Dr Fox: The hon. Lady raises an important point. Of course, we have a number of agreements already with a number of Commonwealth countries and groups of Commonwealth countries, and we are close to signing one, which we will announce to the House shortly. However, we are also concerned about the level of intra-Commonwealth trade and how we can use that very large population, often with common legal rules, to enhance it. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in London, we set out our plans for a trade audit tool to help improve it, and we have had very positive engagement on that. There is tremendous opportunity inside the Commonwealth to allow countries to trade their way out of poverty, and we intend to ensure that that is made possible.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It is vital to forbear from agreeing a price before negotiations begin and to maintain the ability to walk away, isn't it?

Dr Fox: Self-evidently.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Last year, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research told us that leaving the single market would result in a loss of trade of between 22% and 30%, depending on the nature of the Brexit. It also told us that concluding deals with the BRIC countries and the main English-speaking economies would result in an increase in trade of 2% and less than 3% respectively. So although I wish the Secretary of State well in his future negotiations, is it not time to concede that there is no number of new free trade agreements or trade deals he can strike that can possibly compensate for the loss of trade with the European Union?

Dr Fox: First, it depends on our level of access to the European market. That is why the Government have put forward proposals to maximise our access to a European trade area. However, it also depends on growth in other markets and, as the International Monetary Fund has said, in the next five years 90% of global growth will be outside continental Europe. That is where the opportunities will be, and that is where Britain needs to be, too.

Leaving the EU: Exports

4. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What proportion of his Department's staff are supporting businesses that export to the EU in preparation for the UK leaving the EU. [908321]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, the staff and all Members.

We have a dedicated overseas European network of 253 staff promoting exports and investment. At home, we have sector and regional teams equally dedicated to the promotion of the UK economic interest. Every one of the 3,920 people in DIT, whatever their specific function, acts to support exports from Scotland and the rest of this United Kingdom.

Gavin Newlands: I am delighted to hear it. Regardless of whether the disastrous agreement that the Government have reached with the EU comes into force, it is indisputable that unless we stay in the single market and the customs union, the UK will become a third country in its EU trade relations. Has the Minister included in the export strategy a position on whether businesses will have to get economic operator registration and identification—EORI—numbers if they want to export to the EU, our largest marketplace by far?

Graham Stuart: Of course, it is important to remember that for Scotland, the rest of the United Kingdom is its largest marketplace by far. More than 60% of trade from Scotland goes to the rest of the United Kingdom, whereas just 17% goes to the entirety of the rest of the EU. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman lean on his Front Benchers and try to ensure that his party, as the other Opposition parties should do, joins the Government in getting a deal with the EU that makes sure that Scottish exporters and those in rest of the country can have the best deal possible.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Mr Speaker, I wish you a happy Christmas and a calmer recess.

I congratulate the three wise men on the Front Bench on the huge effort in exporting UK plc. However, it is my understanding that exports account for only about 30% of our GDP, compared with 47% in Germany. Where do they think the greatest opportunities are, within or outside Europe, to narrow that gap and export more to the rest of the world?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for that entirely useful question, which highlights the importance of increasing exports. As a percentage of GDP, our exports have been in the 20s seemingly for time immemorial. We have got the figure over 30% and we have set a target of reaching 35%. The whole country needs to engage in this more. We think that there are more companies that could export and do not than there are companies that can and do. That is why the Department has been set up and why we are dedicated to trying to increase that percentage. We want to improve performance in all parts of the United Kingdom. For example, in Scotland, exports constitute just over 20% of GDP, whereas the figure is more than 30% in the United Kingdom overall.

Future Trade Agreements

5. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to ensure that future trade agreements deliver economic benefits to all constituent nations and regions of the UK; and if he will he make a statement. [908322]

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): This Government are committed to working closely with all nations and regions to deliver a future trade

policy that works for the whole of the UK, and we will continue to engage with the devolved Administrations. I visited Cardiff on 15 October, where I discussed this topic with Assembly Members. The Board of Trade will also ensure that the benefits of free trade are spread throughout the UK.

Chris Elmore: A very merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. However, will he elaborate on his work with the Welsh Government to ensure that when trade agreements are made, regional investment happens across the south Wales valleys, north Wales and mid Wales and benefits the whole of Wales rather than focusing, for example, on cities, so that valley communities like mine can really benefit from the economic development that comes from trade agreements?

George Hollingbery: We are currently working on a concordat with the Welsh Government, through which they can contribute directly to the process for free trade agreements. I would expect them to make those points to us and tell us where the industries that matter to them are. We can therefore construct our free trade policies around that input.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Increased trade inevitably leads to more business for our major ports, such as Immingham in my constituency. Does the Minister agree that free trade zones and free ports are worthy of serious consideration post-Brexit?

George Hollingbery: All I can say at the moment is that anything that can be done to increase free trade in the future should be looked at. Indeed, free ports have been looked at and I know that my hon. Friend has been a great champion of the idea. We will continue those discussions.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Supporting our regional economies through trade agreements is about more than just growing exports and opening markets to our producers; trade agreements should also be used to unlock and encourage investment across the UK. A recent report by the Centre for Towns shows that in 2017 nearly 60% of foreign direct investment went to the UK's biggest cities, that 70% of that went to London, and that towns and communities elsewhere have seen FDI decline or remain flat. When will the Government listen to Labour and take the action needed to rebalance the economy and attract FDI right across the country?

George Hollingbery: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and, indeed, the whole Labour Front-Bench team for our associations and discussions during the year, which have, on the whole, been friendly and constructive.

The hon. Lady will be glad to hear that the Government absolutely understand the issue. Our foreign direct investment programme has begun to look at pre-packaging offers out in the regions, particularly in smaller towns, which quite a lot of major potential investors will not know of—they will not know about the skillsets there or about the availability of land and so on. They have been pre-packed into larger blocks so that foreign direct

investors can be presented with them as places where they can take their investment outside London and the major cities.

Topical Questions

T1. [908347] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): My Department is responsible for foreign and outward direct investment, establishing an independent trade policy, and export promotion. I am pleased to announce that this morning UK Export Finance has provided a loan of £27.9 million, under its direct lending facility, to support UK water and waste specialists Bluewater Bio to upgrade water treatment in Bahrain. This announcement shows the continuing demand for British expertise across the globe.

Dr Huq: Constituents have written to me to say that we should sit over Christmas to get a meaningful deal. That is not going to happen, so let me wish you a very good one, Mr Speaker.

Given the pictures of the Prime Minister with the Crown Prince of Saudi after Khashoggi was chopped into pieces, and our Government lavishing praise on Bangladesh, a country whose status has recently been downgraded from democracy to autocracy by several human rights non-governmental organisations—not to mention Trump stating that we drop what he calls “unjustified” food and agricultural standards before signing a UK-US trade deal—has not our desperation for bilateral post-Brexit trade blinded us to all ethical and moral considerations before the ink has dried on a single deal?

Dr Fox: Absolutely not. This country takes very seriously its international human rights and ethical responsibilities. In fact, I would go so far as to say that, rather than being an apologist, the United Kingdom is a great supporter and champion of those very values globally.

T2. [908348] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am sure you will join me in condemning the mindless thug who threw a bottle at man of the match Dele Alli last night. I will indicate the 2:0 score so that you do not have to read my lips.

With UK exports to Israel up 30%, what steps will my right hon. Friend take to ensure that we increase trade with Israel as we move forward outside the European Union?

Dr Fox: Israel is a very important trade partner for the United Kingdom, and our bilateral co-operation has increased. When I met Prime Minister Netanyahu a few weeks ago, we agreed to have a bilateral trade and investment conference in 2019, to increase those relations as far as possible.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and to all staff and all Members.

Chambers of commerce across the country contribute to export success through the brilliant advice they deliver all year round. Their direct local knowledge and expertise is much better than the signposting on any website that the Secretary of State might care to mention. In the spirit of the festive season, will he take this opportunity to guarantee the renewal of the contract with the British Chambers of Commerce for the delivery of export advice?

Dr Fox: We constantly review the mechanisms by which we can give that advice. One of the things that came across clearly from our consultation on the export strategy was that businesses were looking for peer information rather than information from higher sources. That is why the Government have taken on extra staff for our online community for businesses, so that they can get real-time information from similar businesses.

T4. [908353] **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): People in Japan, Singapore and China are getting a taste of Somerset, because Sheppy’s cider from my constituency of Taunton Deane is increasingly being exported to those countries, which is really exciting. Can the Secretary of State give us some news about the work we are doing with China on potential trade and investment?

Dr Fox: As part of the UK-China joint trade and investment review announced in January 2018, officials of both countries took part in the third series of technical discussions in Beijing in November. I am happy for my team to be promoting the benefits of Sheppy’s, but I want them to ensure that people also enjoy the wonderful taste of Thatchers, made in North Somerset.

T3. [908349] **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): According to the north-east chamber of commerce, businesses in the north-east are concerned about the future of international trade deals, and especially about rules of origin, after March next year. What can the Minister say to reassure our north-east businesses?

Dr Fox: That the House of Commons should vote for the Government’s proposal, which will deal with those very issues, to ensure that we get continuity of trade.

T5. [908354] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): I wish you, Mr Speaker, the staff of the House and all colleagues a very happy Christmas.

What early assessment has my right hon. Friend made of UK exports in this festive period?

Dr Fox: British business continues to export strongly. For example, we are working with companies such as Hawkins & Brimble to maximise global retail opportunities. I am pleased to say that, thanks to help from the Department, the business will be lining the shelves of 300 stores in Canada and the United States with its range of male grooming products—a subject that I know is close to my hon. Friend’s heart—after securing £500,000 of contracts

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): How many freedom of information requests has the Secretary of State’s Department withheld on grounds of cost?

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): I am not aware of the exact statistic for cost, but I will happily admit to the House that our record on freedom of information requests in the past has not been good enough. However, a great deal of effort has been put into trying to ensure that we respond on time, and in the latest quarterly report from only yesterday we managed to reach 90%, which is what we were trying to achieve. If the hon. Gentleman wishes, I will happily write to him with an answer.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The UK Israel Tech Hub estimates that the tech partnerships that it has created have an economic impact on the UK of around £800 million. What can we do to continue to grow this mutually beneficial relationship?

Dr Fox: The Tech Hub has been a huge success and a great example of the sort of model that we should be looking at, but we hope to be able to expand that relationship through the trade and investment conference that we will hold in 2019, which will be a celebration not only of our record of trade with Israel, but of the future of our trade with Israel.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Sheep farmers in my constituency export 92% of their produce to Europe and beyond, but have absolutely no idea what is going to happen to their product after 29 March next year. What comfort can the Secretary of State give those sheep farmers to allow them to enjoy a happy Christmas?

Dr Fox: Were there to be no deal, that would be a problem for the export of sheepmeat to Europe, so there is one clear answer available to the right hon. Gentleman, which is to support the Government's proposal, which will enable his constituents to get the market assuredness that they want.

May I finish by wishing you, Mr Speaker, the Members of the House and particularly the staff of the House of Commons a very happy Christmas? Earlier the shadow Secretary of State mentioned the words about the wise men that we heard in Prayers this morning. We would do well to remember that if the wise men had not been carrying cross-border commodities of gold, frankincense and myrrh, we might not be getting the same messages we get today.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Secretary of State for his characteristic courtesy.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

English Language Skills: Employability

1. **Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to support women with limited English language skills to improve their employability.

[908332]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): The Government Equalities Office is considering how best to deliver new funded programmes for people

who face barriers to getting into work for the first time. We are also working with the Learning and Work Institute to develop best practice guidance on building effective local networks and partnerships.

Vicky Ford: During the Afghanistan war, many local people put their lives at risk by using their language skills to help our military, and some of those families were evacuated to Chelmsford. The English for Women project helped some of those women, and it now supports women of more than 30 nationalities to become involved in their communities, and to improve their employability. Will my right hon. Friend thank all those volunteers at the English for Women project in Chelmsford, and suggest ways to help them to network with likeminded organisations across the country?

Anne Milton: I certainly join my hon. Friend in thanking all volunteers at English for Women, which is a remarkable project. Such Government-funded programmes have supported more than 73,000 isolated adults—most of whom are women—to improve their English language skills, and, as my hon. Friend says, such support is about building confidence, people's ability to get into good jobs, and integration in local communities.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): A merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, all the staff, and the police and security services who keep us safe.

Newcastle benefits from many volunteers and charitable organisations such as the Angelou Centre, the West End Women and Girls centre, and the West End Refugee Service, which support women to learn English and improve their employability. There is, however, a lack of central Government funding for adult and lifelong education. Will the Minister speak to the Education Secretary about the importance of investment in adult education, particularly for isolated and vulnerable women, and will she meet me and the all-party group for adult education, which I chair, to discuss how we can make progress in that vital area?

Anne Milton: I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady at any time because, as she rightly says, this is a vital area. We are spending £1.5 billion on adult education, some of which has been devolved to combined authorities and also delegated to London. It will be interesting to see how those different areas best use that money in education—in a way, they are like pilot schemes. I have also seen extremely innovative projects that work with women with children, and help them to help their children with school tests and such things, as a way of improving their own English. Those are often women who would not otherwise have come forward.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What are the Government doing to support women in their communities who are isolated as a result of poor English language skills?

Anne Milton: I have commented on the English language courses we are running, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government also has a big programme. Integration is uppermost in our minds at the moment, and the first step towards integrating people and helping them to gain confidence is for them to have good English language skills.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I offer best wishes for a merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and to everyone in the House, from me as the Member of Parliament for Strangford, and from all my Strangford constituents who are very much involved in these issues.

Will the Minister outline whether funding is available for already trained teachers to be trained in either TESOL, the teaching of English to speakers of other languages, or CELTA, the certificate in teaching English to speakers of other languages, to teach English within communities and community centres?

Anne Milton: I will have to get back to the hon. Gentleman to ensure that I give him a precise answer. We are undertaking a trial this year and fully funding adults who earn less than the pay threshold of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission—just under £16,000. Encouraging women to get on English language courses and improve their skills is an important area to focus on. We are talking about women who are just in employment and on very low wages and who, of course, face significant difficulties if they lose their jobs—their progress will be limited by that.

Vulnerable Women: Return to Work

2. **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): When the Government plan to launch the fund to support vulnerable women who want to return to work.

[908333]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): Last month, I announced the next phase of our returners programme—£500,000 targeted at those with additional barriers to participating in the labour market, including those who speak little English, people with disabilities, and those who are homeless or have been victims of domestic abuse.

Mr Sweeney: Does the Minister think that the fund is resourced sufficiently to help with the huge roll-out of universal credit, which disproportionately impacts on women? That is especially so in my constituency of Glasgow North East, which will have the highest number of universal credit claimants in Scotland: more than 16,000. It is vital that we have a targeted programme to assist women, who will be disproportionately affected. Will the Minister lobby hard for extra resources to focus on the women worst affected by the roll-out of universal credit?

Penny Mordaunt: Our returners programme is not designed to do what the hon. Gentleman has asked; it is a distinct fund. We have also announced some additional money to support women facing the greatest barriers to getting into the labour market. We should absolutely be talking to every Government Department, including the Department for Work and Pensions, about universal credit and other policies, to ensure that they are supporting women.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many women, and how many men, does my right hon. Friend expect the returners fund to support?

Penny Mordaunt: The fund is just one piece of work that the Government are doing, but it is focused primarily on women. However, my hon. Friend raises an important point. If he is aware of my recent speech at Bright Blue,

he will know that we are also very focused on addressing the barriers that prevent men from taking up the roles that they would wish to do—being prime carers for their children, for example. We are also looking at those issues, and my hon. Friend is right to raise them.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I recently met a group of Somali women in my constituency who are very concerned about the wellbeing and employment of Somali women in our community. They have faced all sorts of barriers, and those barriers appear to be getting worse; the women are now identifying a rise in depression. Will the Minister write to me explaining how the fund she is launching will be able to contribute to the support that the women in my constituency need, so that they can access some desperately needed resources?

Penny Mordaunt: Absolutely. I will happily write to the hon. Lady with further details about what we and others in the Government are doing. She is absolutely right to point to this issue. White women have an employment rate of 73.3%; that of women of Bangladeshi ethnicity, for example, is just 32.8%. Bringing my Department into the Cabinet Office, co-located with the race disparity unit, will help greatly in addressing the multiple disadvantages that people face.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I wish you, Mr Speaker, all hon. Members and everyone across my constituency a merry Christmas.

The Minister has stated that she hopes that the returners fund will help women trapped in zero-hours contracts and low paid and low skilled work. Will she speak to her colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions to ask for a review of how universal credit, in-work conditionality and sanctions are damaging the prospects of low paid women?

Penny Mordaunt: It will come as no surprise to the hon. Lady that I am already speaking to the Department for Work and Pensions about a whole raft of issues. We need to focus much more on broadening the work of the Government Equalities Office towards addressing the issues of low paid women. Women with low pay will often still be in low paid work a decade later. We need to look at the barriers to their having the career progression and the training that they want, while enabling them to cope with all the other things that women do.

Disabled People: Elections

3. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support more disabled people to stand for election.

[908336]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): We are undertaking a programme of work with disability organisations to help political parties better support disabled candidates. In the meantime, to ensure that support is in place for the local elections next year, we have launched the £250,000 EnAble fund, which is an interim fund to support disabled candidates.

Damien Moore: In May, my right hon. Friend made a commitment to work with political parties to help support disabled candidates. Can she give a further update on how that work is going?

Penny Mordaunt: We are making good progress. We have met a number of political parties and disability organisations, including Disability Rights UK and Mencap, and those meetings will continue into the new year. It is very important that political parties support all candidates; by sharing good practice and doing this work in a much more methodical way, I hope that all political parties will be able to do so in the coming years.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Secretary of State is absolutely right that political parties must play their part in allowing more people with disabilities to run for office. During the Ask Her To Stand campaign, Members took it upon themselves to invite women into the House to be able to understand its functions. Does she think that it could be an option to consider inviting disabled constituents into this place, as well as council chambers and devolved Administrations, so that Parliament can become more open? People could then get a better understanding of this place and not think of it as some sort of isolated institution that they could never possibly serve in.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. We should be doing that, and I encourage all political parties to do so. People who support various political parties are looking at replicating organisations such as Women2Win, which we have in the Conservative party, and at what further support and schemes can be put in place to encourage people from a whole range of backgrounds and situations to be able to run for office. We need to make the Chamber a much more diverse place.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): We do not just want disabled people to stand for election; we want them to be elected to this place, yet this workplace here takes so little account of disabled people's needs. Would it not be better to have more predictable working hours and voting patterns, similar to practices in other Parliaments, to encourage more disabled people to stand for election and to help all Members with caring responsibilities?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I remember previous conversations I have had with you, Mr Speaker, in a former role I held. It is not just the practice here; it is actually the fabric of the building. With the refurbishments, we have an opportunity to ensure that anyone who has the talents to come and work here is able to do so. I know that hon. Members, including some who are sitting on the Government Front Bench today, have disabled people working in their constituency offices very successfully, but when they have tried to allow people to work in this building, it has proved impossible.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Merry Christmas to all, when it comes. I would particularly like to thank you, Mr Speaker, on behalf of the all-party group for disability, for expanding your internship programme to ensure that people with disabilities gain experience of working in

this House and overcome barriers to politics. What more can be done to use this type of excellent leadership to promote internships for people with disabilities internationally?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is right to pay tribute to Mr Speaker for the internship programme, which has been very successful and is very much appreciated. I hold the Women and Equalities brief alongside my role in the Department for International Development. That provides an opportunity, because there is huge synergy between what we in the UK are doing to meet our own global goals and meeting our responsibility to the developing world. The work initiated by the global disability summit is gathering huge pace and momentum around the world to enable other countries, whether through new legislation or sharing best practice and ideas, to make progress for their own disabled communities.

Breast Cancer Screening Programme

5. **Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab):** What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the adequacy of the breast cancer screening programme. [908338]

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinagen): Our breast cancer screening programme provides a world-leading service, inviting more than 2.5 million women for a test each year, detecting cancer earlier and saving lives.

Mohammad Yasin: The independent breast screening review found that a lack of clarity over when women should receive their invitations had caused the error that resulted in 67,000 women not being invited to their final breast screening. Will the Government implement the review's recommendations and introduce guidance to clarify the ages at which women should be invited for routine screening?

Caroline Dinagen: The hon. Gentleman is right. The review found that the breast screening incident that was made public in May had arisen because of a lack of alignment between the national service specification and the way in which the programme was being run in practice. As a result, NHS England has announced a comprehensive review of cancer screening programmes, to be undertaken by Professor Sir Mike Richards. We will take account of the findings of both that review and our own breast screening review to ensure that changes improve the whole system.

Shared Parental Leave

6. **Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to promote the take-up of shared parental leave to help tackle the gender pay gap. [908340]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Earlier this year, we ran a £1.5 million campaign to promote awareness and the take-up of shared parental leave and pay. We are currently evaluating the scheme, looking at

take-up and the barriers to it and at how the scheme is being used in practice. We expect to publish our findings next summer.

Luke Hall: I thank the Minister for the work that is already being done. Does she agree that it is important to recognise, as part of that work, that cultural change is required to increase the take-up of shared parental leave? That will include raising awareness, challenging stereotypes and ensuring that we, as community leaders, have a role and are engaged with it.

Kelly Tolhurst: Given that 33% of people say that mothers of pre-school children should stay at home and only 7% say that they should be in full-time work, I have to agree with my hon. Friend. Cultural change will not happen overnight, but shared parental leave is an important step, and we are considering further activity to raise awareness, promote take-up and make the scheme easier for parents to access.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Although I welcome the Government's efforts to reduce the gender pay gap, they pledged in 2017 to tackle racial pay disparities. In the same year, Baroness McGregor-Smith found that greater workplace diversity could boost Britain's economy by £24 billion a year. When do the Government plan to act on their pledge? Our economy could certainly do with an extra £24 billion, given the Brexit shambles that they have created.

Kelly Tolhurst: We backed the McGregor-Smith review of racial issues in the workplace. We wanted businesses to publish their data on ethnicity and pay voluntarily, but the Prime Minister announced in October that, rather than waiting for them to do so, we would take action. A consultation is in progress and will end on 11 January, and we will consider then how best to implement its recommendations.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Too often, women face discrimination at work when they are pregnant or on maternity leave, or when they return to work. Although that is illegal, it seems that the law is not working. What steps are the Government taking to end maternity discrimination?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend has raised a particularly important point. We want to do whatever we can to tackle such discrimination. We are currently reviewing the redundancy protections for pregnant women and new mothers, and we hope to take further steps early next year. On Monday, we launched the good work plan, under which employees will receive a written statement of their entitlements in the workplace on their first day at work and which will potentially reduce the incidence of discrimination. Transparency is what we are aiming for, and we will do as much as we can to ensure that those people are protected.

Domestic Abuse: Public Health Strategy

7. **Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab):** What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on a long-term public health strategy to help prevent domestic abuse. [908342]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Merry Christmas to one and all! I say that because although Christmas is a time of festivity, it is also, sadly, a time when the number of incidents involving domestic violence increases exponentially. I hope to be able to inform the House of ways in which we can help to spread the message that if anyone is suffering domestic abuse over the festive period they can—and please, must—seek help.

The Home Secretary chairs an interministerial group on violence against women and girls, which aims to ensure that all Departments, including the Department of Health and Social Care, work together to make dealing with crimes such as domestic abuse a priority. We will publish our response, including our draft domestic abuse Bill, shortly.

Vicky Foxcroft: I welcome last week's debate on the public health approach to tackling youth violence. Domestic violence can be a key trigger of trauma in young people's lives, and they need this strategy to be published and properly funded as soon as possible. May I urge the Minister, who is also part of the Home Office team, to do all she can to make sure this strategy is published as soon as possible?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady, who has done so much work on the specific issue of youth violence, including her work on the commission. She knows, following last week's very good debate, that the Government are absolutely committed to treating serious violence as a public health issue, but we are very much committed also to ensuring that domestic abuse within the serious violence sphere is tackled in hospitals and GP surgeries, because often the NHS is the touchstone that victims of domestic abuse can use to seek help when they find that they are in a place to be able to do so.

8. [908343] **Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con):** I am concerned about the long-term effect on children of domestic abuse in the family home. Is tackling this part of the Government strategy?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so, and we know that domestic abuse has a devastating impact on children and young people. Home should be a place of safety; it should not be a place of fear and violence. We have launched an £8 million fund to support children affected by domestic abuse and services that can help in that. We have also provided money to roll out an amazing project called Operation Encompass, so that there is a person in every school whom the police can contact before the school day starts, to inform the school if a child has witnessed a domestic abuse incident the previous night so that child is treated in a gentle and comforting way during the school day, having witnessed some trauma at home.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Has the Secretary of State also had discussions with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the benefits of sport for women in improving their wellbeing, because women traditionally take part in a lot less sport than men? On that note, will she also congratulate the women's netball team for its fantastic achievement in being voted team of the year in the BBC sports personality awards, and does she agree that they are a great role model?

Victoria Atkins: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for promoting me momentarily. She is right: sport can have an enormously positive impact on people's lives. Obviously in the context of domestic abuse and serious violence, we are very conscious that sport can be a great way to reach out to young people and help them to make positive life choices. I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I understand, too, that there are plans for a parliamentary netball team, which I will not volunteer for—I am more of a hockey player—but I am sure that is something to look forward to in the new year.

10. [908345] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Women in the asylum system are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence if they enter into marriages that they cannot escape. Is it part of the Government strategy to look at how can protect those women?

Victoria Atkins: We are very conscious of the additional pressures women in the asylum system face, particularly if they are in the system through family visas, where, sadly, we know there are cases where the perpetrators of the violence are the people on whom they rely for their asylum status. UK Visas and Immigration has set up a safeguarding hub to look at whether urgent intervention is necessary in each asylum case, and that obviously includes domestic abuse. We are concentrating on this in the forthcoming package of domestic abuse measures.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, may I take this opportunity to wish you, yours and everyone associated with the House *Nadolig llawen*? For the benefit of *Hansard*, that means merry Christmas.

Survivors of domestic abuse and their children need more protection. I have heard from too many victims whose children are forced through family court orders to spend time with an abusive and sometime dangerous parent. Rachel Williams and Sammy Woodhouse are two such victims. Their petitions have gathered half a million signatures. Rachel and Sammy are speaking out, so when will the Government listen and strengthen the law to support victims and their children?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. I had the privilege of meeting Sammy some months ago to discuss the complexities of her case. We clearly do not want the family courts to be used as another forum in which abusers can continue their abuse. The hon. Lady will know that I and my colleagues in the Ministry of Justice are working together on the Bill, but also on educating those who work in the tribunal and court systems to be alert to that possibility.

Topical Questions

T1. [908355] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): I want to ensure that people across the country have financial independence and resilience, as well as a real choice and influence over the economic decisions in their lives. That means doing more for low-paid and financially fragile women, who face multiple barriers and are currently reaping the fewest economic rewards. I will publish a strategy in late spring, outlining our vision and plans to promote gender equality and

economic empowerment. It will outline how the Government Equalities Office, from its new Cabinet Office home, will work across Government and with business and civil society to tackle persistent gendered inequalities that limit economic empowerment at every stage of life.

Mr Speaker, may I take this opportunity to wish you and all Members and staff of the House a very merry Christmas?

Bill Esterson: The majority of people in insecure employment are women. The right to ask for more hours, which was announced on Monday, already exists, and it is no right at all because the employer can just say no. Will the Minister therefore tell the Business Secretary that if he is serious about making a difference to women in part-time work, he will have to do significantly better than this?

Penny Mordaunt: I take a different view and welcome the announcement to which the hon. Gentleman refers, and others that this Government have made on supporting women, whatever stage they are at in their lives and careers. However, I think that we need to do more. That is why I am broadening the remit of the Government Equalities Office and creating an equalities hub in the Cabinet Office, at the heart of Government. We are already working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but we do that with every Government Department, because only when we do that will we be able to move at the speed necessary to meet the ambition of women in this country.

T3. [908358] **Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): This is the season of good will, and some minds will be turning to the new year's honours list. Those who receive honours are rightly recognised for their outstanding public service, regardless of their gender, sexuality or beliefs, but the same is not true of the treatment of their spouses. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the honours system should treat all spouses with similar courtesy, whether they are men or women, gay or straight?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. The Cabinet Office is doing great work to create more diversity in the honours list, but inequality is baked into the system, including in the use of courtesy titles. It is quite wrong that people are treated differently in this way, so I have written to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to ask that it is remedied.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to wish you, Mr Speaker, everyone who works here and all Members a very merry Christmas? On the Christmas theme,

There are five days to Christmas, so will the Minister promise me:

- An action plan to close the pay gap;
- To end period poverty;
- Sustainable funding for refugees;
- Section 106 of the Equality Act;
- Paid leave for domestic survivors;
- And no more austerity?

Penny Mordaunt: I wish those on the Opposition Front Bench a very merry Christmas. The hon. Lady is right to present us with a list. I too have a list—[HON. MEMBERS: “Sing it!”] No, I would not inflict that on Members. She is right to raise those important issues. I certainly wish to ensure that the Government Equalities Office can deliver on those issues, but also on other areas. From April next year, when the GEO will be in its new home, we will be able to do that much more effectively. In the meantime, we will be producing additional work, including the strategy I just referred to in my topical statement, which I think will be of huge assistance to all Government Departments in delivering for women.

T6. [908361] **Tom Purslove** (Corby) (Con): What steps are being taken to improve accessibility to tax-free childcare for carers and other economically inactive women who are looking to take on part-time work?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Carers do a huge amount and are often unsung heroes. Both they and other economically inactive women may be entitled to support of up to 85% of their eligible childcare costs, through universal credit. That is in addition to the Government’s 15 hours’ free childcare entitlement for three and four-year-olds and disadvantaged two-year-olds. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is currently running a campaign to raise awareness of tax-free childcare, including through a new marketing strategy launched in September this year.

T2. [908356] **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Minister for Women and Equalities speak to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about how they can mitigate the difficulties and hardship that women who were born in the early 1950s are experiencing?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): Fear not, Mr Speaker: I will not sing my answer and ruin the festive spirit.

The subject raised by the hon. Gentleman has been debated extensively and we have already put in place an additional £1.1 billion-worth of transitional arrangements. Despite the fact that a retired female would expect to get the state pension for 22 years, which is two years more than a retired male, thanks to our reforms more than 3 million more women will receive an average of £550 per year more by 2030.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I have taken on board your wise words on perseverance, Mr Speaker, so when will my right hon. Friend introduce proposals to repeal the Equality Act 2010, which makes specific provision for caste as a protected characteristic?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is consistent and persistent, and he is right to be. We obviously need a suitable legislative vehicle and parliamentary time, but our request to proceed with drafting has been cleared by the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee. On the guidance that we want to provide, we are confident that we can publish it before summer.

T5. [908360] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I have a very vulnerable constituent who was kidnapped and raped abroad and then had to stay in the country for the trial. She has now returned home to the UK, but

has been refused benefits after failing the habitual residence test. Will the Minister speak to her ministerial colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions and ask them to meet me urgently to discuss this horrific case?

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): I am very concerned to hear that. I note the work that is going on through all-party groups to help victims of crimes and their families overseas. I will of course take away what the hon. Lady has said, and if she would like to meet me to discuss the case, I would be happy to. I will also ensure that the Minister from the relevant Department meets her.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker, and commiserations on last night’s football result.

Will the Minister welcome the work of Cats Protection, which fosters cats to enable women to flee domestic violence safe in the knowledge that their family pet is well looked after until they find a secure home?

Victoria Atkins: I must declare an interest, because I own the most beautiful cat in the world.

I am delighted to hear of that organisation and the work that it does. It is a fantastic charity, and I think I should visit it as a priority, as part of not only my Home Office role but my ministerial cat responsibilities.

Mr Speaker: What is the name of this beautiful cat?

Victoria Atkins: Her full name, as given by my four-year-old at the time, is Gaston the Turbo Snail. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Speaker: I wonder why I did not know that. I am as near to speechless as I have ever been.

T7. [908362] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): . Mr Speaker, may I, too, wish you, all the staff and Members of this House a very happy Christmas? However, over this Christmas season women survivors of domestic abuse in households receiving universal credit will find it harder to leave than they should if their universal credit payment is paid to their abuser. Only yesterday, the director of Women’s Aid said of the Government’s ongoing refusal to introduce automatic split payments for universal credit:

“We know from our research into the impact of universal credit that it risks exacerbating financial abuse for survivors and poses an additional barrier to survivors’ ability to escape the abuse.”

What representations is the Minister for Women and Equalities making to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to urge her to address this outrageous inequality now?

Justin Tomlinson: I have met Women’s Aid three times in the past month, as well as Refuge and ManKind, as we are looking to improve the support available through universal credit, based on the three key principles. The first is identifying people, whereby those organisations are helping directly to sort out training and guidance for all our frontline staff so that people can be identified as quickly as possible. Secondly, we are building on the principle of referring, so that all local and national partnerships are then made available. Finally, we are

supporting people, to make sure they are fast-tracked to get a single status universal credit claim, advance payments and, where appropriate, split payments.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Government's new code of practice is a welcome step in tackling sexual harassment in the workplace, but will the Minister listen to the concerns of the Fawcett Society and provide a formal duty on employers to prevent harassment in the workplace, without which the code falls short and women will be left to deal with this problem on their own?

Victoria Atkins: I very much understand the call for a formal duty and we listen to it carefully, as we do to the Women and Equalities Committee report. We have committed to consulting on that, because this is very complex and we need to make sure we understand not only the scale of the problem, but potential answers to it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We are, as colleagues can see, running late, but there is no particular pressure on time today and I would like to accommodate remaining colleagues.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Minister will know that recently I got involved in tackling this vile practice of sex for rent, and we all understand it is a complex problem. I am grateful for the review of the guidelines and that new guidelines are going to be issued to the

Crown Prosecution Service in the new year, but will he consider a review that actually looks at the complex problems that lead to the fact that this vile practice continues to be widespread, although it is a criminal offence?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the number of times she has raised this issue in the House. Both the Minister with responsibility for victims and the Minister with responsibility for courts are looking specifically at this issue. As the hon. Lady is aware, there are complexities relating to stigmatising the individual who is themselves a victim, but we will continue to work on that and we look forward to working more closely with her on this subject.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Following the earlier exchange with the Minister for Women and Equalities on disability access, does she agree that one way we can improve access to this place is by Members underlining in the restoration and renewal consultation process, when they are approached, that improving disability access to this place is a priority for all of us?

Penny Mordaunt: That is an incredibly good suggestion. I have had discussions with Mr Speaker about the opportunities that the refurbishment of this Palace presents us with. I hope that all Members, who I know care deeply about these issues, with many having signed up to be Disability Confident employers and wanting to help that agenda, will see that that is another way in which we as individuals help to provide support.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts and Measures:

- Civil Liability Act 2018
- Ivory Act 2018
- Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Act 2018
- Prisons (Interference with Wireless Telegraphy) Act 2018
- Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Act 2018
- Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018
- University of London Act 2018
- Ecumenical Relations Measure 2018
- Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 2018
- Church Property Measure 2018
- Church of England Pensions Measure 2018.

Deaths of Homeless People

Mr Speaker: Before I call the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) to ask her urgent question, may I express my sadness on behalf of the whole House at the death yesterday in the subway outside this House? I also ask Members to be aware that, in advance of an inquest, the facts are not, and cannot be, fully known, and therefore please to show some restraint in commenting on that case, out of respect to the family and friends of the individual concerned.

10.46 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government what he is doing to prevent the deaths of people who are homeless.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Every death of someone sleeping rough on our streets is one too many. Each is a tragedy, each a life cut short. In particular, I share the sadness that every Member will feel on learning of the death of a homeless man close to Parliament only yesterday. As you say, Mr Speaker, while we must allow the investigations to take place, I will be asking Westminster City Council to refer this to its safeguarding adults board to look into the matter and see that lessons are learned and applied.

Today's publication of Office for National Statistics data on the estimated number of deaths of homeless people is stark, with an estimated 597 deaths of homeless people in England and Wales in 2017. It is simply unacceptable for lives to be cut short in this way. I believe we have a moral duty to act. The Government are committed to halving rough sleeping by 2022 and ending it by 2027. Last week, we published our rough-sleeping strategy delivery plan, which sets out how we will do this. It gives updates on progress we have already made on the 61 commitments in the strategy and sets out clear milestones for activity.

That said, this is about action now. Our rough-sleeping initiative, backed by £30 million of funding this year, is delivering at least 1,750 new bed spaces and an additional 500 outreach workers in areas across the country where rough sleeping is most prevalent. Only this week, we announced the location of 11 rough-sleeping hubs across the country to provide immediate shelter and rapid assessment now, which will help thousands of people over the next two years.

Today's statistics underline the need to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. We are investing £1.2 billion to reduce and prevent homelessness. Much of this funding is already having an impact, providing vital support to help people off the streets for good. Early intervention and prevention are the key, and that has been the focus of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which came into force in April this year. We will continue to work tirelessly with local authorities and partners across the country to ensure we provide the advice and support they need, but I recognise that this cold weather period is a particularly difficult time. That is why I launched an additional £5 million cold weather fund in October. The fund has already enabled

[James Brokenshire]

us to increase outreach work further and to extend winter shelter provision, providing more than 400 additional bed spaces.

The death of anyone who is homeless is a tragedy. We remain focused and resolute in our commitment to make rough sleeping a thing of the past, and where we need to do more, we will.

Melanie Onn: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I share your sympathies with the friends and family of Gyula Remes, the 43-year-old who died two nights ago in the underpass to the entrance to this Palace in which we all sit. I am sure that all colleagues will be as distressed and shocked as I was, but this is not the first time. It is not even the first time this year: in February, another man died in the same place. So what will it take to shake this Government out of their complacency and out of their outsourcing of responsibility?

Today, the Office for National Statistics data tells us that there were an estimated 597 deaths of homeless people in 2017 alone. Not only could the actual figure be much higher, but it is one that has gone up by 24% since 2013. These figures are the result of an increasingly fracturing system of social security and support. They are the result of Government decisions and Government choices. Five thousand people on any given night can be sleeping rough in this country. Crisis estimates that 24,000 will be sleeping rough in cars, tents and makeshift beds this winter, while 120,000 children are without a permanent home. This cannot be acceptable.

When social security payments are delayed, frustrated or stopped; when mental health services are overstretched, with thresholds so high as to be inaccessible; when council budgets are slashed so that outreach services are lost and drug and alcohol support minimised; when we have an explosion of insecure work; and when people struggle to see their GP—all of these combine to leave those at the highest risk of homelessness out in the cold, and that is literally.

Rather than blaming vulnerable people, as the Secretary of State did in his article yesterday in *The Guardian*, for these failings, saying that it was their fault—relationship breakdowns and irresponsible behaviour—will he say whether he recognises that the welfare state should be a safety net for our society? If he does, will he say that it is not currently working? Will he acknowledge that more support in the availability of and access to health support—mental and physical—is needed, and that homelessness and homeless deaths should be treated as a public health issue, not solely one of housing?

Does the Secretary of State accept that selling off council houses and housing association properties reduces the number of properties available for local authorities quickly to house vulnerable people in? Will he match Labour's £100 million cold weather plan to give every rough sleeper somewhere to stay during the winter? This place has proved, under previous Administrations, that it does not need to wait nine years to solve a homelessness problem. If previous Administrations can do it, why cannot he?

James Brokenshire: I would say to the hon. Lady that I share a great deal of her focus, her attention and the issues she has flagged up to the House this morning.

I would challenge her very firmly on what she said, in a direct accusation, about my own viewpoint on rough sleeping. No one—no one—chooses to be on the street. No one chooses that life.

The figures that the hon. Lady rightly highlights are stark, as I indicated in my initial response. What is also stark is the 50% increase in the number of deaths linked to drugs that those figures highlight as well. Therefore, these are complex matters to do with mental health and addiction. Sadly, the evidence does point to the fact that issues such as, for example, the loss of tenancies are factors that lie behind this, as are issues of childhood abuse. There are other factors, too.

That is why we published the rough-sleeping strategy in August, which was to cover all these issues—not just my responsibilities in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but those in relation to welfare and to prisons; we see some of the issues in relation to prisoners simply being released out on to the streets. It is intended to cover, and is covering, all those grounds. I did highlight the action that is being taken now.

The hon. Lady highlighted issues relating to universal credit and the work we are doing with the Department for Work and Pensions to see where further steps may be taken, knowing that some who are vulnerable might find it difficult to find their way through the system. The DWP is providing support and, equally, we are providing additional funding and support through our navigator project and others so that those who are in the most need, the most vulnerable, are able to get the support they need.

There is absolutely no complacency from me or from this side of the House on the need to deal with the urgent issue of rough sleeping and homelessness. It is something that we are taking hugely seriously as a priority, especially in the current cold weather. That is why I have underlined the action that we are taking now. No one chooses to live on the street, and no one should die as a consequence of being homeless or as a consequence of rough sleeping. That is why we are taking action and why I have committed an initial £100 million through the rough-sleeping strategy, in addition to the £30 million that councils are receiving directly this year. That is part of a £1.2 billion effort over homelessness.

There is a sense of action, of purpose and of bringing about change, and that is firmly what I intend to do, and what I am doing, through various measures. I recognise the need for a cross-party spirit, and we are working with the Mayor of London, the Mayor of Manchester and others to ensure that we make rough sleeping a thing of the past and that we deal firmly and in a committed way with the issue of homelessness more broadly.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Mr Speaker, it was more than 30 years ago that your predecessor, Speaker Weatherill, gave tea to Robert K. Andrews, the homeless man who was in Central Lobby for 35 years.

I agree with Tony Benn that a memorial there would be a happy thing for the Badge Messengers and others who helped to look after him.

Joe Dunlop's play, "The Strange Petitioner", gives an illustration of the old Robert Andrews talking to the young Robert Andrews about how he came to be on the streets. He had all the services that were possible, but

he denied them and would not take benefits. He was well cared for at St Martin-in-the-Fields, and he had his funeral there the day after the service for Sir William Staveley. That was a great thing that the church did.

I hope that most of us will not look for simplistic answers and that we will back the Secretary of State's extra initiatives as well as paying tribute to all the voluntary organisations—including Cyrenians, St Mungo's, Turning Tides in Worthing and the Samaritans—which deal with this work all the time, together with the council mental health workers, to whom I pay a great tribute.

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the incredible work that is being done across the country and some of the many organisations that are doing it. I would like to pay particular tribute to the London homelessness charity, the Connection at St Martin's, which had been working with the homeless man who sadly lost his life yesterday. I spent time last night at a homelessness shelter and I heard the stories of two men there. They told me about their difficult challenges and their different pathways into homelessness, both of which were very complex. That underlines the challenges and issues that we are dealing with, and shows why it is important that we take a broad, overarching approach to ensure that we can prevent, intervene and provide a sense of recovery. We must approach this with a concerted focus on all fronts.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I should like to extend my sympathies to the family and friends of Mr Remes. The number of people sleeping rough has more than doubled since 2010, according to the Government's own figures. Nearly 600 people died on the streets in England and Wales last year, yet the Secretary of State claimed this week that this was not the result of Government policies. Countless charities are pointing to cuts to public services as one of the main contributory factors to the shocking rise in homelessness. Would he consider visiting some of those organisations and hearing at first hand what everyone else in the country knows—namely, that austerity is pushing people on to the streets and putting lives at risk? With the roll-out of universal credit, charities are warning that up to 1 million vulnerable people are at risk of destitution and homelessness. Will he also commit to meeting the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and urging her to pause the roll-out of universal credit until it is clear that effective safeguards are in place to ensure that the system does not create a new tier of rough sleepers on our streets? Lastly, on homelessness and domestic abuse, will the Secretary of State tell me what action he is taking to ensure that the vulnerability test is not used as a gatekeeping tool by local authorities in England?

James Brokenshire: In relation to the hon. Gentleman's last point, absolutely not. The Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), is working very closely on that.

The hon. Gentleman asked about universal credit. I point to the £1 billion in discretionary housing payments that the Department for Work and Pensions has put in place to protect the most vulnerable claimants. As I mentioned, we are working with the DWP. He asked me

about a meeting—actually, the DWP is part of the core group that helped inform the work on the rough-sleeping strategy. Indeed, we are very much working in close concert with the DWP to ensure that, where improvements can be made, support is provided. I know that the Secretary of State is looking at these issues calmly and carefully.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned reaching out to those who work on the frontline. I speak regularly with a number of the charities and other organisations working on the frontline in this sector, and I will continue to make all the necessary visits to talk to those who have been sleeping rough to learn from their experiences and, as I have said, to take further action as required.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, following the introduction of my Homelessness Reduction Act 2018, the statistics released by the Department covering the period from April to June this year show that 58,660 households have been directly assisted under that legislation? Will he also set out an urgent message not only to Members of this House, but to all members of the public, so that when they identify someone who is clearly sleeping rough, action can be taken to point those vulnerable people to the help and assistance that they desperately need?

James Brokenshire: I commend my hon. Friend for all his work and efforts in relation to the Homelessness Reduction Act. He points to some of the direct support that is happening as a consequence of that legislation coming into place.

My hon. Friend asks what people should do. Clearly there is the StreetLink app, which is a direct means by which people can identify someone who is living out on the street and see that they get the support and help that they need. From the conversations that I have had with many charities and the voluntary sector, it is clear that help is there. One of the challenges is getting people to take that help and getting them into accommodation where they will be safe and warm. I commend those groups for all of the action that is taking place.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Two years ago, I had the opportunity to go out one cold November night with the rough sleeper team in Kensington. I was hoping to guide the workers to some sites I knew where people to whom I had spoken had been sleeping. However, I was told that they could not count people in any kind of bivouac or tent as rough sleepers. They may be homeless, but they do not count as rough sleepers if they have a covering of any kind over their heads. Is the Secretary of State aware of that, and will he please review it to ensure that vulnerable people do not die alone unnoticed, unmourned and uncounted as rough sleepers?

James Brokenshire: I can absolutely assure the hon. Lady that I want the data to be as accurate and correct as possible. If there are any examples of where that is not taking place, then I am very happy to investigate further. Today's data is challenging and stark, but it is right that we have that information to ensure that we act and that resources and focus are effectively targeted and delivered so that we are helping people off the street and preventing homelessness and rough sleeping in the first place.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend is a compassionate man who is concerned about the many routes that exist to being homeless. We have rough sleepers in St Albans, and, having talked to the council's chief executive, I know for a fact that they have been approached to try to bring them in. Because of their addictions or drink problems they will not, or cannot, access the services that are on offer, as many of those services do not have a wet facility to allow people with either drink or drug habits to come in. What more can be done to help authorities offer a more varied service for those who cannot drop their dependencies and therefore cannot access many of the services that are on offer?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and important point. We have asked NHS England to provide £30 million of funding over the next five years, specifically targeted in this arena, to provide a rapid audit of health service provision to rough sleepers, including mental health and substance misuse treatment. It is right that my hon. Friend makes this point and equally right that we act.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): May I start by saying how grateful I am to have received confirmation this morning that the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill has now become law? I thank the Secretary of State and the ministerial team for all their support with that.

The Secretary of State has said that homelessness is not simply a result of Government policies, and he is right to cite the complex causes that drive people on to the street, but can he help us to explain why those complex causes—whether it is drug and alcohol abuse or relationship breakdown—have coincidentally risen by 170% since 2010?

James Brokenshire: First and foremost, let me congratulate and commend the hon. Lady for her work on the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act. It was a great moment when Mr Speaker was able to underline that the Bill had been given Royal Assent, so that it is now an Act. The hon. Lady championed the Bill so firmly, and we were pleased to support her in taking forward an important piece of legislation that I hope will start to make a real difference in the new year.

I am not going to hide away from the increase in numbers; those figures are profound. This is why we are taking the steps that we are. I pointed to a number of the complex factors that underlie this issue, but the situation is stark. I am not going to shirk from the fact that the number of those sleeping rough has increased. It is unacceptable. I am absolutely prepared to look at all evidence in relation to this issue, so that we not only learn but actually make the difference, ensure that we make rough sleeping a thing of the past and take still further action to prevent homelessness in the first place.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The most recent briefing that I received on the scale of this problem by a researcher who is following 100 rough sleepers in our part of London said that the 100% common thread was addiction—to legal drugs such as alcohol, and to illegal drugs. What data does the Secretary of State have on the proportion of addiction to legal and illegal drugs? Does this not reinforce the case that we need a royal commission on the prohibition of narcotic drugs, so

that we can assess the costs and benefits of that policy and the implications it has for preventing access to services for people in the way that my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) has just mentioned?

James Brokenshire: My right hon. Friend asks about the evidence. I point him to the Office for National Statistics data that has been released this morning, showing that 190 estimated deaths of homeless people in 2017 were due to drug poisoning; that is 32% of the total number. Alcohol-specific causes accounted for 62 deaths and suicides for 78 deaths, respectively 10% and 13% of the estimated deaths. There is no doubt that drugs and alcohol addiction are a core component of the challenges that we are seeing, which is why we are putting in place additional support. I am profoundly concerned about the implications of new psychoactive substances such as Spice, and the impact that they have had in places such as Manchester and certain parts of London. We are providing additional training and support in relation to those substances and their links to rough sleeping, but we must equally continue to take a very firm approach to drugs.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The tragedy of hundreds of homeless people dying on our streets is shocking, appalling and shameful, but it is not surprising. It is an inevitable consequence of the Government's failure to address the root causes of rising homelessness. Research from Shelter shows that the Government's arbitrary benefits cap is now so low that it is not possible for some households, especially households with children, to even cover the cost of rent in the cheapest areas of the country. Will the Government review the cap and remove this completely unnecessary driver of increased and prolonged homelessness?

James Brokenshire: There are a number of causes of people becoming homeless in the first place. For example, security of tenancy is a significant cause, which is why I have consulted on longer tenancies. I will continue to work with the Department for Work and Pensions on universal credit and, where there is evidence, on the links to homelessness. Where further changes may be needed, I will have those discussions with the Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Before I was a Member of Parliament, I volunteered with a homeless outreach service called Thames Reach. I pay tribute to such services for the work do. They often work antisocial hours, with personal danger to the individuals involved, but they really make a difference. While volunteering, I learned about the complex reasons for rough sleeping and how common it is for people who are rough sleeping to have mental health problems. What steps are the Government taking to support the mental health needs of people who are sleeping rough?

James Brokenshire: I certainly recognise the picture that my hon. Friend paints about the challenges of mental health and how we respond to the dual diagnosis of mental health problems and addiction. That is why we are asking NHS England to provide an additional £30 million and are looking at ways in which services can be delivered. Part of the funding we are giving is to provide support workers who can sustain people in their accommodation. It is precisely those issues that our approach is intended to respond to.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Three weeks ago I joined the census that shames us, counting rough sleepers in Birmingham. There, beneath the Christmas lights, we found a man without legs sleeping next to his wheelchair in doorways. We found wounded veterans sleeping in arcades. We met a man in the grounds of the cathedral who had had his benefits stopped. We met people fresh out of prison. We met people self-medicating for trauma with drugs and alcohol. These are our neighbours, and some will not survive the winter. Today, coroners do not record homelessness in full on death certificates. That has to change, because we in this House need to know the whole truth about the depths of this scandal. Perhaps then we can shame this Government into dramatically speeding up their timetable to end rough sleeping for good.

James Brokenshire: I recognise the right hon. Gentleman's passion in relation to this issue, and I take the cases that he highlights hugely seriously. He makes a point about the proper recording of deaths linked to homelessness, and I will certainly take that up with the Ministry of Justice. This is about not only ensuring that we have the data but how we bring about change and learn and apply lessons to see that homelessness is prevented and reduced and that we act to end rough sleeping and save the lives of some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The people of Chelmsford were very saddened earlier this year by the death of Mr Rob O'Connor in our city centre on a cold winter night, despite the fact that the night shelter had beds available. His case, like many others, was very complex. I was pleased by the Government's announcement of new Somewhere Safe to Stay centres, which will enable multiple agencies to give individuals the best tailored support. I would love to have one of those in Essex. We have also made bids under the rapid rehousing pathway for more move-on housing, housing navigators and a social lettings agency, to enable faster movement into homes for these complex cases. Will the Secretary of State look favourably on those bids?

James Brokenshire: I note my hon. Friend's bid for funding from all the different elements we have announced. She makes a difficult and important point about helping people into support. Sadly, in a number of cases, support is provided and accommodation is offered, but for different reasons, that is not taken up. We must all redouble our efforts to encourage people who have been identified to take up that support, which could save their lives.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that no one should die from being homeless, but these statistics show that they clearly are, and in ever greater numbers. He rightly talked about early intervention and prevention. What is he doing personally within Government to lobby for reverses to cuts to drug and alcohol support services?

James Brokenshire: I would point to the additional funding that the rough-sleeping strategy seeks to deliver on the very important elements that are focused on providing support on mental health and other health services, because those issues do, very directly, matter. The rough-sleeping strategy is not set in stone. I have

said that there will be annual reviews of the strategy, because I know that we need to respond to changing evidence and changing circumstances. I am determined that where further steps are required, we will take action.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Lewes District Council has a new homelessness outreach team that visits people who are rough sleeping. I welcome the £100 million for the rough-sleeping strategy, but does the Secretary of State not agree that many of the budget cuts to local government, which have reduced mental health services and help for ex-offenders and those with addiction, have cut preventive work to the bone, and that local government needs that funding to be able to prevent rough sleeping in the first place?

James Brokenshire: I hope that my hon. Friend will recognise the provisional statement that I made last week on local government finance, which gave a real-terms increase to local government for the 2019-20 financial year, and indeed provided £650 million of additional support for social care and dealing with some of the most vulnerable to whom she is very firmly pointing. In making her points, I hope she recognises that we have listened to a number of the concerns of local government in seeking to provide that additional finance. Obviously, I will continue to make the case as we look to the spending review next year.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Is it not a reflection on today's society that before I came here this morning, a major TV channel talked about this issue of deaths of the homeless for about 30 seconds, yet spent 25 minutes talking about what had happened here after PMQs yesterday? The priorities were all wrong. Every death of a homeless person is a stain on our society. If we are judged as a nation and a Government on how we treat our most vulnerable, then our nation and our Government are broken. I will make it my new year's resolution to do everything I can to alleviate homelessness in this country, whether that be by donating to homeless people or by working on a longer-term strategy in my constituency to try to reduce it. Will the Secretary of State do the same?

James Brokenshire: I can say to the hon. Lady that this is an absolute priority for me. She makes her point about the country and the society we should be very powerfully. In terms of giving directly to the charities, some of them point to the challenges in sustaining people on the streets. The charities sometimes give a difficult and hard message, but it is important to recognise it in that way. I look forward to working with her in the new year as we seek to meet those challenges.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Following on from the question by my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), will my right hon. Friend outline what further steps Government can take to help homeless people with mental health issues, because I understand that suicide was a major factor in today's figures?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend will no doubt have heard the figures that I referred to a little while back about some of the causes that contribute to this.

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We are seeking to undertake a rapid audit of health service provision for rough sleepers, including mental health and substance misuse treatment, because sometimes it is very difficult to ensure that access to the services that are there is delivered. That is why we are doing that audit and why the additional funds are being committed to support services as well.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Following a very useful meeting with St Mungo's, I would like to ask the Secretary of State two things. First, will he work with the DWP to ensure that as part of the universal credit roll-out, outreach workers are sent into hostels, that being the most effective way of ensuring that people are able to claim that benefit? Secondly, does he agree that it is not just a case of ensuring that deaths of homeless people are recorded but that they are fully investigated?

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I commend St Mungo's for its excellent work, for what it does out in our communities and for the difference it is making. I had a conversation with the chief executive of St Mungo's this morning on some of the work it is doing now and, equally, on how, through our rough-sleeping advisory panel, we continue to work with those across the sector.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about giving help in hostels, and that point was also made to me last night. Within our rough-sleeping strategy we have a navigators programme, which is aimed precisely at guiding people through what is sometimes a complex system to ensure they get the support they need.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing this urgent question, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it.

Of the 600 homeless people who died on our streets last year, 85% were men, one third died of drug poisoning and the highest mortality rates were in London and the north-west of England. Will the Secretary of State ensure that, whatever Government help is provided, it is provided to where it will be most effective?

James Brokenshire: I can assure my hon. Friend that our rough-sleeping initiative is targeted at the 83 areas with the highest pressure and the highest demand. Obviously we will continue to reflect on that as evidence emerges. If the patterns change, clearly we will redirect resources, but he makes an important point about London and the north-west, where a lot of resource is being provided. Indeed, Manchester is one of the areas where we have our Housing First programme, which is aimed at providing help more quickly.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): On my way into Parliament this morning, I stopped to talk to a man who was begging on the embankment. His name is James and he is from Manchester, which he left for personal reasons. James told me that he wants to become a *Big Issue* seller in the new year, but in the meantime he faces a cold and lonely Christmas. What policies does the Secretary of State have in place to help James and the thousands of other people like him across the country?

James Brokenshire: I misspoke in my last answer. I should have highlighted that our Housing First programme is also in the west midlands and Liverpool.

The hon. Lady mentions immediate support, and I would point to the £30 million that is going to local authorities this year. I would also point to the £5 million cold weather fund, which I announced in October and which is about providing support now, for this winter, to ensure that we are providing accommodation to more people. The last figures I saw show that the fund is delivering more than 400 extra beds, on top of the additional support that has been provided. That sense of urgency and purpose is one that I entirely hear and understand.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, which my friend, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), was so wise in calling for.

Having spent much of my student years working in homeless shelters in the evenings, I am particularly passionate about this cause. Hearing about it today reminds me of those evenings and of the amount of methadone and substance abuse I saw on our streets. Will the Secretary of State please talk not just about the care the Government are providing but about the care that we, as a community, can provide and about how we can shape ourselves as families, as groups and, indeed, as a society to look after the most vulnerable? This is not just about the state; it is about us as individuals and as communities.

James Brokenshire: I absolutely hear my hon. Friend's point. Of course the Government, local authorities, charities and the voluntary sector all have a key role to play and are doing amazing work. There are things we can do, too. By acting collectively and together, we can provide a solution and answers to the challenges we see.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Many homeless people on the streets have a little dog, which is often their only companion, but they are asked to give up their dog in order to gain a place in a shelter. The all-party dog advisory welfare group heard from a wonderful organisation, Dogs on the Streets, which provides veterinary care and help to homeless people with pets. Can much more be done to provide accommodation that will not only take a homeless person off the street but allow them to keep their pet?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady makes a serious and important point. At an additional shelter that opened in Bristol, one of the first young men I spoke to had his dog with him. Indeed, I spoke to another homeless person last night who also had a dog, and the shelter that I visited accommodated rough sleepers and their dogs. If there are further lessons that we can learn and apply to ensure that good practice is reflected and recognised, we will do so, and I appreciate the hon. Lady making that point in the way she did.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Support services in Torbay do a strong job in reaching out to rough sleepers, but evidence suggests that too many end up back on the street at a later date—which is why we are considering adopting a Housing First approach, which we discussed yesterday with the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend

the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler). What evidence has the Secretary of State seen emerge from the Government's major pilots of Housing First, to see whether that will be effective?

James Brokenshire: We have seen international evidence that underlines the benefit of the Housing First model, which is why we are piloting it in three areas around the country. Those pilots are getting up and running, and I welcome the fact that in Birmingham the first homes are now being provided. I want to learn from that approach and ensure that we apply good practice and sustain people in their accommodation. We want to provide an opportunity to support and help people, and ensure that they turn their lives around.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): When pioneering Bristol journalist Michael Yong wrote an article in August about 50 homeless people who had died in Bristol over the previous five years, he was trying to humanise them and show that behind the statistics are real people with hopes and fears. Will the Secretary of State commit to understanding that this is a public health crisis that needs public health solutions, such as drug and alcohol counselling, mental health counselling, and many other aspects that have health causes at their root?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the health issues that the hon. Lady highlights, and I was pleased to visit Bristol a few weeks ago to see new provision that has been put in place. This is about providing support and opportunity, and once someone has taken up that help and got into accommodation, we must address and respond to their needs there. It is also about the prevention agenda, and I will continue to work with the Department of Health and Social Care to respond to the important points raised by the hon. Lady.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State talk to colleagues across the Government about public institutions that release people on to the street? I recently had a case of someone who was released from a secure mental health institution on to the street, and he ended up in prison. Does the Secretary agree that it cannot be right for public institutions not to check where someone will live when they leave that institution?

James Brokenshire: I do, and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which was championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), is about that duty to refer, and the obligations on public bodies to consider the issues raised by homelessness. The hon. Gentleman highlights a point about custodial settings, and we have pilots in three prisons, supported by the Ministry of Justice, to ensure that someone who is released on a Friday evening when housing services are shut does not simply go out on the street. We must break that and stop it happening, and I take very seriously the point raised by the hon. Gentleman.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): As Liberal Democrat spokesperson for housing, I too send my condolences to the family and friends of the homeless man who died two nights ago. It is a tragedy that can leave no one in this House untouched and unconcerned.

One month ago in Bath I organised a homelessness conference with Julian House. Some excellent organisations took part, including my housing association, Curo, and the Albert Kennedy Trust, which do excellent work on homelessness. They all agree that at the bottom of the issue lies a chronic shortage of social housing. The Liberal Democrats are demanding the building of 100,000 new social homes every year—the current output is less than 10,000—to address that chronic shortage. When will the Government recognise that the private sector will not deliver the number of social houses that we need? A public sector has to deliver those houses. Social housing is a social project, and the Government need to put resources into it.

James Brokenshire: First and foremost, the issue is about individuals—a point made by the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and other hon. Members. Secondly, there has been a lack of focus and attention on social housing for years, frankly. That is why we are investing through our affordable homes programme and, just as importantly, through the release of borrowing restrictions so that councils can build the next generation of council homes and increase the number of social and affordable homes, to meet need.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Ipswich Borough Council has provided an instant access homelessness hospital in Ipswich for many years, since before recent legislation; incidentally, it can also provide accommodation for homeless people's dogs, which is fantastic. However, it cannot afford to provide 24-hour reception facilities or sufficient support for the most difficult people. When will the Government fund housing authorities sufficiently so that they can provide that support for the most difficult people? When will the right hon. Gentleman's Department persuade county councils to stop cutting the support for citizens advice bureaux and other advice agencies that help to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place?

James Brokenshire: There are clear duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017; obviously, we are carefully considering its implementation, with funding provided to support that activity. I commend the work taking place in Ipswich, which sounds as though it is making a real difference. I would ask the hon. Gentleman's authority to work closely with our rough-sleeping team at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. We are seeking to provide advice; if there are challenges to meet, that can be done through that team.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): We should not accept a society where a man can die on the steps of Parliament because he does not have a roof over his head. Sadly, a man also died in Barnsley earlier this year. There will be 100 people without a home in my town this Christmas. The Secretary of State said that we had a moral duty to tackle the scandal. Will he commit to more funding for councils such as mine in Barnsley?

James Brokenshire: I do believe that there is a moral duty to act, which is why we have taken a number of steps, including the additional funding through the rough-sleeping initiative and the rough-sleeping strategy. Equally, there is the challenge of helping people to take

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support and provision when it is there. Sadly, in a number of cases where we have seen deaths, support and accommodation has been offered but not taken up, sometimes because of some of the other issues and challenges. The hon. Lady certainly has my commitment to challenge this and take the agenda forward. Today's figures are unacceptable, and I am determined to act further.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Secretary of State is a boyish 50; according to the latest statistics, the average age of homeless males who died was 44. Will he reflect on the fact that, when he was in his early 40s, this issue had largely been solved and dealt with by Government action during the early 2000s? The current crisis is a product of a combination of complacency and austerity. If he is serious about resolving the situation, it will require more than just words; it will require getting the whole Government working together on the issue as a top priority.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point: this is not just about my Department, but Departments across Whitehall. A ministerial group involving the key Departments meets and is focused on taking the action needed.

It is shocking that, according to today's figures, the average age of someone dying on the streets or as a consequence of homelessness is 44—younger than the hon. Gentleman or I am. That is stark: it underlines the chronic health issues that may be involved—drugs, alcohol and other issues, too—and the need for us to act.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his answers so far and his commitment to addressing homelessness. Some 8 million people are only one pay cheque away from losing their homes. Does he agree that we must recognise that being homeless does not involve only those who are unemployed or who have mental health issues? Some people may become homeless because of the removal of their overtime or a cut to their working hours. How does he intend to help those on the brink of homelessness?

James Brokenshire: I appreciate the situation in Northern Ireland and the support and accommodation available there. There are different pictures in different parts of our United Kingdom. Part of this is about ensuring we have a strong economy, creating jobs and growth and the prosperity agenda that sits behind all this, so we can and will look forward to the future positively. Equally, I come back to the point, particularly in relation to England and Wales, about longer tenancies and security in tenancies. That is why I am reflecting carefully on the consultation we carried out a few months back.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Last year, 597 homeless people died on our streets. Just imagine: that is nearly one dead homeless person for every seat in this Chamber. One cold dead homeless person where I sit, where the Minister sits and where you sit, Mr Speaker. It happens not just in big cities, however. Henryk Smolarz died on the streets in Plymouth. Does the Minister think not just about the big cities, but the small cities, towns and rural areas

where the combination of street homelessness and people living in insecure accommodation is as much a problem as in the big cities?

James Brokenshire: I do. I can certainly assure the hon. Gentleman on that. I talked about the 83 priority areas. That is based on last year's count. We are obviously looking at other data, too, to ensure that our focus and attention is very firmly on areas of need. Where there is good practice that can be shared, we will absolutely do that. I am desperately saddened to hear of the particular case in Plymouth that he highlights. We will be working not just in the big cities, but across the country to provide support where it is needed.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I entirely endorse everything my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) said about the need to treat this situation as a public health emergency. I also echo her praise for Michael Yong, the reporter from the *Bristol Post*. One issue that Michael has also been looking at is the quality of supported housing in the city, particularly in one property in my constituency that is clearly not fit for purpose. The Secretary of State visited the new homeless shelter in St Anne's in my constituency, which I hope will do a great deal to help homeless people over the winter. May I urge him to look at regulating supported housing providers that are not doing such a good job, to make sure that people get the services they need?

James Brokenshire: I welcome the hon. Lady's important point. I want to see appropriate support and provision being provided across the board. I think there is some good practice that we can point to, but there is also not good practice. Therefore, we need to take measures to ensure that people are being cared for. Ultimately, we are talking about some of the most vulnerable people we could point to. They lack confidence—putting aside all the other issues—and the ability to get help. I feel their vulnerability very keenly. We need to learn and to ensure that appropriate standards are in place. I am very happy to look into any further issues she may wish to raise in relation to her particular case in Bristol.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): On average, two people a week die while homeless in Scotland. The average life expectancy of a homeless person in Scotland is just 39. People sleeping on the streets in Scotland before they register as homeless is up 10% from 2016 to 2018. That shows the data picture is not clear. Under Labour, targeted action reduced rough sleeping by 75%. It is not an accident that homelessness has increased. It is because of a failure of policy in mental health, addictions, poverty, social security, housing and immigration. All those areas are failing, and as a result people are dying. If the Secretary of State is willing to address the fundamental failure of public policy, he has to turn to his Front-Bench colleagues and make them accept the reality of what austerity has done and the social destruction it is causing in every part of the United Kingdom. We have to get a grip on this in our national interest.

James Brokenshire: I recognise the need for concerted action across the board. When I look at the numbers, I see that we have not done enough and that we need to do more. That is what the rough-sleeping strategy is all

about and that is what a number of things I have spoken to the House about this morning are profoundly all about. I want rough sleeping to be a thing of the past. There are clear lessons that we can apply and learn from. I will continue to reflect on and review the data as it emerges. As I said, we have provided an initial £100 million for the rough-sleeping strategy. I intend to have annual reviews so that, where further steps and measures are needed, we can take action to ensure we are making a difference.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): My question is about violent assaults on rough sleepers. I am sure that most Members—indeed, most right-minded people—have been horrified and felt revulsion at the recent attacks on people who are already in an extremely weak and vulnerable position and, in particular, at the fact that some of the perpetrators have filmed their attacks and circulated them on social media as though they were some perverted form of sport or entertainment. What further action can the Minister take on this front? Will he ensure, for instance, that the relevant statutory agencies have drawn up plans to identify the potential threat and to offer protection against it for vulnerable homeless people?

James Brokenshire: Such examples are utterly repugnant and will, I know, be absolutely condemned by everyone in the House. We are talking about some of the most vulnerable people who are out on the streets, and the fact that they can be preyed upon and the purpose is somehow to provide entertainment is disgusting. We are working with the Home Office, which is taking steps to bring together police and crime commissioners to deal with the policing aspects. We need to look at the issue on a number of fronts to ensure that action is taken. The rough-sleeping strategy refers to the number of assaults and the greater propensity to victimise those who are out on the streets. That is unacceptable, which is why we will continue to work with the Home Office.

Point of Order

11.41 am

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to you for accepting it. I believe that it is my duty as a Back Bencher to hold the British Government to account, but that is only possible if the Government act with transparency. PricewaterhouseCoopers has written a report on HS2 that confirms that the line will cost taxpayers at least 25% more than similar schemes in other countries. The Department for Transport has refused to publish the report for two years, but, following a series of written parliamentary questions, I managed to secure confirmation that it would be published before the House rises for Christmas. We are still waiting for that report, Mr Speaker. Can you advise me and other Members how we can go about holding to account a Department that is intent on shirking scrutiny?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me notice of his intention to raise it.

I will start by making the obvious point that the House has not yet risen for Christmas, and the Government therefore have a few hours in which to deliver on their stated intention to publish the report before the recess. Meanwhile, the hon. Gentleman has made his concern very clear. It is on the record and will be visible to all in the *Official Report*, and it has been heard by those sitting on the Treasury Bench.

Beyond that, I would say to the hon. Gentleman—who is a perspicacious and indefatigable Member of the House—that he has the opportunity presented by the business question. I hope that he will not be beetling out of the Chamber too quickly, because he will have the chance to raise the matter with the Leader of the House if he so wishes. The incentive exists, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman is suitably enticed.

Business of the House

11.43 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I ask the Leader of the House for the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing Monday 7 January 2019 will be as follows:

MONDAY 7 JANUARY—The draft Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, followed by a debate on the fifth report from the Committee on Standards, “Implications of the Dame Laura Cox report for the House’s standards system: Initial proposals”, followed by a general debate on children’s social care in England. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 8 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Finance (No.3) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 9 JANUARY—Proceedings on a business motion relating to section 13(1)(B) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, followed by a debate on section 13(1)(B) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

THURSDAY 10 JANUARY—Continuation of debate on section 13(1)(B) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

FRIDAY 11 JANUARY—Subject to the proceedings on the business motion, the House may meet to continue the debate on section 13(1)(B) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

On the 36th and final business question of the year, I would like to pay particular tribute to Brendon Mulvihill, Les Stockwell and Noel Kirby, who all retire from the Commons this Christmas with a combined 120 years of service between them. It is that kind of knowledge and dedication that makes Parliament such a wonderful place for the rest of us to work, and their service is very much appreciated by all of us.

The online publication of “Erskine May” was such a popular early Christmas present last week that I am pleased to be able to come to the House with one last pre-recess Christmas offering: anyone looking for a last-minute Christmas gift for their colleagues will now find that the “MPs’ Guide to Procedure” has been published, and I recommend every colleague might like to pick up a copy, and we are grateful for the hard work of the House staff in producing this.

On the final business questions of 2018, I would like to pay tribute to, and wish a very merry Christmas to, all the staff of Parliament: from the doorkeepers and caterers to the cleaners and the clerks, you all deserve a very well-earned rest.

It has been a busy year in Parliament and I know there are challenging days and big decisions ahead of us—there is no denying that. I would like to say at such an important time for Parliament that I know that, despite our differences, every Member comes to this place to do right by their constituents and their country. We should always remember that what brings us together is stronger than what divides us, and I pay tribute to all colleagues across this House for their commitment. With that in mind, I wish all Members a very happy and restful Christmas and the very best for 2019.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for her business statement. It is a very interesting business statement, but before turning to it may I ask this question of the Leader of the House? She confirmed in replying to me on the draft Markets in Financial Instruments (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018 that if a “reasonable request” was made for a debate, she would allow it. I thought I had made a reasonable request last week, but it appears to have been pushed through without a debate in a deferred Division. I also ask her to look at the question of statutory instruments. This issue was raised by the shadow Chancellor, who says that sometimes statutory instruments do not seem to have a named Minister. I am not sure that that is the correct way to proceed as there are wide-ranging powers. Will the Leader of the House look at the statutory instruments, so that we do not have a “To whom it may concern” on them?

I also asked about the draft Universal Credit (Managed Migration) Regulations 2018. Given that the new Secretary of State said yesterday when speaking to the Select Committee on Work and Pensions that she was not going to follow the prescribed time limit, may I ask that the Government withdraw this now, pending the results of the pilot scheme, to stop the full transition?

And where is the NHS 10-year plan? The Prime Minister did not answer that question yesterday in response to the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston).

Turning to the business, we have a debate on Wednesday, on Thursday and possibly on Friday. It cannot have been difficult to give us the following week’s business, too. I can do it: Monday 14 January, continuation of the debate on the European Union withdrawal Act; Tuesday 15 January, debate on the European withdrawal Act, and the meaningful vote. The Prime Minister said in her statement this week:

“I can confirm today that we intend to return to the meaningful vote debate in the week commencing 7 January and hold the vote the following week.”—[*Official Report*, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 528.]

I hope she is true to her word and we do not have to rely on lip-readers. I ask the Leader of the House if this will be a new motion on a new deal or the old deal with an explanatory note. Do those hon. and right hon. Members who have already spoken get to speak again, and do those who did not speak before get to speak first now?

The Prime Minister pulled the meaningful vote, saying she had heard from hon. Members, but she had not because there were still two days of debate left—and former Ministers were among those waiting to speak—so let’s slay that unicorn. She had not heard from the House in a vote: it was just what the Government thought the House was going to do. I had not realised that the Government had additional powers of telepathy; I wonder if that is in “Erskine May”. I know the Prime Minister wants the Opposition to help her with her deal, so let’s slay that unicorn. The Prime Minister went to the EU with her red lines and her negotiating position. She cannot expect hon. Members now to come to her aid when she did not even consult us on her red lines in the first place. We in the Opposition were gagged.

What do businesses say? A Bristol-based online retailer said that, unless there is a Christmas Brexit miracle, he will move part of his business to Germany in January because of impending tariffs. The Institute of Directors said that business leaders were “tearing their hair out” at the current state of negotiations, and that “the last thing businesses needed today was more uncertainty”.

The British Chambers of Commerce called on politicians to “redouble efforts” to stop a no-deal Brexit. The Cabinet is split on a managed no-deal and, it seems, on a second referendum.

I have a Christmas quiz, so fingers on buzzers. Who said this:

“The Conservative Party is suffering something like a nervous breakdown. To watch the Tories in the Commons is to watch a group that has lost much of its self discipline. Members openly insult each other, the leader has only just survived a vote of confidence, and the pro-Brexit European Research Group of backbenchers appears to have its own whipping system and policy platform”?

No, it was not the Leader of the Opposition, but Lord Finkelstein, writing yesterday in *The Times*.

Yesterday the Prime Minister was like a pantomime dame. The Government are like “Whacky Races”, or perhaps the spin-off, “The Perils of Penelope Pitstop”, with the Prime Minister as Penelope Pitstop, stopping off at EU capitals and being pursued by the Ant Hill Mob—the no-dealers, chasing unicorns. The Prime Minister has phoned all her friends and taken away all the answers, right and wrong, by pulling the vote, and she has failed to ask the audience. Can the Leader of the House guarantee that there will be a vote in the week commencing 14 January, just as the Prime Minister has stated in Parliament?

I too welcome the new procedure guide—many Members will have been accosted by the Chairman of Ways and Means as he handed them out in Portcullis House. I want to mention the colleagues who worked so hard on it, particularly Joanna Dodd. Thank you to Joanna and all her colleagues.

I want to thank you, Mr Speaker, and everyone who works in your office for all their support—they are the epitome of grace under pressure. I also thank the Deputy Speakers and all the House staff. Let us remember that it is the Clerk’s last Christmas in post. I thank the Serjeant at Arms; Phil and his team of doorkeepers; the House of Commons Library; the official reporters; the catering and cleaning staff; the postal workers; the police officers who provide additional security and back-up for the doorkeepers; and all the security officers on the estate.

We too sadly say goodbye and good luck to our three extremely experienced House staff who are leaving in January. Brendon Mulvihill has been with the House Service for 36 years, as head office keeper and head of service delivery. Les Stockwell is a service delivery manager with 42 years of experience. Noel Kirby has 41 years as a service delivery manager. Together, they have supported the House through 10 general elections. Les, you have been very helpful to me personally. I hope that they will all come back and see the House that they built, passing on their advice and support of this unique place, helping us to do our work for our constituents, understanding that this is a workplace, not just a visitor attraction.

I also want to mention MP4 and their latest release, which is quite significant because all the money raised goes to the charity Crisis. I also thank the Opposition Chief Whip and his office, and of course my staff. I wish all right hon. and hon. Members a peaceful Christmas and all good wishes for 2019.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady for her many different points, and for her good wishes to the House. She raised a number of points on statutory instruments,

and I have heard her request clearly. She will know that the Government have a good record in responding to reasonable requests from the Opposition for time for debates on the Floor of the House. We will continue to discuss such requests through the usual channels.

The hon. Lady made a point about designated Ministers with responsibility for statutory instruments, but I am not entirely sure that I caught it, so I will have to look it up in *Hansard* and write to her. To update the House, though, more than 290 Brexit statutory instruments have now been laid for Parliament to scrutinise, and very good progress is being made. We continue to provide as smooth a flow as possible for the sifting Committees in this House and the other place. We are quite clear that we have enough time to get all those urgent Brexit statutory instruments through. I hope that that reassures the House. The hon. Lady asked specifically about the universal credit statutory instrument; I shall take that away and take it up with the Secretary of State on her behalf.

The hon. Lady asked where the NHS 10-year plan is. She will be aware that our long-term plan for the NHS will see funding grow by £394 million more a week in real terms by 2023-24. That is the biggest investment in our NHS ever committed by a Government, and it is great news for the NHS. The NHS itself is writing its long-term plan for how it will use that money to provide a better service for patients, and we look forward to seeing that as soon as it is available.

The hon. Lady asked about the second week back after the Christmas recess. The business of the House will of course be subject to the motion, which will be put to the House on 9 January. There will then be the opportunity for the House to agree the business. She asked whether there will be a new motion; that will of course be subject to what the Prime Minister comes back with. As she has made clear, she is seeking legal reassurances on the issues around the backstop. Whether MPs will speak twice in the debate is a matter for you, Mr Speaker. It is matter for the Chair as to who speaks in debates.

Let me be clear: the hon. Lady suggested that the Prime Minister has not spoken to the Opposition, but she very much has. Throughout this Parliament the Government have been seeking to speak to Opposition Members closely and collaboratively about their concerns about the Brexit preparations. There were more than 280 hours of debate in the Chambers on the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, and it took more than 11 months for that Bill to go through Parliament. The hon. Lady will appreciate that there is a huge amount of consultation, and the Prime Minister is seeking to provide reassurance. If the hon. Lady wants uncertainty to be gone, she and her right hon. and hon. colleagues must take seriously the proposal that the Prime Minister will put before the House and seriously consider voting for it. That is the way to get rid of uncertainty for the country.

Finally, I should point out to the hon. Lady that Penelope Pitstop always wins through in the end. All the rotters and cads around her get defeated and she always wins.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My right hon. Friend should recall that Penelope Pitstop was opposed by a man called Dick Dastardly, who was completely incompetent and lost out every time.

[Mr Iain Duncan Smith]

May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to an issue of significant importance? I am a sponsor of Lord McColl's Bill on improvements to modern-day slavery legislation. I recognise that it will never see the light of day in this Chamber, but will my right hon. Friend use her good offices to speak to her right hon. Friends in the Home Office and recognise that this great thing that the Conservative party introduced—this was the first Parliament in the world to introduce a modern slavery Bill, and we did that to help to release those people suffering—now needs serious adjustments to ensure that those who suffer persecution can be protected by being allowed longer stays in this country? I urge her to use her good offices to persuade the Home Office to extend that time, or to schedule a debate in the House on a possible extension to the time for which victims of modern slavery may stay in the UK. Otherwise, they risk being re-trafficked, and we would never forgive ourselves if that happened.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. All of us in this House are proud of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which the Prime Minister passed when she was Home Secretary. It is vital that we keep ahead of problems. It is extraordinary and utterly unacceptable that slavery still exists to this day. The Government have done a lot to protect against violence against women and girls. Through the 2015 Act, we will continue to review any steps that need to be taken to improve on the work that has already gone ahead.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next year? As we remember particular issues, it is worth while noting that tomorrow marks the 30th anniversary of the Lockerbie tragedy, the biggest single act of terrorism perpetrated on British soil.

Well, there does not seem to be much sign of Christmas cheer in this place, does there? Yesterday, the House practically descended into a grotesque pantomime of, "He says, she says". The sight of the party of Government reduced to nothing other than a furious mob was as bizarre as it was unedifying. The scenes from yesterday were simply appalling, and constituents have got in touch to say just how embarrassed they felt about how this place conducted itself. As Rome was burning, we were deciphering what the Leader of the Opposition muttered under his breath with speech analysts. For the Leader of the House to raise the temperature in the way she did yesterday was simply irresponsible. She is the Leader of the House and she should be lowering the temperature, not lighting the touch paper. In this place, our favourite Christmas film is not "It's a Wonderful Life"—it is "Hate Actually".

As we leave today, we leave this country on the very brink. Not only have we arrived at the cliff edge, but the front wheels are starting to topple over. And from us it is nothing other than a cursory, "Merry Christmas, British people, see you in 17 days", as they look on with bemused Brexmas horror. But what happens when we get back? The Leader of the House has to make this clear today: do we have a resumption or a new debate when we come back to the meaningful vote? Will all the previous amendments, particularly the one tabled by

the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), still stand? I know that she now personally favours the chaos of a no deal, but the rest of the country do not and she will not get that past this House. When I asked her the last time, a few weeks ago—she will remember her response to me—whether the meaningful vote definitely, without condition, would go ahead, she said it most definitely would. So I ask her today, once again: will this meaningful vote definitely happen at the time specified by the Prime Minister, yes or no? We will not accept any other attempts to remove this.

Lastly, Mr Speaker, may I wish you all the very best for this Christmas? I hope you have time to get yourself a peaceful Christmas. Of course, I want to extend that to the staff in this House, who I believe will be glad to be shot of the lot of us for a couple of weeks. I am sure they are going to enjoy being clear of Members of Parliament bothering them. Mr Speaker, 2018 was Brexit crisis year, and it is almost unbelievable to think that 2019 could be so much worse. So to everybody across this House, let me say: enjoy your Christmas and, more importantly, enjoy it while you still can.

Andrea Leadsom: I would not dream of calling the hon. Gentleman a bit of a Grinch, because that might be unparliamentary language, Mr Speaker. First, I wish to join him in paying tribute, in memoriam, to those who suffered from that appalling, horrific incident in Lockerbie 30 years ago. Many will never get over it and our hearts go out to them at this time.

The hon. Gentleman and I worked very hard on the complaints procedure and on the culture change in this place, seeking to treat everybody who works here and comes here with dignity and respect. So I simply do not accept his accusation that what happened yesterday was trivial. It is very important that we in this Chamber do act as if we know how to behave. We need to be a role model if we are to succeed in changing the culture of this place.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the meaningful vote debate. As he knows, it will be coming back on the first week back. There will be a business of the House motion on 9 January, so the House will decide exactly the terms on which and for how long that motion is debated. He asks specifically about the amendment in the name of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield. In simple terms the answer to that is, yes, paragraph 11 of the order of 4 December remains an order of this House. That has not changed. And merry Christmas to the hon. Gentleman.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I, too, want to wish the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and everybody else a happy Christmas. It has been a busy year and I am looking forward to 2019 optimistically nevertheless. The Leader of the House set out the dates for the start of the debate. When is the end of the debate, when we will have the meaningful vote?

Andrea Leadsom: There will be a motion of the House on 9 January, for the House to agree or reject, that will set out the terms of the final days of the debate and the vote.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am grateful to the Leader of the House for the business statement. I understand that, because of the nature of the business,

the Backbench Business Committee will not get any time in the first week back after the Christmas and new year recess, but I hope that we will get some time early in the new year. Yesterday's almost unprecedented events meant that one of our debates had to be postponed. It was an important debate on mental health first aid in the workplace. As a result of the two Government statements and the almost unprecedented number of points of order, the debate had to be—[HON. MEMBERS: "And an emergency debate."] I am sorry. I try to resist heckling because of my position, Madam Deputy Speaker, but don't worry; I will roll with the punches.

That said, I am glad to see that this afternoon we have a healthy amount of time for the important debate on the Rohingya refugee crisis, and of course we must not forget that our pre-Adjournment debate on matters to be raised before the Adjournment will take place in Westminster Hall at 1.30 pm. Members not taking part in the Rohingya debate will be very welcome to come along.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you, Mr Speaker and the Leader of the House a happy, peaceful and restful Christmas. I also wish all our constituents a happy, peaceful and restful, but also warm and comfortable, Christmas. They deserve it.

Andrea Leadsom: First, may I say it is such a pleasure to work with the hon. Gentleman? He sets a fine example of how to chair a Committee in this House. It is always a great pleasure. I would point out to him that on Monday 7 January there will in fact be a Backbench Business Committee debate on children's social care in England—that is in the first week back—but I appreciate he has a long list of requests from Back Benchers, and I always seek to accommodate them.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): This winter, notwithstanding extra investment, health services will struggle with extra patients and crowded schools with extra pupils, and our roads are more and more congested. At the heart of this is the level of population growth. The population is growing faster than at any time for almost a century, at a rate of 400,000 a year. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate on that subject? Much of the growth is due to immigration—not all, but much—which of course is at record levels. Such a debate would allow us to explore what Chesterton said:

"The way to love anything is to realise that it might be lost".

With our green and pleasant land concreted over, our public services buckling under the pressure and civil society under strain, all that we cherish might be lost unless we act now.

Andrea Leadsom: I thought for one awful moment my right hon. Friend was going to say that I personally needed to do something about the population explosion, and I was scrabbling around to think what I could do. He is absolutely right to point out the need to keep the balance between building enough houses, which is a top priority for all right hon. and hon. Members—we all want to see people suitably housed—and preserving this green and pleasant land we live in. I completely understand where he is coming from. Under the Immigration Bill, which is shortly to be debated, and of course the meaningful vote debate, there will be plenty of opportunities to discuss the specific issue of how the growing population can best be served.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Moving away from the Brexit issue, can we have an early debate on the situation in Syria and the fight against Daesh, given the statement by the US President, the fact that the US is going to withdraw its forces from the region and hand over to the Russians, the Iranians and Turkey, and that the French Government have made it clear they will remain engaged in Syria? Can we have an early debate or statement explaining what our Government's position on the situation is?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this very concerning issue. We do remain committed to securing peace in Syria and fully support the UN-led Geneva process. Securing the lasting defeat of Daesh is a top priority for the Government. The Foreign Secretary made a written statement yesterday explaining that Daesh is being defeated militarily. It is estimated by the global coalition that Daesh has lost over 99% of the territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria.

At the same time, it is vital that the UK remains at the forefront of the international humanitarian response. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the UK has committed over £2.7 billion to Syria since the start of the conflict, which is our biggest ever response to a humanitarian crisis. He will be aware that we have Defence questions on 14 January and he may want to raise this issue then.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I join with others in thanking Les, Noel and Brendon for their years of service to this House.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the criteria for awarding city status? Recently, the area that I represent was voted the happiest place in the country, and possibly in the world, so I think it would be excellent if happiness could be added to the criteria.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish everyone a happy Christmas.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend seems to make his constituency gaining city status a feature of his pre-recess bids. Having visited it recently with him, I have to say that it is a very happy place, but perhaps that is because he represents it so well. He will be aware that the criteria used to judge applications are determined once a city status competition has been called. The Government do not, I am afraid, have plans at present for a city status competition. However, I urge him to make representations to the Cabinet Office for the next time.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): May I extend my Christmas and happy new year wishes to the whole House?

On a very serious matter, the Leader of the House will be aware that yesterday there was a report in *The Times* about a leaked document from the Department for Work and Pensions that outlines different planning for Brexit scenarios. In particular, on a no-deal Brexit, the document warns of increased poverty, increased homelessness and a potential £12 billion cost to our country in increased unemployment costs. I note that we have seen online that the Government overnight—in the past 24 hours—have quietly edited every no-deal technical notice to take out the word "unlikely" from the sentence,

"in the unlikely event of no deal".

[*Luciana Berger*]

This is a very serious situation. In her opening remarks, the Leader of the House talked about the need for reducing uncertainty and for us all therefore to vote in support of the withdrawal agreement. We are not going to get the chance to do that at the very least—if it goes ahead—for 24 days. Why is she not bringing the House back at the very least on 2 January, when most of the country goes back to work, to contend with the uncertainty that is causing a crisis in the country?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raised the issue of a leaked document and she will be aware that we do not comment on leaked documents. At the same time, she will also be aware that any competent Government must always plan for all eventualities. That is not to predict that those are going to happen, but to ensure that we are never caught out by circumstances beyond our control. The Government will prepare for all eventualities and it is right that we do so.

The hon. Lady asked about bringing back the meaningful vote. As has been explained by the Prime Minister in the many statements she has made to this House, she has listened very carefully to the beginning of the debate on the meaningful vote and to the representations made right across the House about the grave concerns, particularly in regard to the backstop. The Prime Minister is determined to get the legal reassurances that hon. and right hon. Members want to see, and we will return with that vote once we are more confident that the House will support it. That is what will deliver the country from the uncertainty and that is what the Prime Minister is committed to achieving.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): We cannot fail to notice that the high street has been on its knees. Indeed, many shops and pubs have been closing. I know there was a business rate relief of £51,000 in the Chancellor's Budget. However, in a high house and property value area such as mine, £51,000 really is not helping at all. May we have an urgent debate on what more we can do to recognise that there is a cliff edge for very many businesses in prosperous areas and they get no relief whatsoever from the Chancellor's business rate relief? Please may we debate as a matter of urgency why we should have not a cliff edge, but an escalator to encourage businesses to survive?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. We know that the high street is changing and that more people are using online shopping routes. On the other hand, we also know that Britain's retailers support over 3 million jobs and contribute over £90 billion to our economy, so it is absolutely right that we do everything we can to support them. She observed that we are cutting business rates, but pointed out that that has not helped in her own constituency. I would say to her that the Government and retailers come together through our Retail Sector Council. I encourage her to raise this in the Finance Bill debate on the second day back from recess, when she can discuss directly with Treasury Ministers what more can be done.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate in which I am sure she, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and, indeed, the Prime Minister

would like to take part in order to set out their different or respective views on where next for Brexit? Such a debate would highlight the rather clueless, rudderless, fractured nature of our Government's position on Brexit, thereby, I am absolutely certain, causing the Leader of the Opposition with immediate effect to sign the cross-party motion tabled by the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the Green party and the Liberal Democrats—early-day motion 1943, the motion of no confidence in the Government—which I am sure the Leader of the House would want to make time available for us to debate.

Andrea Leadsom: I am not quite sure what the question was, but let me just say that the Government's policy is absolutely clear: we will be leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019. The Prime Minister is working very hard on getting the changes that can secure the confidence of the House in her proposal, which will give certainty to businesses, travellers and people right across the United Kingdom about our future as we leave the European Union.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last weekend, students from North London Collegiate School raised a whacking £50,000 towards the National Brain Appeal's immunotherapy fund to combat brain cancer. Very sadly, the former headteacher of the school, who was the headteacher for 20 years, was recently diagnosed with brain cancer, but that treatment is not available on the national health service. When we come back, may we have a debate in Government time on what measures can be taken to ensure that the national health service funds this all-important treatment for the people who are suffering?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very serious and important issue. I am sure that brings back to all of us the memory of our friend Baroness Jowell, who tragically died as the result of brain cancer. It is a very serious issue, and I am sure some of the measures on particular treatments will be brought forward in the NHS 10-year plan. However, I encourage my hon. Friend to raise it directly with Ministers at the next Health and Social Care questions.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I am still not quite clear from what the Leader of the House has said why we cannot have a date for a final vote on the EU issue. She has announced Friday 11 January, but not the following day of the debate. That aside, may we have a debate urgently on the question of retail crime? Many shop workers face an increasing number of attacks over the Christmas period, and we need to put some protections in place. We have seen an increase in retail crime, with the cost of shoplifting offences rising to £700 million. It is an important issue, so may we have an urgent debate on that as well as an answer on the European question?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made a statement on Monday, her sixth in 19 sitting days, in which she confirmed that we intend to return to the meaningful vote debate in the week commencing on 7 January and to hold the vote the following week, which is the week commencing on 14 January. Further details will be set out in the business of the House motion, which, as I have confirmed in today's business statement, will be considered on Wednesday 9 January, before we continue the debate on the deal that day and for the remainder of that week.

On the right hon. Gentleman's other point, I understand that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), has offered to meet him to discuss his particular concerns. If he has any problem with that meeting and he would like me to take the issue up directly with her, I would be delighted to do so.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): May we have time for a debate on compelling heavy goods vehicles to use commercial sat-navs to stop them using rural roads as cut-throughs, which is affecting the villages of Alfriston, Ditchling and Newick in my constituency? Commercial sat-navs would enable enforcement action to be taken against those who flout the height and weight restrictions, and it would make our rural roads safer for all road users.

Andrea Leadsom: I think my hon. Friend will find a lot of support for that from around the Chamber. In my constituency we have enormous problems with HGVs getting stuck together when they are trying to pass on a narrow country road. She will be aware that we have Transport questions in our first week back, on 10 January, and I encourage her to raise the issue directly with Ministers then.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): This morning on Radio 4, speaking about the prospect of a managed no deal, the Leader of the House used the words "in the event votes don't take place". Why?

Andrea Leadsom: What I meant was, in the event that such a vote was not passed by the House. Just to be clear, the vote will take place, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said, in the week commencing 14 January.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): In July last year, I held a Westminster Hall debate on drones and aviation. In his excellent reply, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) promised certain measures, which came into effect in July this year. Certain others will come into effect next year. The crisis at Gatwick airport at the moment shows just how important those measures are, and how they have to be enforced and, I believe, taken further. May we have another debate on drones and aviation safety, to ensure that the public are not put at risk and that passengers are not deprived of their holidays, their honeymoons and their visits to loved ones by the entirely irresponsible, and indeed criminal, actions of these perpetrators?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings for the action they oversaw to ensure that the Government brought forward legislation to make it a criminal offence carrying a sentence of up to five years and unlimited fines to interfere with an aeroplane using a drone. That was absolutely essential. Our hearts go out to all those who are desperately trying to go on holiday or arrive in the United Kingdom via Gatwick at the moment. What is happening is absolutely unacceptable. I know that the police are doing everything they can to catch the operators of those drones. My hon. Friend has made an extremely good point, and I encourage him to raise it at Transport questions on Thursday 10 January.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May we have a statement on Government procurement? The Health Secretary says that he is the world's biggest buyer of fridges, which he is buying for medicines in preparation for a no-deal Brexit. Can the Leader of the House tell us exactly how many fridges the Government are going to be purchasing?

Andrea Leadsom: It might surprise the hon. Gentleman to learn that I cannot tell him exactly how many fridges—or indeed any other specific items he might like to raise—are involved. Had he given me prior notice of his question, I might have had a stab at it. The Government are ensuring that we are prepared for all eventualities, as any competent Government should do.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): Merry Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker. Emergency debates, extended exchanges on points of order and overrunning Question Times have contributed to the public's perception that we are all overly fixated on Brexit. The Leader of the House will be aware of Standing Order No. 21, which requires that questions are not taken any later than one hour after the beginning of the House's proceedings. Will she arrange for a statement, and perhaps even a debate, on the importance of that Standing Order being enforced, so that we can maximise the time available for other business, rather than being fixed by questions on Brexit?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have had quite a number of challenges to business as a result of emergency debates being brought forward. This is certainly something that I always keep a close eye on, but I would encourage him to raise this matter in the first place with the Chair of the Procedure Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), to see whether it is something that his Committee would like to consider further.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): May we have a debate on the privatisation of the Forensic Science Service, following the scandal of 10,500 criminal cases that could have been affected by result-tampering at the private firm Radox Testing Services, based in Manchester, which the police have described as the worst evidence breach in living memory?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important point. It was quite a shock to see that report, and I think that all hon. Members will have been concerned about it. She is absolutely right to raise the matter, and she might like to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can get an answer directly from Ministers.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Leader of the House's announcement that we will have a chance to debate the conclusions of Dame Laura Cox's review on the first day back after the recess. Given what we have seen this week, could she arrange through the usual channels for one of the Deputy Speakers—either you, Madam Deputy Speaker, or the right hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dame Eleanor Laing)—to be in the Chair for that debate, to show exactly how culture change will be driven in this House?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his advice and suggestion. I think I am right in saying that it is a matter for the Chair as to who sits in

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

the Chair, but he has placed his views on record and I am sure that they will be listened to carefully.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I wish you and everyone else a very merry Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker.

On a more sombre note, my constituent Cole Thomson, aged six, has repeated paralysing epileptic seizures, and his mother Lisa has been battling for access to medicinal cannabis to try to save his life. She states:

“A few weeks ago, Cole was running around kicking a ball. Now he can barely lift his foot. I still can’t believe how quickly he has deteriorated. This is a horrible nightmare I can’t wake up from every night and morning, watching my poor boy suffer.”

I have already written to the Home Secretary and to Scotland’s chief medical officer for guidance on the new regulations, but I have had no response yet. Will the Leader of the House ask her colleague to give me an urgent response or to provide an early statement on how we can do everything possible to access medicinal cannabis for Cole in order to save his life?

Andrea Leadsom: I am so sorry to hear about Cole’s problems, and I wish him and his family well, particularly at this time of year. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise his case in the Chamber, and if she would like to email me, I can take it up on her behalf and seek the answer that she is looking for.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Please may we have a statement on whether the House of Commons rules of behaviour have been highlighted not only to new colleagues but to all colleagues? I personally have found them very helpful, although I do not always get everything right, as you have highlighted a few times, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yesterday’s shenanigans in the Chamber highlighted the fact that some of our longer-standing colleagues also need to be reminded of the etiquette of this place. May we go into the new year with a whole new tone in this place so that we can conduct ourselves with the dignity expected of us, particularly as we bring forward the very difficult Brexit procedures?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. As she knows, many hon. and right hon. Members across the Chamber have worked very hard on culture change, on bringing forward a complaints procedure and on setting out a behaviour code for how people should treat each other, wherever they work in the Palace of Westminster or in our constituency offices. I hope that we will start to see the fruits of all that effort during 2019.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): We will need some more time in the new year to debate Yemen. We had the statement yesterday, in which the Foreign Secretary helpfully responded to my question about my constituent Jackie Saleh Morgan, whose daughter Safia was kidnapped from Cardiff in the 1980s. He said that

“we will do everything we can to support his constituent and their family in the way that he wants.”—[*Official Report*, 19 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 840.]

The way I want them to be supported is, when she and her family get out of the country, through getting personal British consular support in Cairo to get their

British passports and to get back home to their family in Cardiff. Will the Leader of the House pass that message on to the Foreign Secretary before Christmas, and tell Ministers and officials that that is what we want?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his commitment to looking after the interests of his constituent. He will appreciate that we are now hopeful that, for the first time since the start of the conflict, there might be a window in which both sides can be encouraged to stop the killing and start negotiating, which is absolutely vital. He will also appreciate that the Foreign Secretary has shown a huge amount of personal commitment to this issue. If he wants to write to me following business questions, I will be happy to pass his message on.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Happy Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

May we have a debate on the timeliness of business in this House? My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) has already raised the issue of the proliferation of SO24 debates and urgent questions, but there is a big problem about question times not starting and ending when they are supposed to. Questions to the Prime Minister now lasts between 45 minutes and an hour. As a new Member of this House, I find it very strange that the timetabling in this House is so very, very fluid, that meetings are disrupted and that constituents are put out by the fact that things do not happen when they should. May we have a debate on putting down clear times for things to start and stop?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter. It is something that has been raised with me a number of times by various Members across the Chamber. Keeping to times is important. There is flexibility with some questions sessions and so on. They tend to be a matter for the Chair in each session, but if my hon. Friend wants to raise this issue again with the Chair of the Procedure Committee, it might be appropriate that the Committee looks at it further to see whether there is anything more that we need to do.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the whole House a very merry Christmas.

The Government have taken more than £4 billion out of the mineworkers’ pension scheme over the past two decades, yet they have not paid in a single penny. May we have an urgent debate in Government time to discuss this unfair surplus sharing arrangement and how we can get a better deal for miners and their families?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point. As I recall from my time as an Energy Minister, there was a clearly agreed sharing arrangement whereby the Government undertook to underwrite certain returns for mineworkers in return for which, should there be surpluses, some of that would go back to the taxpayer. I believe that that is the point to which she alludes, but we do have Work and Pensions questions on the first day back, 7 January, and I encourage her to raise it directly with Ministers there.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Further to the questions raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Wells (James Heappey) and for Harborough (Neil O’Brien),

I wonder whether my right hon. Friend agrees that we lost a very important debate on mental health first aid last night because of an SO24 debate, which was apparently very popular, but which then in fact ran short because there were not that many people who wanted to speak in it. Does she agree that the Procedure Committee should specifically look at whether the SO24 procedure is functioning as it was intended and indeed in the interests of our constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly share my hon. Friend's concern. I encourage all those who have questions about how some of the procedures in this place work to raise them with members of the Procedure Committee, who may be willing to take them up further and look into them.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all the staff of the House a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

This question has been raised already, but I would like some clarity from the Leader of the House. Many of my constituents are currently stuck at Gatwick because of the flying of illegal drones in the airspace. Can we have an urgent debate or statement from the Government on the regulation of drones, particularly around airspace, and the criminal sanctions that go along with illegally flying drones, which could endanger many hundreds of lives? I say that particularly as this is the anniversary of the disaster at Lockerbie 30 years ago. Will she join me in congratulating London North Eastern Railway, a train company in public ownership, which is offering my constituents free travel back to Edinburgh today if they are caught up at Gatwick?

Andrea Leadsom: I am pleased to hear that the hon. Gentleman's local train company is offering a solution. It is awful for passengers who are stuck, or trying to get on or off a plane or to land at Gatwick. It is absolutely unacceptable. The Government passed legislation very swiftly to introduce a criminal sanction for those who seek to interfere with a plane using a drone. There are now sentences of up to five years and unlimited fines for such activities. He is absolutely right to point out that we need to do more. A consultation is under way, and the Government are committed to making sure that, although drones present fabulous opportunities for things such as delivering medicines or aid and all sorts of commercial uses, regulation keeps up.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Leader of the House will have heard my point of order in relation to the PricewaterhouseCoopers' report on the costings of HS2. Can she arrange for me to have an early Christmas present and ensure that the promises made to me in answer to a written parliamentary question 188155 are honoured?

Andrea Leadsom: I did hear the hon. Gentleman's point of order. He will no doubt be aware that many of my constituents would agree with his concerns. I will certainly look at what can be done and whether we can provide a debate.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Following the launch of its alcohol charter, the drugs, alcohol and justice cross-party parliamentary group, which I co-chair,

wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), seeking a meeting with her—*[Interruption.]* The Minister has just taken her place in the Chamber. It has been several months. Can the Leader of the House have a kindly word with her, reminding her of the group's request?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady's timing was perfect. I can tell her that my hon. Friend is saying that she did not know anything about it and that she would be delighted to meet her.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins) *indicated assent.*

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Being elected to this place was one of the proudest moments of my life, but I was embarrassed to be a Member of this place yesterday with the antics that went on in the Chamber. Of course we must treat each other with respect, but I wish that Members had shown a similar sense of outrage and urgency when the Cox report was published as they did yesterday. I am very pleased that we will have a debate on the first day back in the new year, but will there be a votable motion as a result of that debate so that we can actually implement the procedures necessary to investigate and deal with these historical allegations?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, the hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Specifically, the Standards Committee has brought forward its own review of what steps can be urgently taken to provide more lay member input on things such as voting and assessing any findings against Members of this place. Those are its initial suggestions of steps that we can urgently take. There will be a motion—I am just reviewing it now. Specifically, I am keen to make sure that the complainants' confidentiality, which was such a core point of all the work that we did in the original setting up of the complaints procedure, is upheld. There will be a votable motion. It will change the Standing Orders of this House in certain small ways, but the Standards Committee is clear that there is more work to do. There will also be the six-month review of the complaints procedure itself, which will begin in late January. I will be talking to the House more about that in due course.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the early hours of Sunday 9 December, just two weeks ago, Chinese authorities launched a large-scale crackdown on a church in Sichuan province, arresting some 100 members as they worshipped their God. Twelve members of that church are still in detention, including the pastor, Wang Yi, and his wife. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement, or a debate, on this very pressing issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very serious issue about the rights of everyone to be able to freely practise their religion. He often raises such issues and he is absolutely right to do so. This whole House deplors any type of discrimination against anyone for their religious views. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise the matter directly with Ministers.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you and all the staff a happy Christmas.

I have tabled a written question about the Civil Nuclear Constabulary's pension predicament. It has been awaiting an equality impact assessment that was undertaken by the Treasury and then passed to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. In its answer, BEIS tells me that it cannot release it yet until all policy discussions on this matter are complete. May we have a statement on why we are awaiting policy decisions when the request was for the publication of the impact assessment?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I have not had sight of his question, so I am not aware of exactly what the position is. We have BEIS questions on Tuesday 8 January; I encourage him to raise it directly with Ministers then.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): There are many people in the House, across the parties, and outside who have real concerns around some elements of policing across the United Kingdom, which has seen crime going up, including burglary, knife crime and much more. I have tabled early-day motion 1656, signed by 47 cross-party Members, demanding that the Government implement a police royal commission, the first one for 50 years, so that the whole issue of policing and resourcing for the 21st century can be done independently, robustly and properly. Will the Leader of the House advise me of the best way to persuade the Government to implement that police royal commission?

[That this House celebrates the hard work and determination of police officers across the country to serve their community against the backdrop of financial cuts preventing their ability to do so as effectively as they could; notes that it has become difficult to establish precisely what resources the police need long term to act effectively; further notes a Royal Commission has not been carried out for almost 60 years; calls for a new Royal Commission on policing to establish precisely what is required by UK police forces to ensure they continue to deliver a service to the public that is fit for purpose for the next decade; and in the short term backs an immediate boost to police budgets in England and Wales of at least £300 million.]

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue, which gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to all the amazing work of our police forces right across the United Kingdom, particularly at Christmas, when they often do not get to eat their Christmas lunch while the rest of us do. The hon. Gentleman asked about a royal commission. He will be aware that we have just had the police funding review statement in this place, and that we have set out our serious violence strategy as well as the Offensive Weapons Bill. The Government are taking every possible step to try to address the challenge of changing criminal behaviour, including the rise in county lines, knife crime, moped crime and so on. We are dealing with those issues, so it is not considered necessary to have a royal commission.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Although we are all preparing for Christmas and looking forward to the period so that we can get a bit of respite, we have to remember that for many people this time of

year is a time of isolation, increased mental health problems and, indeed, suicide. Would the Leader of the House considering calling a debate in Government time on suicide prevention? Will she also pay tribute to the Think Again campaign in Glasgow, which is calling for permanently staffed, emergency lifeline telephones to be installed along the River Clyde; and to the Spiers family in my constituency who suffered the tragic loss of their son Christopher in the River Clyde two years ago, and are fighting to ensure better life-saving measures on its banks?

Awareness of mental health issues is improving, but that does not reduce the need for practical measures to reach out to people with suicidal thoughts at their most dire moment of need. The hard work of bereaved families who have built up the Think Again campaign with the help of Glasgow community activist Stef Shaw over several years, and the efforts to raise awareness of the issue by Duncan and Margaret Spiers, have turned their own unimaginable losses into hope. The ambition of the Think Again campaign is such that, when these measures are introduced in Glasgow, they plan to expand the campaign to include other cities across the UK. This work represents Glasgow at its best. I hope that the Leader of the House and Glasgow City Council can mark their wonderful efforts in that regard.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to that superb work; it really does sound like a magnificent contribution to trying to alleviate the problem of poor mental health and suicide and so on. Such work is vital, right across the United Kingdom. He will be aware that the Government are putting much more money into solving mental health problems and taking strong action. For example, we have committed nearly £2 million for the Samaritans helpline over the next few years, and the NHS is working towards standards for mental health that are just as ambitious as those for physical health. There is still a long way to go, but I think all Members across the House are united in their determination to see more people supported with their mental health needs.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you and all hon. and right hon. Members a merry Christmas. There are only 103 days until 29 March, and the Government have only just published the draft Environment (Principles and Governance) Bill. In the event of our leaving the EU without a deal, we will have no method of protecting our environment—investigating and prosecuting environmental crimes—without this Bill going through Parliament, so when are we to expect its First Reading? How will sufficient time be made available to ensure this Bill is passed before 29 March?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that all of the *acquis communautaire* was brought into UK law in the EU withdrawal Bill, in order to ensure that all the existing measures—provisions on the bathing quality of our waters, and measures to keep rivers clean, protect our environment and air quality, and so on—are brought into UK law. It is therefore not right to say that there will be no means at all to protect our environment. Very importantly, the UK has brought in new measures through the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We have a 25-year environment plan for England that demonstrates our ambition to be

the first generation to leave our environment in a better place than we found it. As the hon. Gentleman points out, the draft Bill is coming forward, and we will be introducing that Bill. It is our intention that the UK will have the highest environmental standards—among the best in the world—and we will continue to take steps to ensure that that becomes the case.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Just last week, Councillor David Balfour in Grangemouth passed me one of the most harrowing universal credit cases that I have seen so far. The case involved a couple with disabilities who had worked on zero-hours contracts for a period of only five weeks together, and then had their contract terminated, following which they had eight weeks without any income whatever; the husband attempted suicide during that period. This case is genuinely harrowing. I would like to see an urgent statement from Ministers as to how we can rectify intergovernmental Department communications. Despite the best efforts of the Department for Work and Pensions, the problem is that it cannot communicate directly with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and that has prolonged the agony and misery that was almost tragic in this situation.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is raising a very serious constituency case and he is right to do so in the Chamber. He will be aware that the Government have listened very carefully to views raised across the House and have changed the roll-out of universal credit so that anybody is able to get 100% of their first full month's payment upfront on the day they apply for it, if they need to. We have a new contract with Citizens Advice so that it can help people to sign up for universal credit. There are new measures to scrap the seven-day waiting period and to increase the amount that someone can earn before their universal credit begins to be withdrawn. It is a good measure that is designed to help people into work, which is the best way of supporting people to have the security of an income for themselves and their families. With regards to the specific point the

hon. Gentleman raises, we do have DWP questions on 7 January—the first day back—and I encourage him to raise the matter directly with Ministers.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Like the last Quality Street in the tin or the leftover Turkey or nut roast, there is always a leftover; and I am afraid it is me today.

I have been contacted by a number of people in Plymouth who have dialled 999 to request an ambulance and have had to wait hours and hours for one to come. That is not because our paramedics and NHS staff are not working hard enough; it is simply because there are too few of them and too much demand. Could we have a debate in Government time in the new year on the resources we need to keep our emergency services operating at peak efficiency, ensuring that no other people around the country have to wait as long as my constituents have had to in order to get a life-saving ambulance?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is obviously a coffee cream; I think that has got to be the last one in the Quality Street box.

The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that we would all like to pay tribute to the amazing work done by emergency staff, particularly ambulance staff, at this time of year. We have seen emergency admissions via A&E rise by over 6% compared with the same time last year, which means there is a great challenge for all emergency workers. During the build-up to this winter, the Government have provided enough money for ambulance trusts to buy just over 250 state-of-the-art ambulances. We have also provided investment in the 111 service, so that it can move from being a service that can assess and refer to being a service that can consult and complete, in order to try to help people who do not necessarily need to use the ambulance service. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this matter, but the Government remain fully committed to ensuring that we keep pace with the rising demand from our population.

Point of Order

12.47 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me too wish you a very merry Christmas.

Today the Department for Work and Pensions released information on the review of 1.6 million personal independence payment claimants that is taking place following the High Court ruling in December last year which found that the Department had unlawfully discriminated against those experiencing psychological distress. The figures show that there are still 1.5 million claimants left to have a review, many of whom may be forced to wait years to receive that vital social security support that they need and are entitled to. Please can you give me some advice as to how Members can question the figures that have been published today? Given that this is one of six reviews currently being carried out by the Department, it is only fair to assess that the Department is absolutely in chaos in relation to social security.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order. I am sure that the Table Office will offer a lot of advice about different ways in which these issues can be raised, through parliamentary questions and so on. I think the Leader of the House also said that we have DWP questions on the first day back, so I am sure the hon. Lady will raise the matter then. In the meantime, I am also confident that the Treasury Bench will have heard her concerns.

BILL PRESENTED

IMMIGRATION AND SOCIAL SECURITY CO-ORDINATION
(EU WITHDRAWAL)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Sajid Javid, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Karen Bradley, Secretary Amber Rudd, Caroline Nokes and Alok Sharma, presented a Bill to make provision to end rights to free movement of persons under retained EU law and to repeal other retained EU law relating to immigration; to confer power to modify retained direct EU legislation relating to social security co-ordination; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 7 January 2019, and to be printed (Bill 309) with explanatory notes (Bill 309-EN).

Backbench Business

Rohingya Refugee Crisis

12.49 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House is deeply concerned by the ongoing humanitarian crisis facing Rohingya refugees; agrees with the findings of the UN fact-finding mission that genocide and war crimes have been carried out against the Rohingya by senior Myanmar military figures; calls on the Government to pursue an ICC referral for Myanmar through the UN Security Council; and further calls on the Government to put pressure on the United Nations to prevent the repatriation of the Rohingya from Bangladesh to unsafe conditions in Myanmar and continue to provide assistance to Rohingya refugees.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and to my co-sponsor, the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), who co-chairs the all-party parliamentary group on the rights of the Rohingya. I want to also extend my gratitude to my co-chair of the APPG on democracy in Burma, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), and to all Members of Parliament who supported the application for this important debate.

We are deeply concerned about the horrific ongoing crisis affecting Rohingya people in Burma and Bangladesh. We are close to Christmas, and I know that many colleagues would have liked to be here to support this motion if not for family or constituency commitments. The proximity to Christmas should remind us all of our duty to refugees. The Christmas story reminds us of the plight of those displaced from their homes.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for getting this important topic debated in Parliament, because many people out there will think that the British public and its Parliament have forgotten the desperate plight of the Rohingya. Does my hon. Friend agree that, while we commend the Bangladeshi Government for their incredible generosity in dealing with hundreds of thousands of refugees, we must compel our own Government to do a lot more to assist them and to hold to account Aung San Suu Kyi and her regime for the crimes perpetrated against the Rohingya people?

Rushanara Ali: I very much agree with my hon. Friend's sentiments. I hope that the Minister will be able to update us on what action the Government are taking, because we depend on the Foreign Secretary and Foreign Office Ministers to take a leadership role.

Spending time in our warm homes this Christmas will remind us of the conditions in which people are living in the camps in both Burma and Bangladesh. Being with friends and family will remind us of those separated from their loved ones, some forever. At a time of peace and good will, we should recall the fate of the Rohingya people and other refugees around the world who are subject to war, rape, execution and mutilation, their villages burnt and their lives destroyed.

This is not the first time that the House has debated the Rohingya refugee crisis, and it will not be the last. This is one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our time.

The United Nations fact-finding mission concluded that the Burmese military were responsible for

“consistent patterns of serious human rights violations and abuses...in addition to serious violations of international humanitarian law.”

It made concrete recommendations that the Burmese military

“should be investigated and prosecuted in an international criminal tribunal for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.”

And yet so little has been done in practical terms to solve the crisis, provide safety and security for the Rohingya people and bring those responsible to justice.

How did we get here? We know from the history books that human beings only behave like this towards one another after a process of dehumanisation. From Cambodia to Srebrenica, massacres are carried out when communities have been isolated, demonised and presented as subhuman and worthy only of extinction. The Rohingya Muslim minority in Burma have been the subject of decades of systematic segregation and racial discrimination. Much of the forced segregation stems from the citizenship law of 1982, under which full citizenship in Burma is based on membership of one of the national races—a category awarded only to those considered to have settled in Burma prior to 1824, the date of the first occupation by the British. In Burma’s national census, the Muslim minority group was initially allowed to self-identify as Rohingya, but the Government later reversed that freedom and deemed that they could be identified only as Bengali, which they do not accept because they are not Bengali.

Over the past few years, the Rohingya have been indiscriminately targeted by the Burmese military. The August 2017 attacks were the most systematic and the largest in scale, but they were not the first. Attacks in 2012 and 2016 led to the internal displacement of more than 124,000 Rohingya people, who were forced to live in what are effectively prison camps in Rakhine state, with extremely limited access to food, healthcare and shelter. I visited those camps in Rakhine state twice, and the conditions have not got any better. People are arbitrarily deprived of liberty and forced to live in conditions described by the UN deputy relief chief as “beyond the dignity of any people”.

There are echoes of apartheid in Rakhine, with one racial group separated, corralled and delegitimised. There are echoes too of previous genocides, with civilians sent to camps, villages burnt and human rights trampled under military boots. But this is not the 1930s, the ’40s, the ’70s or the ’90s. It is happening in this day and age, as we sit here in the Chamber this Christmas.

Aung San Suu Kyi’s failure to condemn the violence and stand up to the military has been deeply disappointing. While power over security operations constitutionally resides with the military and her power to halt the military offensive is limited, her ability to speak out in defence of the Rohingya is not. She spoke out for democracy and human rights from house arrest and liberated her country, and yet she failed to speak out for the rights of the Rohingya people when a genocide took place.

The 2017 attacks by the Burmese military came after a lengthy campaign initiated by those in power to demonise the Rohingya people using online platforms. Hidden behind fake accounts, military officers exploited the wide reach of social media to promote their divisive rhetoric and create a culture of suspicion and anger.

They created fake news and sent it into the battle against the Rohingya. Of course, incidents of mass violence have happened before, catalysed by other forms of media. In Rwanda in 1994, local radio stations incited Hutus to kill Tutsis. Within 100 days, 800,000 people were dead. While social media platforms cannot be wholly blamed, the UN fact-finding mission singled out Facebook as a tool used to disseminate hate speech and concluded that it played a “determining role” in inciting violence against the Rohingya.

Social media can also be a force for good, as it was in the Arab spring in 2010-11. It is highly influential and can play a positive role. However, it is important that we recognise its capacity to foment division and incite violence—and, in this case, murder. Social media companies have a responsibility to ensure that malicious posts and dehumanising material are removed from their sites without delay. We must ensure that there are regulations and controls to prevent these abuses from happening again.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on her outstanding advocacy of all that is best in the determination of this country to drive a human rights agenda internationally. I visited Myanmar three years ago. It was a beautiful country of immense potential, emerging—we thought—out of an era of authoritarianism, but it is now scarred and shamed by the treatment of the Rohingya. Does she agree that an unambiguous message needs to be sent today that the Government of Myanmar will forever be a pariah state until they end the shameful war crimes against this noble people, the Rohingya?

Rushanara Ali: I share my hon. Friend’s concerns. The Government need to make it absolutely clear to the Burmese military and the Burmese Government that if they continue to carry on like this without progress on this very important issue, they will continue to be seen in a very negative light and as a pariah state. They will face difficulty doing trade, quite rightly, and challenges from the wider international community. If they want to make the transition towards democracy, and want to make sure that human rights are protected, they have to take action to get their country in order to protect people’s rights, including the rights of the Rohingya minority—and other minorities, because the military have been attacking others too.

There are now over 1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Over half the refugees are children, 160,000 of whom are under the age of four. Following the 2017 attacks orchestrated by the Burmese military, some 700,000 Rohingya refugees joined hundreds of thousands who had already fled there following previous periods of targeted attacks, notably in 2012 and 2016. The border pathways are particularly dangerous. Last year, Amnesty International accused the Burmese Government of having laid landmines in the path of fleeing women and children.

In July 2018, I visited Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh with the International Rescue Committee to see for myself the situation of the Rohingya refugees, and to hear about their lives in the camps and how they got there. The overwhelming, immediate impression is the scale of the disaster. Almost 1 million people are now packed densely into only five square miles. During my visit,

[*Rushanara Ali*]

I heard terrifying stories of the brutal violence and persecution that the Rohingya faced at the hands of the military during last year's attacks. The people I met were traumatised, unable to sleep or eat. Daughters were raped in front of their mothers; children were burnt to death in front of their parents. Women and men were separated into different rooms and slaughtered. A father painfully told me of his son and how he had been burnt to death in front of him. As I left, he added, "We want justice."

I met non-governmental organisation relief workers. Local and international agencies are doing incredible work in very difficult circumstances. Some 30,000 NGO workers of Bangladeshi nationality are working in camps with international NGOs. But the NGOs tell me that the lack of long-term funding is making it very difficult for them to plan ahead and scale up their work, not to mention the restricted access and bureaucracy in trying to work in the camps. Although the situation is marginally better than in Rakhine, there are major challenges, and only two thirds of the UN appeal for funding has been fulfilled. That is not enough, and our Government need to do more to ensure that the outstanding funding is committed by the international community.

Last year, the response from the authorities and the people of Bangladesh was incredible. They demonstrated immense generosity to the refugees, despite being one of the poorest countries in the world, with millions of people living below the poverty line and facing the greatest risks from climate change. Over recent years, when thousands were killed by the Burmese military and hundreds of thousands sought refuge, Bangladesh kept its borders open and provided them with sanctuary. But the international community and other neighbouring states must do more to support that country in the humanitarian crisis. We know from our experience in Europe that absorbing so many people is a massive challenge even for this continent, which is among the wealthiest in the world. The end result must be the peaceful return of the Rohingya to their homes, but that must happen only when it is safe and when the Rohingya believe that the danger has passed.

These are particularly turbulent times for the Rohingya people, as only a few weeks ago, in the run-up to the planned repatriation date, there were reports of an increased military presence in the camps. This, according to the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, has caused a state of terror and panic. All the families placed on the list for repatriation refused to return to Burma as they were too afraid of the current conditions. It is imperative that any return is safe, dignified, and, crucially, voluntary. It is vital that we keep up international pressure on the Burmese Government. They need to know that the world is watching.

I welcome the contributions by Nobel peace prize winners Tawakkol Karman, Shirin Ebadi and Mairead Maguire, who implored Aung San Suu Kyi to "wake up" to the atrocities after they visited Cox's Bazar. Nobel laureates such as Malala Yusufzai, Muhammad Yunus and Desmond Tutu, among others, have also spoken out. I welcome the legal voices who have spoken out in favour of human rights and justice—Amal Clooney and Ben Emmerson QC, among others. I welcome the interventions made by Cate Blanchett, who visited the

camps in her role as a UN good will ambassador, and by Angelina Jolie as a special envoy of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Others have supported the humanitarian fundraising effort by visiting the camps to raise awareness and keep the media interested and engaged in what is happening. They include Ashley Judd, Mindy Kaling, Freida Pinto, Priyanka Chopra, and many others.

Most of all, I am incredibly grateful to, and commend, my colleagues in this House and the other House who have visited Burma and Bangladesh and publicly campaigned and voiced their concerns. The fact is that the more attention we generate, the brighter the light we shine, and the more noise we make, the less likely that further murders and atrocities will occur. Scrutiny and activism from campaigners, the media and the wider international community is literally the only line of defence for the Rohingya people against the Burmese military and its might.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I commend my hon. Friend for the fantastic campaigning that she personally has done, as well as all the other people she listed. One of the main difficulties is that at the United Nations, there are two Governments, one in the Security Council and one in the General Assembly—China and India—who have been supporting the Government in Myanmar. The Chinese, in particular, have massive investments in Rakhine province, and, as a result, they have not been prepared to take the action that should be required internationally. Does she agree?

Rushanara Ali: I could not agree more. I will come on to that. I very much hope that the Government will build the alliance that is needed to get support at the United Nations.

The United Kingdom has a unique responsibility towards Burma. We must use all our relationships, forged over many centuries, to argue for a peaceful settlement to the crisis. We are also the penholder in the United Nations for Burma. We must apply all the pressure that we can. However, as hon. Friends and others have pointed out, it is not just about our humanitarian response to the 1 million refugees, nor the prevention of future violence, nor even the return of the Rohingya to their homes; ultimately, it is about justice.

Here in the UK, many Members of Parliament have consistently campaigned against the persecution of Rohingya people. On many occasions, we have pleaded with the Prime Minister and successive Foreign Secretaries. We have held parliamentary debates. We have used our platforms publicly to denounce the atrocities. While there have been welcome changes in tone from the Foreign Secretary, and a more critical and proactive stance is being taken, including by his Ministers, this has yet to translate into a stronger policy.

Over the years, there has been little concrete action from the UK Government to solve this issue. In 2017, we warned the Government of increasing tensions in Rakhine state weeks before the brutal military campaign, but little was done to prevent it. When asked in a parliamentary debate last year, the Minister said that if the United Nations determined genocide, then

"of course the UK Government will be the first to be supportive of taking these matters to the International Criminal Court."—[*Official Report*, 17 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 780.]

Twelve months later, there has still been very little progress. Last November, the Prime Minister called explicitly for more action and said that the humanitarian crisis

“is something for which the Burmese authorities—and especially the military—must take full responsibility.”

She went on to pledge that Britain would

“continue to play a leading role in bringing the international community together...to do everything possible to stop this appalling and inhuman destruction of the Rohingya people.”

The sad reality is that our Government, while strong on providing humanitarian assistance, have not come close to putting real pressure on the Burmese Government and their military leaders. It should not have taken more deaths and displacement to make the international community take notice. This crisis happened on our watch. The UK Government should publicly press the Burmese Government to immediately stop all abuses, remove restrictions on freedom of movement, improve conditions for all Rohingya in Rakhine state, and grant unfettered access to Rakhine state to humanitarian agencies and rights monitors. The UK Government should insist that no repatriation of Rohingya refugees takes place until it is safe to do so. The UK and concerned Governments should call on the Bangladeshi Government to halt their plans to relocate refugees to Bhasan Char and encourage them, instead, to consider alternative, safer and more feasible options for relocating those who are vulnerable in the current camps.

The UK Government must press the Burmese authorities to take steps to address the culture of marginalisation and discrimination of the Rohingya community in Burma and to reform the 1982 citizenship law, which renders the Rohingya stateless and denies them basic human rights. The UK Government must accept the full findings and recommendations of the United Nations fact-finding mission, and they should play a leadership role in pressing the United Nations Security Council to urgently refer the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court so that all crimes, not just the crimes of deportation, can be considered.

The international community must not allow the Burmese military to get away with the slaughter, rape, torture and displacement of the Rohingya people on such a scale that it constitutes genocide. I ask the Minister to address head on the issues of getting the International Criminal Court to bring the criminals to justice. That is vital not only in this instance of genocide but in the prevention of future genocides.

After the holocaust we said “never again.” After the killing fields of Cambodia we said “never again.” After Srebrenica we said “never again.” And after 800,000 people were slaughtered in 100 days in Rwanda we said “never again.” It is time we pledged to end genocide, to work for peace and to bring perpetrators to justice, because genocide continues to occur. This time let us say “never again” and mean it. Let us bring the war criminals to court and give the Rohingya people the justice they deserve.

1.11 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and I do not disagree with a word she said. I completely agree that it is up to us to keep this as a hot topic.

Yesterday, there was some Punch and Judy, some pantomime—call it what you like—in the House, and the coverage took up acres of press space. It is on the front page of every paper and every freesheet today, yet this hugely important debate probably will not get a column inch tomorrow. The Press Gallery is empty, and sadly this debate will not be watched by many people on telly. This is not a bit of theatre or a bit of entertainment; it is the most crucial issue affecting us as a country today. This is about our values and who we are. I say to any of the press who are listening remotely: if I do not see this covered tomorrow, be judged by your own standards when you judge us in here, because there are those of us in here who are interested in the important topics. I know there are not many people in the Chamber today, but that is not because we do not care.

In our defence, when the hon. Lady and I went to the Backbench Business Committee, it recognised how important and time-sensitive this topic is, but we were not allocated a date. We were given the possibility of a date and that date has shifted three times. However, because we feel this topic is so crucial, so important, we were prepared to take any date we could. Today is the thinnest date on the calendar for many Members because they will have made alternative arrangements. Because the date shifted all the time, it was hard for many Members to make it here today, but colleagues have told me that they feel acutely about this topic, too. Only a few Members are here, but those who are here are very knowledgeable, they care and they have a burning desire to see justice for the Rohingya.

As the hon. Lady said, an election is looming in Bangladesh—hopefully it will be a well-contested election—at the end of the month, which is why we wanted to make sure we had the debate now. The Secretary of State came to give a presentation to the all-party parliamentary groups on Burma and on the rights of the Rohingya. Whoever is in charge of Bangladesh in 2019, and we take no sides, the problem will last for a very long time and a handover is required to ensure continuity of care for those involved. If there is any change of regime, I want to be sure that the Secretary of State will be straight on the phone to keep up the pressure on the new regime to do the right thing by the Rohingya in these camps.

As the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, most non-governmental organisations now estimate that up to 1 million Rohingya refugees are living in southern Bangladesh. Kutupalong is the largest refugee camp in the world, with a population of over 700,000. It is the same size as the city of Glasgow and 50% bigger than the city of Manchester. Other hon. Members and I saw the vast tide of suffering when we visited last September, and the crossings continue even now. The UNHCR has said that 100,000 people have crossed the border in 2018 alone.

In our debate in the House last October, it was widely accepted that ethnic cleansing was taking place. The stories coming out of the camps now point to war crimes and even genocide, which is why we felt it timely to have another debate. I challenge the House, as the hon. Lady did, to join the call for the actions of the Myanmar Government and militia to be referred to the ICC.

I wanted to intervene on the hon. Lady, but she was in full flow. The one thing I would say is that Aung San Suu Kyi has not just turned a blind eye but has actually

[Mrs Anne Main]

been complicit. She has said that she does not see these things happening. She sent officials over to the camps, and they said that they did not see Rohingya but saw only Bangladeshis. As the hon. Lady said, they are not Bangladeshis; they are Rohingya.

The fact-finding mission report of 24 October 2018 said that this is an “ongoing genocide.” The word “ongoing” should fill us with horror. This is not an event that has finished, hence the need for this debate. The investigators told the UN that the atrocities continue. They are happening now, as we sit here.

In response to a letter from the all-party parliamentary group on the rights of the Rohingya, which the hon. Lady and I both signed, the Secretary of State said in early November that he had told Aung San Suu Kyi that there must be accountability. I would say that is putting it mildly. I accept that the Secretary of State is using his best endeavours, but could he pep them up somewhat next year?

The Secretary of State also said that the Government are not naive about the Burmese commission of inquiry, which he said needs to be strengthened to have credibility and to be a path to justice. Will the Minister tell us how that is going to happen? Good words butter no parsnips, particularly at Christmas. I am not sure that, without any root, we will be any the wiser. The Secretary of State said that he does not think this can be immediately dismissed and that he intends to press the Government of Myanmar to ensure that the concerns are addressed. Again, I would like the Minister to give us some information on how that will come about.

Sadly, the Secretary of State does not think we have the votes for an ICC referral at present, and he believes that a referral to the UNSC would be vetoed. I do not know at what point we will ever test that. If we can keep this situation in the media, and if we can show that the world cares, the countries that might exercise those vetoes, as the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) said, may feel so shamed, or so pressed by businesses, that they threaten to withdraw any supplies they give to Myanmar or think about sanctions. We might then be successful, so I hope we will try at some point.

The persecution of the Rohingya is a tragedy that should stain the consciences and plague the souls of those who might exercise that veto and, if the feeling increases in Myanmar that it can act with impunity because a referral will not happen, at what point will we call the bluff? We are on the edge of a precipice. Myanmar is certainly not stopping this. It is an ongoing genocide. The Burmese Government do not care that the world hates them, so we need to call them out and test their resolve.

I welcome the fact that the United Nations Human Rights Council mechanism has been established to collect and analyse evidence in order to bring about criminal proceedings against those who have committed international crimes. It is worth reminding the House of the definition of genocide, because I would be surprised if anyone here, or anyone who may or may not be listening, would say that this is not genocide. The mens rea is the “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”.

The actus reus, the means of bringing that about, is killing members of that group.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Lady for her leadership in helping to secure this debate, and I fully agree with her comments condemning genocide. Does she agree that our Government must publicly condemn the Myanmar Government for practices and policies that promote racism and segregation, and that the 1982 citizenship law must be repealed or brought into line with international standards?

Mrs Main: I am not sure how that law could be repealed, although I completely agree, and the fact that those people do not exist in law means that they will never have legal protection. I join the hon. Gentleman’s call for our Government to do more. I am aware that these things are difficult and that the soft voice of diplomacy must be exercised, but sometimes there needs to be an end.

As I was saying, I do not think anyone can dispute that this is genocide. Perhaps it is just me and I do not understand the legal terms of this, but the actus reus includes killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, and imposing measures that are intended to prevent births within the group. All those things are happening, but who is being held accountable? I say again: let us try to bring that charge of genocide; let us shame the world and those people who would exercise their veto. Oxfam has said that it agrees with the findings in the UN fact-finding mission’s report. There are no independent and impartial courts in Burma, and with the military treated as above the law, the international community should step in to ensure justice and accountability for the systematic rape, torture and murder of Rohingya refugees.

These are the worst crimes. The 1998 Rome statute of the International Criminal Court defines crimes against humanity, when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against any civilian populations, as any of the following acts: murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation or forcible transfer of population, imprisonment, torture, grave forms of sexual violence, persecution, enforced disappearance of persons, and the crime of apartheid—all things that the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow referred to today. She has seen them happening, I have seen them happening, Members across the House have seen them happening—there is no dispute. These are crimes against humanity. This is a genocide. Today on this, the quietest day of the year, although we are not standing up and saying “this House commands whoever is in charge to try to make a charge of genocide” I would love there to be a vote. But we are not voting and there are not enough of us here to do that anyway. But I think the sentiment of the House says exactly that.

The Rohingya are crossing because they are being driven out and fear for their lives. They are crossing while being shot in the back and legs to drive them faster in their flight. They are crossing because they are being persecuted, denied citizenship and, as the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) pointed out, they have no recognition in law. They are being denied land and livelihood. They are crossing dangerous borders strewn with landmines to escape from burnt homes, abductions, brutal beatings, mutilation, murder and rape. They are crossing because they are fearful of being obliterated,

erased because of who they are and what they believe. Because they are Muslims and they are Rohingya they have no safe place in Myanmar, and it is no surprise that none of them wants to go back.

A year on there has been a terrible harvest in the camps as a result of those atrocities. That harvest is babies, born as a result of rape and violence. It has been estimated—I was talking to the new high commissioner in this country—that an average of 60 babies a day are being born in those camps. Most reports acknowledge that we do not know how many babies have been born as a result of rape, due to secrecy and the desire to hide what people see as the shameful stigma of violation. When we visited the camp, it was estimated that up to 50% of all women there were pregnant, although most reports acknowledge that it is nearly impossible to know how many thousands of pregnant women there are. Aid workers have been searching the camps for young pregnant Rohingya girls, some barely in their teens.

Reports say that only one in five births in the camps are delivered in health centres. That is not because there are no health centres, difficult though such facilities are to access; there is regular reporting of hidden births and self-conducted abortions. Those who have visited the camps have seen the ankle-deep mud and the conditions, and young girls who have been brutalised and raped are experiencing self-induced abortions, because of the shame of carrying a child that will be forever a burden on their family. For those who have not gone down that route, pregnancies due to rape have also led to reports of baby abandonment.

Aid agencies are working to provide care and support for young pregnant women and abandoned newborn babies. As I said to the high commissioner, I want to know what is happening to those children who are born in the no-man's land of being stateless. They are born vulnerable to exploitation, being sent into prostitution and sexual exploitation, they are disappearing and even being sent to a dreadful death in those camps as a result of people not knowing they exist. We need to push for the crimes against those babies, and their mothers, to be punished, and that is why we must make a stand on the world stage. The mothers and those babies are victims. Some 55% of Rohingya refugees are children, and 160,000 people in the camps are four years old or younger. Many families told us that they had lost key male relatives to murder and enforced disappearances after the militia swooped on homes and carted the men and boys away.

As the hon. Lady said, Bangladesh has been commended by many NGOs for its generosity to the Rohingya, and praised by groups for its constructive engagement with Myanmar. However, Myanmar has yet to deliver safe, voluntary and dignified conditions. It has not guaranteed citizenship rights for those who return, and the Rohingya are rightly fearful of return. Indeed, some have returned—some are boomerang Rohingya, if that is the right way of putting it. They have gone back, trusted in warm words, only to find the same thing happening again. No trust is left at all.

UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme are yet to be granted full access to Rakhine state to see the conditions, and people cannot and must not go back to conditions that in effect will be an isolated internment camp. That is not sanctuary; that is

imprisonment. However, the international community does not always step up. The UN joint response plan for the Rohingya is still seriously underfunded—at present, it is 70% funded, and about \$250 million short of what is needed. The USA has contributed 40% of the fund, which is \$277 million. As the hon. Lady said, this country has sent a generous contribution of \$84 million, but the European Commission has provided only 7% of the fund at \$49 million. The European Union should examine its conscience and provide a fair share of funding to help to shoulder the enormous burden that is afflicting Bangladesh.

We cannot just sit by and allow this issue to be shuffled off into two column inches tomorrow. The House will speak today. It may not have as loud a voice as it did yesterday, but its intent is far stronger and its commitment to justice will not go away. If next year we are here again, we should hold our heads in shame and silence for all those who will have died in the time that it has taken us to make our minds up and to act.

1.27 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure and privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main). They make a powerful cross-party team in leading this debate, and in their excellent and ongoing efforts to ensure that the cause of the Rohingya remains firmly on our agenda in the House and the public debate.

The International Development Committee has followed closely the ongoing humanitarian crisis—the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) is our rapporteur on the issue—and over the past year we have published three reports relating to Burma, Bangladesh and the Rohingya. The first report, from January, focused on the issues that both hon. Members spoke about, including the culmination of decades of marginalisation, persecution and abuse that the Rohingya people have faced in Burma.

We then looked more widely at the work of the UK Government in general, and DFID in particular, in Bangladesh and Burma. Like others, the Committee visited the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar, and we heard the voices of the Rohingya people and saw the huge challenges of life in the camps for those families. The scale and complexity of this humanitarian crisis is best experienced at first hand if at all possible. We also sought to visit Burma and to ask difficult questions about what is happening, but we were refused visas by the Burmese Government.

In our final report, we joined the call, already set out so eloquently today, on the UK Government to gather support for the UN Security Council to refer Burma to the International Criminal Court and to apply targeted financial sanctions against identifiable key figures with responsibility for what is happening. I am pleased again today to echo those calls for the UK to pursue such an ICC referral, but I will focus my remarks on the other issues raised in the motion, about repatriation and some of the broader humanitarian concerns.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept that the problem does not relate only to the Rohingya? The Kachin and Shan people have a long

[Dr David Drew]

history of subjugation by the Burmese authorities. It is an absolute tragedy that the regime picks on those groups without any real comeback from the international community. Does he agree that that is part and parcel of the whole problem in Myanmar?

Stephen Twigg: I agree entirely and wholeheartedly; in fact, my hon. Friend has anticipated something I was going to mention later in my speech. A number of highly respected advocacy groups, such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Human Rights Watch, have documented appalling human rights abuses by the Burmese military in both Kachin and Shan states. There is a broader set of questions about the protection of minorities in Burma; the Rohingya example is perhaps the most potent and large-scale, but my hon. Friend is right to remind us of the Kachin and Shan peoples as well.

Let me address the issue of repatriation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, last month there was an attempted repatriation of refugees following the announcement by the repatriation joint working group of the Governments of Bangladesh and Burma that repatriation would begin then. When that was announced, many of the refugees fled and hid in the surrounding forest. There was at least one reported suicide—someone so fearful of what returning to Burma would entail that they took their own life. As the buses arrived at the camp in Cox's Bazar, a number of refugees were offered the opportunity to return. There were anecdotal reports that they were offered food in return for boarding the buses. As my hon. Friend said, no refugee agreed to return, and the buses left the camp empty. That clearly showed the refugees' fear about any suggestion of returning in the current situation.

Why is there that fear? As Marzuki Darusman, the chair of the UN fact-finding mission, reported in October, and as the hon. Member for St Albans emphasised so powerfully, the genocide against the Rohingya is ongoing in Burma. Why on earth would the Rohingya seek to return? We have a responsibility to hold both the Burmese and Bangladeshi Governments accountable on their stated commitments that repatriation will happen only when it is safe, voluntary and dignified.

I urge the Minister to commit again to ensuring that the important principle of non-refoulement is upheld—that people are not returned against their will and that the Government will continue to speak out clearly and publicly against any refugee returns that are premature, non-voluntary or in any way dangerous. It is pretty clear that the current lack of any sign of political will from the Government of Burma to address the conditions that led to this refugee displacement suggests, sadly, that conditions conducive to return are unlikely for quite some long time.

The protracted nature of the displacement crisis means that we have to think more about the short to medium-term needs of both the refugee community in Bangladesh and the local host Bangladeshi population. We need action to address the barriers to Rohingya self-reliance, including employment and access to services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees are living in Cox's Bazar, and barely 4% of them have any form of legal status.

We can learn lessons from other protracted displacement crises. The International Development Committee was in east Africa last month, looking at some of the consequences of displacement from South Sudan, Sudan, Congo and Eritrea, and at how in Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda there are now sustained attempts to set up programmes that provide hope to not only refugees and internally displaced people but the often very poor local communities. We can learn from that example.

However, the best example that we can learn from is what has been done in Jordan for Syrian refugees. The Jordan compact is an agreement between the Government of Jordan, the World Bank, the European Union and others to support Syrian refugees to access employment. Under the agreement, Jordan reduced its regulatory barriers on refugees' right to work. Two years on, the compact has led to considerable improvements in labour market access for Syrian refugees and education.

If we fail to provide comparable opportunities in Bangladesh, for both the Rohingya and the often very poor local Bangladeshi population, we know what the risks are. We are aware of the boredom that comes from living in a refugee camp and what relying on humanitarian assistance does for the dignity and sense of self-worth of refugees and their families. Policy changes are needed to create opportunities for the Rohingya to enjoy wellbeing and self-sufficiency so that they do not have to rely so much on aid in future and can maximise their own potential.

As has rightly been said, the Bangladeshi people and their Government deserve praise for welcoming about 1 million Rohingya refugees. We pay tribute to them and rightly congratulate our own Government on DFID's substantial contribution to the humanitarian effort in both Bangladesh and Burma. We must not lose sight of the global responsibility that Bangladesh has taken on. We now need to address some of the long-term issues. Will the Minister set out how the Government will mobilise the other donors, the United Nations and partners to build support for the long-term measures that I have talked about—in particular, the idea of a jobs compact? As the hon. Member for St Albans reminded us, the Bangladeshi people will vote in their general election later this month. What discussions have the Government had with the Opposition parties in Bangladesh? It is important that there is continued support for the Rohingya whichever party or alliance of parties forms the next Bangladeshi Government.

I turn to education. We know from other protracted crises, particularly those involving large refugee flows, that education has often not been given the priority that it deserves. There is a real risk of a lost generation of refugee children. I urge the Government, and DFID in particular, to give much higher priority to education in our aid for the Rohingya. In July, Save the Children reported that more than 70% of Rohingya children in the camps were not in school. They are being deprived of the chance of a proper education. UNICEF has warned that children living in refugee camps face a bleak future:

“If we don't make the investment in education now, we face the very real danger of seeing a 'lost generation' of Rohingya”.

One of the central aims of the UN's global goals is to “leave no one behind”; a substantial increase in finance for, access to and quality of education in Cox's Bazar is required to achieve that for Rohingya children. As both

my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow and the hon. Member for St Albans said so powerfully, humanitarian finance suffers from being short-term and unpredictable. The underfunding in this case is in line with pretty much all the funds for comparable humanitarian crises around the world. If education provision does not get priority and is ignored, the future of the children caught up in these crises through no fault of their own is at great risk.

In our report last year on education, the IDC recommended that the Government should establish a long-term strategy for education in emergencies. The reality is that, tragically, larger numbers of children are now living in these emergency situations—refugee crises often caused by conflict, ethnic cleansing and genocide and sometimes by climate change. The mechanisms to ensure that they get the education they deserve need to be in place; that is not happening at the moment. Support for programmes such as education cannot wait. That is now working, which is very welcome, but we need more of it.

We also need practical steps to minimise some of the risks that Rohingya people face in their day-to-day lives—basic but important things such as the quality of lighting, the lack of privacy in toilets and bathroom facilities and the absence of security for women and girls who have to leave the camps for whatever reason. All of that has come together to create, as the hon. Member for St Albans said, an environment that is incredibly unsafe, particularly for women and children, who form at least 70% of the Rohingya refugee population. Many arrived in Bangladesh having reported alarming gender-based violence by the Burmese military. Now that they are in Bangladesh, supposedly in safety, they still face enormous risks, with numerous examples of incidents of gender-based violence in the camps.

The International Rescue Committee says that despite that, there remains a significant gap in services that are targeted particularly at women and girls. I join the IRC in urging our Government to work with the Government of Bangladesh and other donors to secure a significant increase in support for programmes that relate specifically to the needs of women and girls, and especially to those of either sex who face gender-based sexual violence.

Finally, more needs to be done to ensure that we are ready for the monsoon season. When we visited in February, we heard a lot of concern about the 2018 monsoon season, and how ready the camp and its administration was for heavy rainfall. The Select Committee warned, in its second report, that without decisions and actions being taken very quickly, for example to enable relocation to begin and to facilitate other mitigations, people were going to die. When the downpours finally came, they did bring a lot of misery for the Rohingya—thousands of shelters and other structures collapsed, hundreds were injured and, tragically, some did die. However, the impact of the monsoon in 2018 was actually not as bad as our worst fears. I hope the Minister can perhaps say something about the Government's analysis of why that was the case. Was it that we were better prepared and lessons had been learned, or were we more fortunate with the scale of the weather conditions, meaning that we could possibly face much bigger challenges in 2019? Decisions and actions need to be taken more quickly to mitigate the impact of landslides and floods that could come with

the forthcoming monsoon season. In particular, there is the challenge of ensuring there is enough suitable land to enable the immediate relocation of the most exposed and vulnerable refugees, so that that can be done effectively and efficiently.

Let us remember that we face huge immediate humanitarian challenges on shelter, water, food, security, health and education if we are to provide at least some dignity and hope. We know that this is a protracted crisis. It is incumbent on the international community to work together to address it. There are three big challenges. I have chosen to focus, in my remarks, on investment in humanitarian and development support, and the crucial significance of staying for the long term. Alongside that, we must address the key challenges of politics and justice that my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow and the hon. Member for St Albans set out so powerfully.

In the end, we all have a responsibility to protect the refugees and to invest in humanitarian support and long-term development aid, but they have a right to go home, and that is what they want. That will happen only when there is true justice and when the Government of Burma—and, frankly, the people of Burma—address the need to make fundamental changes to their own laws and attitudes to the Rohingya, so that we can have in Burma a country that truly respects and protects the rights of all its people. That feels like a distant hope at the moment, but this debate at least gives us an opportunity, on a cross-party basis, to send a clear message that we will not forget the minorities of Burma. In this debate in particular, we continue to stand in solidarity with the Rohingya people.

1.44 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) on securing the debate. Yes, the debate has been delayed, but it is always timely and it is always important to ensure that we raise our voices for the Rohingya people. I commend her powerful speech and the powerful speech from my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main). We have attended Cox's Bazar and we have seen the camps together—more on that in a second. I also commend the very measured and sensible approach, as always, of the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who chairs the International Development Committee. It is a pleasure and honour to serve alongside him.

Why is it important that we talk about this issue now and keep on talking about it? As I have said many times, it only takes something to flare up in Syria or the news we had this week in Yemen—never mind the pantomime we had in this place yesterday—to take the focus off what is such a huge humanitarian crisis in such a small part of the world. It is a niche area that many people, especially in this country, simply do not understand or appreciate. Burma was closed for 70 years, so there has not been the opportunity for people to find out much about it. If we ask people in this country outside this place what they know about Burma, they will say two things: Aung San Suu Kyi and Rohingya Muslims. That is about all.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans talked about the definition of genocide. Burma has form on this. For a number of years, since before I was elected,

[Paul Scully]

I have been going to meetings of the all-party group on Burma. I remember the days when Mr Speaker chaired the group. We had a chap—it must be nearly a decade ago—called Jared Genser, a human rights lawyer, then of DLA Piper. Before Burma opened up into the fledgling transitional democracy that we sort of see struggling at the moment, he made the case that of the seven or eight conditions that one can ascribe to genocide, Burma was the only conflict post-war that matched every single one. Rwanda and Srebrenica matched some of them, but Burma matched every single one. Now we can see the past masters of this heinous crime are using all those instruments time and time again. It is time that we acted.

I want to set out the context of why we have got to where we are. I am half-Burmese and my first question, when I was elected to this place, was on what we then described as the Rohingya boat people. In 2015, people were being pushed out into the seas in fear of their lives, trying to find a safe haven. It was cyclone season and there was a horrendous number of deaths. If we fast forward to 2017, my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans joined me and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) as, I think, the first Members into the refugee camps at Cox's Bazar just weeks after the latest exodus. At the time "only" 400,000 people had crossed the border. By the time we left, a week later, there were 500,000 people. We are now at 700,000-plus people who have joined those already there.

The Kutupalong camp is the biggest refugee camp in the world. It has been there for 30 years, expanding and expanding significantly. We went to the Gundam border crossing where, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans said, we spoke to people who had been driven across the border chased by helicopters shooting at their ankles and the backs of their legs to hurry them towards the landmine-strewn border. We saw video and photo evidence of people who had had their legs blown off by landmines just four days before we got there. They were being searched by Burmese guards using drones, which were looking at the no-man's land area where there were 5,000 people in a tiny little area on a curve of a river—they did not want to go to the refugee camps in Bangladesh because at that time they did not know or trust what would happen to them.

We saw people who were dead behind the eyes. These were the people, let us not forget, that the Burmese Government had accused of being terrorists. I saw a 60-year-old lady, who had seen her children genitally mutilated and her son-in-law slaughtered in front of her, and whose house was then burned down. To accuse her of being a terrorist was just fantasyland. As we sat there in Cox's Bazar airport, Aung San Suu Kyi was on telly saying that nothing else was happening—that there were no fresh attacks. Fast forward a couple of hours and we were back on the Gundam border, and we smelled and saw the smoke from burning villages. It is no surprise that the intransigence we are seeing now is a continuation of the denial—the "hear no evil, say no evil, see no evil"—that we observed then.

Because the Burmese people are largely in favour of the exodus of the Rohingya, and because of the whipping up of the nationalist interests of those people, the military in particular are able to hide behind the populist

uprising and say, "We have been accused of acts of terror, but that is just western propaganda." We must cut through that very clearly. We must say, "Look, we will always help you when it comes to democratic support. We will continue the support that we have given in this place over the last few years to enable you to build up the rule of law and democratic structures in your Hluttaw"—the Burmese Parliament—"and we will not tell you how to run your country. But we will always call you out when you are breaking, in every sense, every international norm relating to human rights."

Along with the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, I went back to Cox's Bazar six months after that first trip. It was rewarding to see some of the improvements that had been made thanks to UK Aid, DFID funding and a number of other countries that had come together—and, indeed, thanks to members of the public in this country, who had raised £27 million through the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal. Worshippers in mosques and churches and charities around the country came together in a spectacular way, first to raise the money, and secondly to do what we are trying to do here: to keep the voice of the Rohingya in our minds. We saw a huge improvement in the registration camps. It had taken my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans and me perhaps 40 minutes to cross areas that could now be crossed in 10 minutes because of the tracks and roads that had been built over those six months.

I think that landslides and cyclones posed a risk to about 200,000 people. Fortunately, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby said, our worst fears were not realised; none the less, people are still suffering in the makeshift camps, which are cleared jungle. It is the only hillside in Bangladesh: there is pretty flat land below sea level, but they managed to find the only slopes. The area is on an elephant migration track, and unfortunately when people walk around the landslides, some of them are trampled by elephants travelling back and forth on their normal annual path. So there is plenty more for us to do.

I was the rapporteur for the Rohingya report that we produced a few months ago. It is my job to follow up developments and ensure that we are keeping the Government and all the agency and non-governmental organisations on their toes, and that they are fulfilling our recommendations, to which DFID agreed. We could return to some of the stuff that we have talked about before, and discuss how we can prevent crises in the future, but that is for other debates and other crises not yet known. We need to empower the affected people. That means building up leadership structures through DFID and NGOs, but it is also up to the all-party parliamentary group on the rights of the Rohingya, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans, to ensure that we in Parliament can start to speak out. This is not just between the Bangladeshi and the Burmese Governments. Stakeholders—those people, those women, those children—must be at the heart of any decision making, so that if they are able to go back they will be repatriated in a dignified way, when it is safe for them to do so and when they have agreed to do so.

This is at a slight tangent, but there is one particular thing that I think our Committee needs to do. I appeal to any women Members, if they so choose, to put their names forward when there is a vacancy. Women and Equalities questions took place earlier today, and we

have had plenty of debates about women's equality, but this is at the heart of what we need to be doing. The Committee currently has just one female member, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham). One of the limitations when we are investigating what is happening in the camps is our inability to go into some of the health clinics and see people who are traumatised by the rape, the violence and the maiming that they have seen. It is impossible for the likes of my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans and me to go there, and even if we did, we would not get the information out. If Parliament is to do its job, it is fundamentally important for the Committee to have a better gender balance in future.

Many Members have mentioned gender-based violence, which is mentioned in one of our recommendations. How can we build up justice, and establish accountability for what has happened? We have clearly said that the military cannot act with impunity, feeling that they can do what they like and get away with it. They must be held to account. The next stage is reconciliation. How can we start to bring the different factions back together? That does not just mean dampening down military control in the country. If the Rohingya manage to return to their homes, they will need to be able to live side by side with the other members of the Rakhine community, who have been whipped up into a nationalist frenzy and pushed into perpetrating some of the violence alongside the militia.

The Rohingya communities were farming some of the land and harvesting, but as people have been pushed into Bangladesh, that has gone to pot, and many of the villages that were burnt have started to turn back into jungle, which is beginning to affect the community as a whole. The entire state is suffering badly, not just the million people who have been pushed out. DFID has done a very good job so far in providing medicine, vaccinations, food, shelter and trauma support, but we need to do much more. This is not just about helping the people who are there. Yes, we can continue to help them, but surely the best way we can help them is to bring an end to the conflict and allow all of them to return safely and in a dignified way, and that means that the citizenship laws must be overturned.

When I first went to Burma in 2016, I met a young lady called Wai Nu, who is now campaigning around the world—in America, in this country and back in Burma. She had been in prison for seven years, and she was 29. She had served a shorter jail sentence than anyone else I had met, purely and simply because she was so little. She had been imprisoned predominantly because of her father, who was a former Member of Parliament for the area. Now, because of those citizenship laws, not only could he no longer be a Member of Parliament, but he could not even vote. He could not even be a citizen of the country in which he had lived for his entire life, which is painfully ridiculous. This is a fundamental issue. We must press for change if the Rohingya are to have any comfort in the knowledge that they will be able to return to their country.

I welcome the fact that the Foreign Secretary and the Minister—who is always very proactive when it comes to matters relating to Burma and, indeed, the whole region, and with whom I have worked very closely—have been far more robust in recent weeks and months in respect of the possibility of a referral to the International

Criminal Court. The work that is being done at the United Nations with the international community is extremely important.

We must think about what more we can do to target the military with sanctions. As I have often said in this place, I do not think that we should target the whole of Burma in a “blanket” way, because that would adversely affect so many people who are not in the midst of the conflict and who desperately need our help. We need to target the military so that they cannot feel that they can get away with this with impunity.

We need China's influence as well. Yes, it has its trading links, but if it wants to be part of a wider trading partnership with the international community, it must realise that it has responsibilities as well. I do not care if ASEAN countries do not come out and say that publicly, as long as they are saying it when they are having conversations with the Burmese military, with whom many countries in the surrounding area are reasonably friendly. They can have private conversations that may bear fruit in the long run. They can say to Burma, “You need to tackle your responsibilities if you want to return as an open member of the international community.”

Finally and briefly, I want to broaden my speech and talk about why I have always believed we need a holistic approach. The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) talked about the other conflicts, and it is important that we have an understanding of them here, by looking at the Christians in Chin state who are still persecuted, and at northern Shan and Kachin where there is still conflict going on; airstrikes were reported only a few months ago, and there is open fighting. A bomb was found in Shan state just last month. There are also the Reuters journalists who have been put in prison, and a British national, Niranjan Rasalingam, who is in Insein prison serving a 17-year sentence on what many believe are trumped-up financial charges. We need to look at that, and address it by asking, even though many political prisoners have been released, what more we can do to make sure people whose charges might be fake or trumped up are judged under the open rule of law.

Without stopping too much DFID aid around the country, we do need to make sure we provide for the healthcare and educational needs and the democratic structures, so that when Burma finally decides to re-join the international community it has the capacity to do so in its Hluttaw—its Parliament.

I am the trade envoy to Burma and, finally, I want to say that the economic development of Burma is very important. We must build on prosperity and bring people into that, because if they feel the benefit of involvement with the wider international community, through improved facilities and services, micropayments, FinTech solutions for the smaller villages and so forth, that holistic approach will help to drive them back into the wider family of the United Nations.

2.1 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who is a member of the International Development Committee and has had the benefit of visiting Cox's Bazar and therefore gave an informed speech based on first-hand experience. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend

[*Imran Hussain*]

the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), Chair of the Committee, all of whom made powerful and substantial contributions. In particular I thank all three Members for continuing to keep this important issue alive, and continuing to make sure that it is brought back before the House at every opportunity. That should, however, be the role of the Government.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field):

We have tried to get a statement on this issue over the last two or three weeks, but were aware that there was great interest in this Backbench Business Committee debate. Obviously, I would have much preferred it to have taken place on a different day when more Members would have been present, but we have been aware of this and would have had a Government statement other than for the fact that there was a real passion on the subject from many Members including the hon. Gentleman.

Imran Hussain: I thank the Minister, but he still has the opportunity to make a statement in the new year, because this is an ongoing genocide and ethnic cleansing. I hope he will make such a statement, and at a time when more Members are present and can take part in this important debate. I was actually, however, referring to the last year, but I will come on to that shortly.

This is an extremely important debate, as I have said, but sadly the issue of the persecution of the Rohingya is not a new one; it has taken place for hundreds of years in that region, with violence flaring up on countless occasions. However, this persecution reached new heights last August, with some of the most brutal violence ever seen.

I want to reflect for a few moments on that violence, because the pictures and reports of violence against the Rohingya do not do justice to what they faced; they do not even begin to properly depict the horrors that innocent, men, women and children were subjected to. They faced murder, and their friends and relatives cut down by gunfire, knives, machetes and whatever else soldiers and thugs could lay their hands on. They faced pillage, their homes ransacked, their belongings plundered, and valuables seized. And they faced rape: women and girls—daughters, sisters, and wives—tied to trees and subjected to the most brutal treatment as relatives were forced to watch. Once they had finished inflicting their carnage, the soldiers moved on. Without remorse or reconsideration, they headed to the next village, but not before burning down the one they had just devastated. Homes that had stood for years, built by hand by those who lived in them, were reduced to nothing more than ash. These fires became the face of the violence carried out against the Rohingya, the pictures adorning the pages of the media as journalists were allowed no closer—Burma blocked off to them by a hostile Government fearful of outside independent reporting.

Mrs Main: The hon. Gentleman is painting a very graphic picture of what went on. Does he share my concern that we need to have all this documented as this has gone on over a long period and by the time justice is served—hopefully it will be—names and incidents might be forgotten, and documentation might not be available?

It is hugely important that what the hon. Gentleman is describing is recorded so we can bring those responsible to account at some point.

Imran Hussain: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The UN Human Rights Council has taken many first-hand testimonies, but that is just a starting point. Perhaps a Committee of this House—perhaps the International Development Committee or some other appropriate Committee—might choose to take that up; the Chair of the International Development Committee is in the Chamber listening.

This violence was shocking, but it was not as shocking as the response from this Government and the international community. The UK Government and Governments across the world turned a blind eye as the Rohingya screamed, as people pleaded and protested, and as we in this House repeatedly begged for action to be taken. But we did nothing: the UK stood silent, and by doing nothing—by refusing to condemn them—we emboldened the Burmese military. We allowed them to act and we allowed them to carry on and to conduct, in the words of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I temper very slightly the comments of the hon. Gentleman? The Foreign Affairs Committee, which I am privileged to chair, was very clear in its criticism of the Burmese military and indeed of Aung San Suu Kyi herself. In evidence session—this is an unusual position for me, but I am going to say it—the Minister who is on the Treasury Bench today was also extremely clear in criticising the Burmese regime. His efforts and those of other Ministers in the Department shadowed by the Committee of the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), including the Secretary of State, and of Ministers in the Foreign Office in getting aid to the Bangladesh Government and forward to the refugees have been pretty good. I am not going to argue that we could not have done more, or that we should not do more and must do better, but I do not agree with the idea that we just stood by.

Imran Hussain: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I was referring to the Government, of course, because I know that the Foreign Affairs Committee has done a great deal of work on this. However, let me be absolutely clear that I do not accept what he says, because I stood up in the House soon after the atrocities last August and asked the Minister simply to condemn the brutal actions, to condemn the ethnic cleansing, and to condemn the genocide, but there was no condemnation at that time—the hon. Gentleman might like to look in *Hansard* if he has any doubt. The reality is that even today I cannot think of one occasion when the Government have openly and forcefully condemned those atrocities in the House. If the Minister wishes to correct me on that, I am more than happy to give way.

Mark Field: I understand that the hon. Gentleman is very passionate about this issue and has raised it several times, but the Government have repeatedly, on the Floor of the House, talked about ethnic cleansing. We stand by the ICC report, which we want to push through the UN Security Council, and I will say more about that later. We have condemned the actions of senior figures

in the Burmese military and played a leading role in ensuring that they are sanctioned at international level, through the European Union rather than through the UN. It is all very well to condemn, but we also have a range of other actions, both humanitarian and political, which I will talk about more in my speech. Although we have condemned, condemnation is never enough; we need a practical plan of action, both for what happened over the past 15 months and hopefully for the months and years to come.

Imran Hussain: I partly accept what the Minister says. Of course condemnation alone does not go the length, but it is absolutely a starting point. Regrettably, the Minister did not condemn at that point—he knows that he did not use the word “condemnation”—and did not strongly condemn the Burmese Government for their actions at that point, perhaps because he wanted to pursue more diplomatic channels. There are times for diplomatic channels, but perhaps condemnation is more appropriate when genocide and ethnic cleansing is happening.

Those on the fact-finding missions to Burma saw for themselves the horrors that have led to the creation of one of the biggest refugee crises ever seen. So great was the crisis, and so brutal the violence, that the weekly outflow of refugees fleeing Burma rose to a level unseen since Rwanda in the 1990s, as many Members have mentioned. Yet although the refugees, having fled across difficult and even hostile terrain that saw many die on the journey, have escaped the boot of the Burmese military, they are not safe in Bangladesh. The conditions in the camps in which they reside are on the edge of inhumane.

Many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow, have described graphically the conditions in the camps. I will not repeat what has been said, but I want to highlight the really important point made by the hon. Member for St Albans about the children born in Cox’s Bazar. What is their future? What are the thoughts of the young people living day to day in those squalid conditions? Let us all reflect on that.

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point about the children born in the refugee camps. Does he agree that the 13,000 children who were orphaned and then crossed the border on their own face an equally grim future?

Imran Hussain: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It is massively important that safeguards are put in place to protect those children. Again, the international community must do more to ensure that we protect the children, whether they are born in the camps or whether they have been orphaned.

Despite those conditions—and we have heard graphic descriptions—many Rohingya would still rather stay in the camps than be repatriated, against their will or with false promises, to the country that tried to kill them. That is a powerful point. Let us be absolutely clear that they are not being relocated back to their villages, which have long since been burnt to the ground, erased by soldiers who are equally keen on erasing the existence of the Rohingya themselves. Instead, they are being relocated to holding camps; camps surrounded by fences and barbed wires; camps that are a prison, not a new home. In these camps the Rohingya are easily identifiable

to the Burmese Government, easily located, easily persecuted and easily killed. When the same Government and military who forced them out of their homes, and killed their husbands, wives, sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, are in power, and when there are no guarantees of their protection other than the word of the same Burmese Government, then safe return is a fiction.

The Rohingya would not be safe. Indeed, they would be even more at risk. We cannot expect them to return to Burma willingly. To guarantee as great a level of protection as possible for the Rohingya and to stop this genocide ever happening again, we need to hold the Burmese Government to account. We need to hold them responsible, and we need to hold them to their commitments and promises to Bangladesh and to the international community. The first real step—the Minister is listening—that the Burmese Government can take, if there is an ounce of will to move in the right direction, is to give immediate and equal citizenship—not a passport to citizenship or a route to citizenship, or any other scheme, but an immediate right to citizenship. Promises and gestures will not do. Only hard action and a firm stance will work, because that is the only language the Burmese Government seem to understand.

The first action we should take is to refer the Burmese Government and the leaders, military and civilian, who are responsible for the Rohingya genocide to the International Criminal Court. That point has been made, and made well. Those who commit grave crimes against humanity do not belong in power; they belong in The Hague, on trial for their actions. The Government occasionally argue back that any referral to the ICC would be vetoed by China, but I say, let them veto it. Let it be known that they did nothing to stop the persecution of innocent civilians. But we should not let it be known that the UK did not even try, that we shied away from our global responsibilities and that we ran in fear of a veto. The Government have nothing to lose from pushing for a referral and building an international coalition of support for such a measure across the UN General Assembly, but we have our dignity, respect and, above all, our humanity to lose by staying away.

We should not stop there. We must take further action. We need to create a deterrence to prevent this from ever happening again, and we can do that only by creating a serious impact on the Burmese Government. We therefore need to look again at the sanctions that can be imposed on the Burmese military and the companies that are owned by or profit through the military. Some will say that sanctions are dangerous and that they would lead to the toppling of a democratic Government. That may be their concern, but I am concerned that the Government in Burma are no longer democratic or representative anyway, and that Aung San Suu Kyi, the de facto President of Burma, is just as culpable for the genocide. She may not have issued the orders, but she was part of the persecution campaign against the Rohingya.

Sanctions will not topple the democratic Government in Burma and will not lead to a military coup. That is just a myth, because those in the Burmese military already have everything they want. They have control over the legislature and the key Government Ministries. They have made reforms that are acceptable to the international community while barely sacrificing an ounce of their power, so why would they rock the boat now? Their violence and genocide against the Rohingya

[Imran Hussain]

may have gone unpunished so far, but it is certain that a military coup would not be. To believe in the military coup is simply an excuse, and the Government need to propose measures on how they will respond to the UN report's findings and impose sanctions on those involved in the genocide that it describes.

Before I finish, I want to stress the importance of ensuring that those who can escape to the UK—those who can legally reside in this country—are able to do so. Many Rohingya in Burma have close family in the UK—indeed, my constituency houses the largest population of Rohingya in Europe—but Home Office hoops and legal hurdles mean that they cannot escape the hell in which they find themselves and join their family here. To enter the UK, the Home Office requires an English language test and a tuberculosis test, both of which must be completed at the British consulate in Dhaka. It is impossible for the refugees trapped in Cox's Bazar to fulfil those criteria, because they are unable to leave. I have spoken with DFID staff about this matter and sought contact with the Home Office, but I have thus far been ignored. I will be grateful to the Minister if he states what further action he can take to allow the tests to be done in the camps. Will he press upon the Home Secretary and the Immigration Minister the importance of lifting restrictions that refugees cannot fulfil?

The Rohingya in my constituency have made a rich contribution to Bradford, and I put on the record my thanks, gratitude and appreciation to them for the positive contribution that the Rohingya community has made to the great district of Bradford.

2.22 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is a privilege to take part in this debate, and a real honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), who spoke in this debate with such knowledge and passion. It was a real delight to hear them talk.

Like many other Members present, I took part in the debate last year in which we heard about the appalling violence that was being carried out against the Rohingya people in Myanmar and about the disgraceful failure of the State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, to act. She was a woman in whom I placed real hope and faith; she has now betrayed her nation and the most vulnerable in it.

The most horrific stories are still emerging, but I wish to share just two. Lukia is just 18. She grew up in Rakhine state with three sisters and one brother. Their father was a fisherman who took care of them all. Lukia was married just one week before her village was attacked. Some would say she was fortunate to be out of the house when the Myanmar military fired at it with a rocket launcher. Her family, brothers and husband were all killed instantly. She managed to escape the village and, after weeks of walking with other bereaved people, sleeping in tents with traumatised strangers, starving, she managed to join her sister and nephew in a refugee camp in Bangladesh. There, she at least has some rice and dal to eat, and some soap to get clean. But she cannot work, so she can do nothing except dwell on all that she has lost—the family and home that were so cruelly stolen from her. She still dreams of one day returning.

A man called Abul Basar has a similar story. He was also married at 18, and he sold betel leaves to support his wife. When the military entered his village two years later, he ran to a nearby hill to hide, because he knew that men of military age were often abducted or killed, as the UN reports confirm. From that hill, he saw the military take his wife and subject her to rape and torture. There were so many of them that there was nothing he could do. They put her in a house with 20 other women and burned them all alive. Abul said:

“The world went dark for me at that moment.”

He does not remember the journey afterwards—the trauma was too much for him—but he seems to have been carried by people from his village all the way to Bangladesh.

It is so hard to imagine the suffering that Abul, Lukia and the 900,000 others are going through. The Rohingya have already suffered so much, and the criminals who planned and perpetrated all this are getting what they wanted: ethnic cleansing. For those who do return to Rakhine state, the Government there are developing Rohingya-only settlements. They will not be allowed to return home. Amnesty International has called what is emerging

“a vicious system of state-sponsored, institutionalised discrimination that amounts to apartheid”,

and that is so true. There is no room for doubt about the scale of the persecution of the Rohingya, and there should not be any doubt about the intentions of those responsible.

In 2012, the Rakhine Nationalities Development party, the most powerful elected party in Rakhine at the time, was already preparing for genocidal violence. It spread an insidious message of hate, representing the Rohingya as terrorists and a threat to the Buddhist majority. In an official publication, the party used the example of Adolf Hitler to spread its message. The report explicitly said that “inhuman acts” are sometimes

“necessary to maintain a race”,

and called for a “final solution”. What an utterly terrifying thing for any Rohingya person to hear. The report went on:

“Although Hitler and Eichmann were the greatest enemies of the Jews, they were probably heroes to the Germans.”

Just this year, the Myanmar army published a pamphlet to justify the violence that said:

“Despite living among peacocks, crows cannot become peacocks.”

Dehumanising language, presenting an entire people as a threat, and praise for Hitler and the holocaust. I know the Minister will agree that there are clear grounds for an investigation under article 3 of the genocide convention—the crime of:

“Direct and public incitement to commit genocide”.

I really hope he will address that later.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, social media platforms played a huge role in the incitement. As the UN report says, for so many in Myanmar, Facebook is almost synonymous with the internet, and Facebook has proved to be a useful tool for spreading hatred in the build-up to each outbreak of violence. The site was used by individuals to post messages urging their friends to fight the Rohingya the way that Hitler fought the Jews, or advocating burning Muslim refugees

“so that they can meet Allah faster.”

The UN report describes this as a “carefully crafted hate campaign” conducted by “nationalistic political parties and politicians,”— and, heaven help us— “leading monks, academics, prominent individuals and members of the Government.”

It was a campaign of hatred across all levels of society.

Facebook continues to host the page of the so-called Information Committee, apparently run from the office of Aung San Suu Kyi herself. The page shares propaganda posts denying the persecution of the Rohingya people. One particularly awful post smeared a woman who had dared to speak publicly about being raped. The words “FAKE RAPE” appear twice, in big font, at the top of the post. Facebook officials have conceded that they bear some responsibility, and they have now trained dozens of content moderators who speak the Burmese language and banned various military figures from the site. It is a start, but we need social media platforms such as Facebook to take responsibility for their complicity in horrors such as this much earlier, ensuring that such content cannot be shared on their platforms. Facebook does need to take responsibility, but it is the Government and the military of Myanmar who are ultimately responsible for the evils that have taken place. Thankfully, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court has launched an initial inquiry into the violence against the Rohingya—I was not alone in asking for that last year. This is genuinely good progress, but we need to do far more.

In the debate last year, the Minister said that the responsibility lies with the Government of Myanmar and the security forces. He said that we should support the Government in following through on the promises made by Aung San Suu Kyi. But look at what is still happening. Look at the things that the security services are still saying and doing. Working with the security services of Myanmar would be a betrayal of Abul, Lukia and the hundreds of thousands of others who have suffered. It would not help end this horrific persecution, remove the people responsible from positions of power in Myanmar or secure justice for the Rohingya. So I would like the Minister to categorically rule out any military transfers and commit to a broad review of UK trade with Myanmar. We need to know that no aid money provided by this Government, and not one penny of profit from trade or investments involving UK companies, will reach the hands of those responsible for this genocide.

2.31 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I congratulate colleagues from across the House who have brought this important issue to the Chamber today. I know that the number of MPs here does not reflect the importance we put on this vital issue. I have visited the Rohingya refugee camps on the border of Bangladesh and Myanmar twice in my capacity as a humanitarian doctor. In doing so, I have had the ability to see at first hand the brutality and hear the accounts of what has been undertaken in Myanmar. I have had a career spanning more than 10 years working in the field of humanitarian medicine, and never have I experienced such atrocity.

Last year, when I first met refugees crossing the border, I saw the most brutal injuries and heard devastating first-hand accounts of mothers having their babies ripped

from their arms and having to make the choice of whether to go and save one baby from a burning fire or flee with the children they still had remaining, in the vain hope of saving their lives. These are mothers whose children were murdered with the same knives then used to slice off their own breasts. There are sprawling camps, housing almost 1 million Rohingya; the scale has to be seen to be believed, and I know that many in the House today have seen that for themselves. There is a generation of children born out of rape, women who have been brutally violated and men who have had to carry their pregnant wife for 15 days, without food, often needing to drag them just to get over the border to safety. Meanwhile, the world has watched; meanwhile, we have watched.

In October, I returned to the camps and heard how, despite the uncertainty surrounding their futures, people felt relief at finally being able to sleep at night. It was so much easier for people to live in a camp, knee-deep in mud, with a family of eight sharing one little shack, but without the fear of imminently having their child snatched away and murdered. I spoke with Humaira, whose young son was murdered when the army stormed her village. She told me how she wanted to kill herself but was kept alive by the thought of trying to find his body to at least give him a burial. After two days of searching in vain, she had to decide between staying and losing her own life, or fleeing across the border, knowing that she was leaving her son’s body somewhere to rot. She still lives with the pain of not being able to bury her son.

I then met Subara, a 24-year-old mother, who spoke of how the military snatched from her arms her one-year-old child and hacked him to death right in front of her eyes. I know this does not make for easy listening, but these are the facts. We have seen this and heard this; this has been happening on our watch. I was in a room full of 30 women each of whom had a similar woeful, devastating story to tell. The guilt of coming home to my own three-year-old and five-year-old daughters left me unable to sleep at night, as I pondered what it must feel like to have to choose between your two children and for a moment accept that choice. No parent, wherever they are in the world, should ever have to make that choice, but that has been happening as the world has watched and as we have watched. Why should our children’s lives be of more value than those of the Rohingya children, so brutally left for dead and slaughtered, without even a proper burial?

There are now plans to forcibly repatriate thousands of refugees, despite condemnation by the UN and despite their having escaped incomprehensible brutality. These refugees have already lived through the most intolerable cruelty. Just last month, refugees were fleeing camps in fear and others attempted suicide having been named on the list of 4,355 Rohingya refugees for imminent return, without their consent. Those repatriations have been halted for the time being, but they are due to start again in the new year. With the clock ticking, will the Minister confirm to the House that he will speak to the UN to place international pressure on Myanmar and Bangladesh to stop this forced repatriation? The UK Government, as the penholder for Myanmar on the UN Security Council, have a real leadership opportunity, which we have to take.

One year ago, Rohingya refugees were still fleeing over the Myanmar border into Bangladesh. One year ago, Members in this House were debating the horrors

[Dr Rosena Allin-Khan]

faced by the Rohingya in northern Rakhine. One year ago, the Minister stated in this House that if the UN found evidence of genocide, he would support a referral to the ICC. However, just last month, he stated, in writing, that there is insufficient support among Security Council members for an ICC referral at this time. Just how much more suffering do the Rohingya people have to go through before the UK Government are forced to act? The debate is not concluded, yet we have already heard so many first-hand accounts, and I have witnessed these things myself. What more needs to happen? How is it possible that we are still witnessing the Rohingya face unimaginable horrors on a daily basis and uncertainty, yet the UK Government have not publicly spoken out against the forced repatriation of the Rohingya to Myanmar? Should the Rohingya not return to Myanmar, it is looking ever more likely that they face an uncertain future, with the possibility of relocation to Bhasan Char, a desolate island in the bay of Bengal, where communication with the mainland would be entirely cut off during monsoon season.

Many people would do anything to have our job, sitting in this place and making decisions that affect hundreds of thousands, if not millions of lives. We need to be able to look ourselves in the mirror in the twilight of our years and know that we did something with our position in this House. Sometimes that will call for bravery, sometimes it will call on us to take a chance and speak out for all that is right and good. We sit here today on the verge of Christmas and new year. I will be cuddling my children in the new year, but there are hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees for whom their children are but a memory. How can life have such different value depending on where a person was born? The Rohingya are crying out for justice. Humanity must have no borders. Will the Minister today please replace platitudes with promises of action?

2.40 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for her excellent work in bringing this important debate to the House, and I thank the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for her excellent work as well. This is a very important issue, and having listened to some of the speeches of my hon. Friends, I am feeling quite emotional over the trauma that the Rohingya people are going through. It is unbelievable in this day and age. I cannot believe that the international community has failed completely to help these people.

Only last month, buses and trucks stood ready to return refugees to Myanmar from the Cox's Bazar refugee camp, but no one wanted to go back. There are 900,000 Rohingya in more than two dozen camps in the area, living in appalling and dangerous conditions. Food and medical facilities are poor, there is little or no access to education for children, and living conditions are dire. New arrivals are living in highly congested areas and are vulnerable to disease and starvation. There is no proper sanitation, there is insufficient water supply, and women and children are living with the threat of, or enduring, horrific sexual violence and trafficking.

As bleak and disturbing as this picture is, the prospect of forced repatriation to a dangerously hostile home country, stripped of rights and citizenship, is even worse.

The draft UN resolution aims to put a timeline on Myanmar allowing the return of more than 700,000 refugees, but all the evidence points to the fact it is not safe for even one refugee to return. It is an act of gross inhumanity that refugees still living with the trauma of horrific experiences are being forced back to a Buddhist-majority country that is still perpetrating genocide against the Rohingya people.

According to UN investigators, thousands of Rohingya are still fleeing to Bangladesh, and the estimated 250,000 to 400,000 who have remained following last year's brutal military campaign in Myanmar continue to suffer the most severe restrictions and repression. Furthermore, according to reports from Reuters and others, the Myanmar Government are taking steps that threaten to make the purge of the Rohingya permanent. In August 2017, all 6,000 Rohingya residents of the village of Inn Din in Myanmar's western Rakhine state fled a brutal army campaign. Rohingya Muslims and Buddhist villagers were once neighbours here, but Rohingya houses were burned to the ground and all trace of their lives there erased.

New satellite images show that the area was bulldozed and security buildings constructed where the Muslim houses stood. New homes have also sprung up, but not for the Rohingya. The new inhabitants are Buddhists, largely from other parts of Rakhine. The Myanmar Government's resettlement maps show that Rohingya refugees returning to Rakhine will be herded into settlements that segregate them from the rest of the population.

The international community, including the British Government, has failed to take effective action to hold those responsible to account, address the root causes of the crisis and provide sufficient support to refugees. They cannot stand back and allow forced repatriation to a homeland where genocide is still happening. The British Government must accept in full the findings and recommendations of the UN fact-finding mission and officially accept that what took place is genocide, if we are to provide an adequate response to this appalling human suffering.

I welcome the Government's leading role in humanitarian assistance for Rohingya refugees, but we must act now to improve security for women and children in the camps. The UK Government must take action through the UN Security Council to ensure that the Burmese authorities promptly bring suspected perpetrators of crimes against Rohingya to justice, including by referring perpetrators to the International Criminal Court. All the Rohingya refugees would like to return to Myanmar, but they cannot be expected to do so without guarantees of safety, citizenship and dignity.

2.45 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate, and I thank the hon. Members for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and for St Albans (Mrs Main) for setting the scene so well. I also declare an interest. As chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, it is an issue I am very interested in. Every time there has been a debate on the Rohingya, I have probably been there. I commend the hon. Ladies for their leadership in this area and the Backbench Business Committee for making this debate possible today. I am very aware of this issue.

I have spoken about it numerous times. I would love to say that I will not have to speak about it again, but, as everyone has said today, we probably will. We will probably be having this same debate this time next year. It would be great if things had improved by then. We wish and pray for that.

The reason for this debate is very clear. The humanitarian crisis has been described by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as

“a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”,

the UN Secretary-General has described the situation as “catastrophic”, and various NGOs continue to warn that the recent escalation of violence by Burma’s security forces against the predominantly Muslim Rohingya population constitutes crimes against humanity—those last words are all important. The UN special rapporteur for human rights in Burma has said that the situation has the “hallmarks” of genocide, while the independent international fact-finding mission established by the UN Human Rights Council claims to have documented evidence of genocide.

It has been over a year since these atrocities were perpetrated, and the international community has taken woefully—I say that respectfully—insufficient action either to bring them to an end or to bring the perpetrators to justice. The independent international fact-finding mission has called for a case to be brought to the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. All these things irk us. Right hon. and hon. Members have referred to much depravity and violence and brutal killing. It is very hard to sit through these things and not be moved.

As we work to secure the referral of a case to the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity, as recommended by the UN independent fact-finding mission, I believe we should seek a UN Security Council resolution imposing a global arms embargo on the Burmese army, with targeted sanctions against Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. May I ask the Minister—we are very fortunate to have a Minister of such standing, whose responses show such an understanding of this issue—to indicate what our Government, my and his Government, have done on this?

A briefing I have received from the Burma Campaign UK states very clearly:

“Time is running out to address one of the most critical issues for addressing the root causes of the crisis, the denial of citizenship. Aung San Suu Kyi still refuses to accept Rohingya belong in Burma and should have citizenship. With elections due in Burma in 2020, there is now only a window of 12 months where it may be possible to repeat or replace the Citizenship Law. At the present time, Aung San Suu Kyi has the Parliamentary majority and political authority to push through a change. This may not be the case after the 2020 election. The British government and others must prioritise this issue, pressuring Aung San Suu Kyi to change the Citizenship Law in 2019.”

Hon. Members have all asked for it and I am asking for it, so I ask my Minister—our Minister—what has been done to ensure that that happens? We are ever mindful, as the Burma Campaign UK says, and I agree, that we have a “window of 12 months”, which is a very short time. While it is right and proper that we give the Brexit issue full attention, and it is consuming all our lives at the moment, we cannot and must not forget what we owe to the world out there, and especially to those countries with which we have had colonial connections in the past.

I was shocked to learn back in October that the number of Rohingya refugees has reached nearly 1 million, with the young girls in Bangladesh refugee camps sold into forced labour accounting for the largest group of trafficking victims. All these things are horrible to listen to. It is even more horrible to know that, despite the efforts of many, they continue. OM—Operation Mobilisation—reports that women and girls are lured into forced labour, and they account for two thirds of those receiving the agency’s support in Cox’s Bazar, while another 10% were victims of sexual exploitation. They have run from sexual exploitation, and they find themselves back in it. There must be something seriously wrong when that is happening. Men and boys are not exempt, accounting for about a third of refugees forced into labour.

There must be more support on the ground, and it is clear that we must call on the Burmese Government to allow unhindered access to the country for international humanitarian aid agencies, human rights monitors, the media, UN representatives of the fact-finding mission and the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Burma. Everyone has a role to play. This will, I sincerely hope, curtail the actions of those who believe that there is no law and no accountability for breaking any human rights violations.

A short time ago, I met Christian Solidarity Worldwide’s delegation from northern Burma, which gave us some horrific statistics about what is taking place. While it is completely understandable and right that the world has focused on the plight of the Rohingya, I want very gently to mention others. In no way should we detract from their plight, but the situation in northern Burma affecting the predominantly Christian Kachin, as well as the Buddhist Shan and Ta’ang and others, has deteriorated dramatically.

It would seem that, having achieved their objectives in Rakhine state, the Burmese army has moved on to perpetrate similar atrocities in northern Burma, while the world was still focused on Rakhine. The Burmese army, and all the officers that have been commanding it, need to be held accountable. If there is a war crimes tribunal, I can tell you, I will be the first in the queue to give them a good going over. What has taken place is absolutely despicable, and it really grieves me greatly.

In a statement on 23 April, the Kachin community warned of an escalation in Burmese army military offensives against the country’s ethnic groups. It stated that

“the Burma military is escalating attacks against ethnic groups in the country, including in Rakhine State, Kachin State, Shan State and most recently breaking the ceasefire in Karen State.”

It continued:

“There is no shortage of evidence of violations of international law committed by the Burma military.”

That has been outlined by other Members today.

Mrs Main: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that because nothing has really happened as a result of the atrocities against the Rohingya, the Burmese army is emboldened to do this? It would actually help support other religious communities in the country if they could see that these actions against the Rohingya were stamped on. The Burmese army is doing it because it knows it can, and the public quite welcome it.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is so right. This is the frustration we all have, and this is where we are. We have the frustration that the Burmese army is emboldened: because it has got away with it, it can get away with it again. I think it is time that we draw a line and make it accountable. The United Nations has been documenting these crimes for decades. There is another example: it just goes on and on. It is really time to draw a line and to tell these people, who think they are judge and executioner and that they can do whatever they want, that, no, they cannot. They will be held accountable for it some day.

A detailed assessment in 2016 stated that what may amount to war crimes were being committed in Kachin state and Shan state. The independent international fact-finding mission has concluded that crimes against humanity are being perpetrated in Kachin and Shan states. The judicial system has systematically failed to hold accountable perpetrators of abuses such as torture, forced labour, systematic rape and sexual violence.

According to Rev. Samson, by September 2018, 52 churches had been closed down and 92 pastors had been arrested. Further, in October 2018, the United Wa State Army—the UWSA—expelled a group of eight Catholic clergy and lay people from the Wa region in Burma's Shan state. The UWSA has now said that all churches built after 1992 were constructed illegally and will be destroyed. It has forbidden the construction of any new churches, and five churches are reported to have been destroyed.

This demands action, and I believe that we must take it. I ask the Minister again to give serious consideration to actively ensuring that engagement with Burma on human rights and freedom of religion or belief does not focus entirely, with respect, on the plight of the Rohingya to the exclusion of the Kachin and Shan people or of the Muslims, the Christians and other minorities throughout the country. Nobody is safe from the Burmese army; that is a fact. Will he also ensure that freedom of religion or belief is recognised as a priority for all the people of Burma and that we press for international accountability for the human rights violations that have been committed in the Kachin and Shan states?

At the very least, we have a responsibility to encourage the Burmese Government to repeal all legislation that discriminates against religious and ethnic minorities, including laws that limit religious conversion and interfaith marriage. In particular, the Burmese Government should change or repeal the 1982 citizenship law to allow the Rohingya full citizenship rights. That is the least that we can do for them and the least we can expect. We also need to do many other things, and we must use any diplomatic pressure that we have available. In the medium to long term, there must be investment to support initiatives to address racial and religious hatred in Burma. The hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) clearly illustrated that point. We need to support the voices of peace and moderation, and encourage a reconciliation process.

I am conscious of the time, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I shall conclude by pressing the Minister to take this case to heart. I have the greatest faith in him as a person, and also in his position as a Minister, as to how he will respond. Minister, every one of us is burdened with this—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for interrupting him, but it has been my ambition during this year to persuade him to address Members of the House through the Chair. He has now, for the 124th time, addressed the Minister as “you”, and I have to admit my failure. I have failed during the whole year to persuade the hon. Gentleman, who speaks in this House every single day, to refer to the Minister as “the Minister” and to use the word “you” only when he is addressing the Chair. I feel a great burden of failure for not having persuaded him to do that during this year. I will start again next year, as I am determined to educate him in the ways of this Chamber. I beg him, please, to call the Minister “the Minister”, just this once.

Jim Shannon: Madam Deputy Speaker, it is up to me to grasp that terminology. I usually get carried away by the emotion of the occasion, and sometimes I let my voice follow what my heart is saying. Sometimes, inadvertently, that terrible word “you” comes out. The problem is that we are so involved with the EU at the moment, and sometimes I get the two terms mixed up. But there we are; that is by the way. I will endeavour to achieve what you ask.

At this time, Minister, we have a heavy burden in our hearts for the Rohingya, for the Christian Kachin and for all the states in Burma and across the world. I believe that we in this House have a responsibility to act, and act we must. I look to the Minister to outline what form this action will take and when it will take place. We need a timescale. In her introduction, the hon. Member for St Albans mentioned the fact that we were debating this issue this time last year, and indeed we were. We are back again now, but I am not sure how much further forward we are. There are hundreds of thousands of people looking towards us and praying for relief, and if it is in our power to grant that, we must do so. If it is not, we must still do all that we can to exorcise those whose gift it is to enable people to return home and to live and worship as they see fit.

2.59 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I pay tribute to the work that he does in the all-party group for international freedom of religion and belief. Perhaps I could even say, “Well done, you,”—but perhaps not.

I congratulate the hon. Members for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing the debate. It is a sombre and reflective end to the term, but, nevertheless, a very important opportunity to remember, as we go off on the Christmas break, that the seasonal message of peace, hope and joy should be not just aspirational, but motivational, as we remember those who will not enjoy the comforts that many of us are looking forward to, and, of course, that includes the refugees and the Rohingya people. I also echo the point made by others that, on another day, the Benches would have been considerably fuller. That applies to the Scottish National party Benches as well, and I speak on behalf of all my hon. Friends in this debate.

The House has considered this issue several times since the first evidence of the crisis. I remember, very soon after the 2015 general election, the hon. Member

for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) leading an Adjournment debate on the issue. He had also drawn the attention of the House to the issue in January of that year in Westminster Hall. Those debates were the straws in the wind, as it was becoming apparent then that the initial high expectations of democratic reform and the forthcoming elections were perhaps too high, and that there would in fact be trouble ahead. That has been reflected in the powerful contributions that we have heard in all the speeches today, especially from members of the International Development Committee who have travelled to the area. They include the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) who has had first-hand experience of the area, and the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) who gave a very powerful and moving account.

I just want to reflect briefly on the situation on the ground, some of the international responses and the role for the UK Government. We have heard those testimonies throughout the debate. Since 2017, and indeed before, there has been a brutal state-sponsored oppression of the Rohingya people in Rakhine state—mass murder, rape, abuse, destruction of villages, certainly a form of ethnic cleansing and now very clear ground to consider whether a genocide is taking place. We heard other moving stories from the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) in that regard.

More than 800,000 Rohingya people have already fled to Bangladesh, with women and children accounting for at least 80% of those refugees. The point was well made by the hon. Member for St Albans about the need to continue to raise awareness and public understanding so that this issue does not get lost. I pay tribute to my old friends in the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund and in Justice and Peace Scotland who, this year, commissioned the photo exhibition, “The Journey”, which has been touring Catholic cathedrals and other venues in Scotland, bringing home the harrowing reality of the refugee crisis and the experience of the Rohingya people and ensuring that they are not forgotten. I also join the tributes that have been paid to other non-governmental organisations working in the area. Christian Solidarity Worldwide and the Burma Campaign in particular provided very helpful background for this debate.

There may now be a pretence of calm and an attempt to keep the lid on the situation, but it is clear that things remain precarious, that oppression continues, and that any attempt by Bangladesh to force repatriation on the refugees could once again lead to an escalation in violence.

It is important to recognise some of the responses from international actors. There is a widespread humanitarian response in operation. Last year, the Scottish Government contributed £120,000 from their humanitarian emergency fund. The First Minister said:

“The Scottish Government has made clear that we support the UN Secretary General’s call for effective action that addresses the root causes of the situation and brings an end to violence. We also stand ready to support the UK Government in providing an appropriate response to this situation... The Scottish Government expects all states to comply with fundamental and human rights law, to condemn human rights abuses wherever they occur, and to take positive action to confront abuses and give practical day-to-day effect to human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

We support the EU and US actions and sanctions on individuals in the Myanmar military, including the European Council’s recent decision to adopt individual

sanctions against Myanmar’s senior military and border guard officials for alleged human rights violations. The US has also adopted such sanctions, but, clearly, there are calls in this Chamber and from elsewhere that they could be stronger and more effective. I also note the decision of the US House of Representatives to agree a resolution that the Myanmar Government’s actions constitute genocide, and perhaps that does need further consideration here in this House.

It is clear that further support is needed for the authorities and responders in Bangladesh. It must not feel that it has to forcibly repatriate the Rohingya refugees—a point on which the Chair of the International Development Committee spoke very powerfully. There are some estimates that suggest that barely half of the required funding has actually been met. Likewise, the refugees must be treated with respect for their human rights and under humanitarian principles. The reports we have heard of prison-like accommodation and significant overcrowding in camps are simply unacceptable.

I echo the calls for careful management and regulation of social media. The comparison has been drawn with the situation in Rwanda. I had the privilege of travelling there with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association earlier this year, and the legacy of that genocide is still incredibly raw 25 years on. We keep saying that this must never happen again, yet here we are on the verge of it happening again. We have to respond and take action, which is why this situation should be among the highest priorities for the UK’s diplomatic efforts.

We have a long historical relationship with Burma/Myanmar and we should be using our influence with the country’s Government and on the world stage. It is therefore disappointing that the UK Government have chosen not to accept in full the findings and recommendations of the UN fact-finding mission, and it is clear from this debate that there has to be further and full consideration of whether the violence against the Rohingya people constitutes genocide. I echo the calls of the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) that the Government must completely and unequivocally condemn what is happening.

As others have said, it would be useful to hear from the Minister an update on efforts to build support for a legal tribunal, whether that is a referral of the regime to the International Criminal Court or the establishment of an ad hoc tribunal to consider the situation. There are other steps that the UK and its agencies could take to more effectively enforce sanctions—for example, by making sure that procurement by the Department for International Development or the embassy does not source goods or services from military-owned or controlled companies in the country.

As others have alluded to, the sorriest part of the story is the fall from grace of Aung San Suu Kyi. She had been such an inspirational figure to so many people. As I have said previously in Westminster Hall debates, I grew up hearing about her house arrest and the inspiration she provided. When she was released, she was fêted here in this House, but now the civic honours are being stripped from her, including the freedom of the cities of Dundee and Glasgow. But she still has a crucial role to play, and could redeem her reputation and her Government, if she was willing to acknowledge the mistakes that are being made and take whatever steps she can to bring the army under control. The first and most important thing

[Patrick Grady]

she must do is to recognise the rights of the Rohingya people to citizenship in their own country. That message is coming very strongly from this debate and from the international actors, and it must come strongly from the UK Government too.

This time of year is about hope. We must have hope, but we must take responsibility for bringing that hope to fruition. That message is coming strongly and clearly from this House in support of the UN's findings, and the Government must use their resources and influences to build peace and seek justice for the Rohingya people of Myanmar. On that note, I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and everybody in the House and around the world—including the people of Myanmar, Bangladesh and the Rohingya communities—a happy and peaceful Christmas.

3.7 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and the Backbench Business Committee on securing this important debate. At the beginning of her speech, my hon. Friend drew our attention to the motion before the House, and I am going to begin in the same way:

“this House is deeply concerned by the ongoing humanitarian crisis...agrees with the findings of the UN fact-finding mission that genocide and war crimes have been carried out...calls on the Government to pursue an ICC referral...and further calls on the Government to put pressure on the United Nations.”

The fact of the matter is that we are not going to divide the House this afternoon. This is a substantive motion. It means that the Government, having accepted it, must carry through in full with action.

My hon. Friend made an excellent speech, in which she pointed out that the UN fact-finding mission has found that genocide and war crimes have been committed. I thank her for her work in not only securing the debate but visiting the refugees, preparing so thoroughly and putting pressure on the Myanmar Government. As she said, half the refugees are children, so the horror and catastrophe of this situation cannot be exaggerated. She said, as other Members have, that she was disappointed in the Government's response. Later in my speech, I will suggest some ways in which we could toughen up the UK's position.

It is now 16 months since three quarters of a million Rohingya people began to cross the border into Bangladesh. In the camps, there is plainly terrible suffering and squalid conditions—many Members have testified to that—but, of course, the situation from which they were escaping and the horror of the sexual violence were even worse.

All Members have rightly acknowledged the great generosity of the Bangladeshi Government. I also want to thank the voluntary sector for not only its support in briefing us for the debate but the work it is doing day in, day out, including Save the Children, Burma Campaign UK, the International Rescue Committee, Human Rights Watch and the UNHRC.

I was somewhat alarmed when I discovered that the Myanmar and Bangladeshi Governments had reached a new agreement on repatriation and registered all the refugees in the camps, which is the necessary base for repatriation. The main question is: are the conditions

right for a safe, voluntary and dignified return? This House is sending a message to both those Governments that the answer is an emphatic no; those conditions are not yet present.

Mrs Main: The hon. Lady is referring to the memorandum of understanding signed between the two countries. It is worth putting on record that there was no voice for the Rohingya in the dialogue on the memorandum of understanding. They were being talked about, done to and organised around, but they did not have a voice at that negotiating table.

Helen Goodman: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention and she is absolutely right. She made a powerful speech. Through their work and actions, she and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) have demonstrated that there is a consensus across the House on this matter, to which we want Ministers to listen and pay attention. She asked, what would be different in December 2019 and why should we wait for the independent commission of inquiry, because this is surely a recipe for delay and the loss of evidence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who chairs the International Development Committee, made an excellent speech in which he emphasised the problems with repatriation and the conditions in the camps. He stressed the importance of enabling people in the camps to work and secure an education. He pointed out that this problem will not be solved quickly, and we need to borrow from best practice in other countries in order that these people do not become a lost generation.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam, who is the Select Committee's rapporteur, gave us the benefit of his deep and long-standing understanding and emphasised that the Rohingya themselves must have more control in this situation. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) demonstrated that the gender-based violence is not the result of an army out of control but is being used as a systematic weapon of war. He expressed his frustration with the position that the British Government have taken. He talked, in particular, about children born in the camps. There is a question for the Minister flowing from his remarks: what is the legal status of these children? It would be very helpful if we could have a clear legal view from the Foreign Office on their legal status, because we are clearly talking about thousands of young children. My hon. Friend also pointed out that relying on the internal state to provide security for the Rohingya people is completely inadequate.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) talked about the catastrophe suffered by two people, in particular. As so often, the horror is easier to understand when one hears about individuals than when one hears about thousands of people. She also pointed to the propaganda war that has been run over a long period. Will the Minister consider what the legal responsibilities are of the social media companies? What, precisely, are the responsibilities that we should be attributing to Facebook—and, incidentally, has it given any money from its huge profits to address this vast humanitarian crisis?

My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) spoke about the atrocities that have occurred. Her testimony was so powerful that I really feel that I

do not want even to begin to comment on it. She ended by saying that we need to move from platitudes to promises, and I completely agree.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) pointed to the most recent evidence that has come out of the country. All hon. Members have said that the treatment of the Rohingya is obviously the most horrific act of the Myanmar Government, but a number of things are going on in the country that show that it is not open or properly democratic. The Government made a strategic error when they jailed two Reuters journalists, because now Reuters is using satellite photography that shows that villages are being bulldozed and new people are being put into them. That reinforces the case that hon. Members are making that, when the Myanmar Government say that people should go back into Rakhine state, they mean that they are just going to be put into camps—enclosed, not given freedom of movement. That, in itself, is a completely unacceptable and unsafe situation. They are continuing to oppress the Rohingya people and they are suppressing open reporting.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, made a heartfelt call for improvements across the board in Myanmar. I agree with him about what is happening to the Chin people. I was extremely alarmed—again, I would like some answers from the Minister on this—when I heard on the World Service that the UNHCR was proposing to send back people from that ethnic minority who are currently refugees in Malaysia, India, Thailand and Nepal. So I wrote to the UNHCR to ask it about this. I wrote for two reasons, partly out of concern for that group of people and partly because it sets a terrible precedent for the Rohingya minority. I had a letter back from the UNHCR at the end of November, and it said that the reasons giving rise to a fear of persecution under the 1951 convention have very significantly diminished. I will share the letter with the Minister afterwards, but I would like to know whether that is also the Foreign Office's assessment. I do not think it is the assessment of hon. Members, not least because we have seen the Rohingya people continuing to cross the border throughout the year.

The big question, of course, is, what should be done? What should we do now? The Government are telling us that they think we should allow the Burmese Government to carry on with the process they call a commission of inquiry. The UK Government want to press them to ensure that the process is transparent, independent and considers international evidence. Everything we know about the Myanmar Government suggests that we cannot have confidence in an internal inquiry. Myanmar is not a country with a robust criminal justice system, and there is a big risk in behaving as if it is such a country. The risk is that people escape, that evidence is lost, that nothing ever happens and that people are not brought to justice.

Her Majesty's Opposition believe it is now time to have a UN Security Council resolution referring the Myanmar military to the ICC. When the Minister wrote to me about that a few days ago, he said that we would lose and that it would not advance the cause of accountability should the UNSC try and fail to refer Burma to the ICC. I do not think for a single moment

that that is an easy judgment to make, and nor do I think any Member would think that, but we need to look at where we think the opposition to such a resolution would come from.

First, of course, there is the risk of a Chinese veto. As part of its belt and road initiative, China is currently trying to build a port in Rakhine state. China is continually arguing that the Rohingya are an internal issue. That is clearly because China wants to have a good relationship with the Myanmar Government so it is able to continue with its belt and road initiative, and in my opinion it is also because China does not want people looking too closely at how it is treating the Muslim Uighur minority in the west of China.

We are also beginning to see an undermining of the ICC by the Trump Administration. John Bolton, the US national security adviser, recently said that the ICC is “dead to us”. He does not want the ICC to prosecute US army officials for alleged abuses in Afghanistan.

The question is really whether the British Government wish to hand over their moral conscience to the Chinese and the Trump Administration. Would it not be better to be open and straightforward by standing up for what we believe and letting them be tried in the court of public opinion?

Other hon. Members have talked about sanctions, and we now have individual sanctions against some members of the Myanmar military. However, two further strengthenings would send helpful and powerful signals. Unless we put more pressure on the Myanmar Government, they will feel that they have some impunity. The first point is to have a UN-mandated global arms embargo, and I would be interested to hear what the Minister thinks about the scope for that. The second point is to extend European sanctions, which at the moment are on individuals, to that part of the economy controlled by the military. We know there are travel restrictions on some of the Myanmar military, but we do not know—again, this is a specific question for the Government—what assets have been frozen so far.

Imran Hussain: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and compelling case. On military personnel travelling, she will know that, soon after the initial escalation in violence in October 2016, red carpets were rolled out in Italy and other countries in Europe for the military generals in April 2017. That is outrageous and any sanctions must start with the top personnel, not the military further down the chain.

Helen Goodman: I did not know about that episode, but my hon. Friend makes a fair point. Ultimately, as everyone in the Chamber understands, we want the implementation of the Kofi Annan report, and full recognition and civil rights for Rohingya people within Myanmar.

To be honest, there could not be a better day for this debate. Hon. Members will recall that two days after Christmas day we remember the slaughter of the innocents, so it is therefore apposite for us to be considering this issue. Hon. Members and people watching the debate also know that Christmas is a time for giving, and having heard the powerful testimonies from my colleagues, I hope that those watching who feel moved to do so, know that to give to the Rohingya refugees via Save the Children they can telephone 0207 012 6400, or go online to www.savethechildren.org.uk/rohingya.

[Helen Goodman]

Madam Deputy Speaker, I think I will be the last person from this Dispatch Box to have the opportunity to wish you, other hon. Members, and the staff of the House, a very happy Christmas.

3.27 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate, and to Members for their heartfelt and emotional contributions. One difficulty of standing at this Dispatch Box is that although I have heard the poetry, there may now be a little more prose as I try to give a realistic assessment of what is achievable. As we know, politics is to an extent the art of the possible, but it is also the art of aspiration, and I hope to touch on a few issues that have been raised. I shall try to respond to all the points raised, but I hope hon. Members will forgive me if I revert to writing to a number of specific points. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) will accept that it is better I do it that way, rather than try to give a glib answer that then begins to unravel.

I take this opportunity to condemn on the record the political violence that we have seen in Bangladesh in recent days, which has, and will have, a big bearing on these matters. Whenever I visit Bangladesh, I am struck—as I am sure other hon. Members are—by the absolute determination of its people to get on and prosper, and we all know that political instability and violence will not help them to do either of those things. Much can be said, of course, for many in the British-Bangladeshi diaspora

I am concerned by reports that some civil society organisations in Bangladesh are being prevented from observing the election. Independent domestic and international observers have a crucial role in helping to support a free and transparent process for the elections in 10 days' time. We urge all in Bangladesh to refrain from further violence, to deliver a democratic election, to give Bangladeshis a properly representative Parliament that can propel their country to greater economic prosperity, and—to reflect the words of the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)—to reflect on their ongoing responsibilities for the situation in and around Cox's Bazar.

I now turn directly to the subject of this impassioned debate. The plight of the Rohingya people rightly concerns many hon. Members—many more, perhaps, than are in the Chamber today. Like me, several colleagues have made the journey to camps in Bangladesh to meet refugees and heard their distressing testimony for themselves. When I travelled to Cox's Bazar in June, I could see the immense scale of the suffering. The refugee situation is heartbreaking, notwithstanding the immense generosity being shown to them by the Government of Bangladesh, who have given shelter to nearly 1 million people. Those whom I spoke to said that they wanted, in time, to return to their homes in Burma, but only if they could be certain that they would no longer be persecuted and discriminated against.

I very much agree with the sentiments of the hon. Members for West Ham (Lyn Brown), for Bishop Auckland and for Bradford East (Imran Hussain): the citizenship issue is critical. If we do not get that right, it will be

pointless for the refugees to return. But the situation is difficult: we cannot impose that but must work with the international community to make the case to the Burmese authorities. The UK Government will continue to work with international partners to press for the creation of conditions in Rakhine allowing for a voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees. However, there is clearly no appetite for such a return at the moment.

Paul Scully: As the Minister says, at the moment there is no appetite for going back. There is also a sense of hardening opinions. Whereas a year ago refugees wanted to go back if it was safe, the refugees I spoke to six months ago felt that hope was being lost.

Mark Field: I agree with my hon. Friend, who has been to the camps on several occasions and has probably seen the degradation of process in that regard. I say again that, for the reasons set out by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), we absolutely oppose plans for moving any Rohingya to Bhasan Char, the island in the bay of Bengal. We do not feel that that would be a safe or feasible place, for the reasons that she set out. Any location or relocation of refugees has to be safe, dignified and in accordance with international humanitarian principles, standards and laws.

As colleagues will know, the Governments of Bangladesh and Burma were preparing to start a refugee repatriation on 15 November. I spoke as a matter of urgency by telephone with Bangladesh's Foreign Minister and I spoke with both the Bangladeshi State Minister of Foreign Affairs and Burma's Minister for International Co-operation in advance of that day. I was absolutely clear with each of them that the UK Government shared the assessment of the UN Refugee Agency: that insufficient progress had been made to enable safe returns to northern Rakhine.

Our concerns were also borne out by the fact, brought up by many hon. Members today, that no Rohingya refugees volunteered to return. I believe that international pressure at that point was a key factor in halting any involuntary repatriations. I welcome the Bangladeshi Government's subsequent reaffirmation of their commitment to exclusively voluntary returns, but we all know in the international community that we will have to remain vigilant about that point.

I can reassure Members that the UK will continue to play a full part in supporting Rohingya refugees as a leading donor to the international humanitarian response, to which we have so far donated £129 million.

Dr Allin-Khan: It is great to hear the Minister affirming that we do not want any forced repatriations and acknowledging that Rohingya refugees want to return only if that is safe. On my most recent visit just two months ago, the word coming out from the refugees was that they wanted justice. Does the Minister agree that the issue is about not just safe repatriation but bringing about justice for all the atrocities that those people have had to live through?

Mark Field: I do understand that. What justice amounts to is obviously something that will develop in time, as and when, one hopes, people are able to return to traditional homelands. That is something I am sure we will discuss.

Mrs Main: Just before the Minister moves on from his point about Bhasan Char island, I met the new Bangladesh high commissioner to the UK this week. This is a narrative I have heard before. They do not regard Bhasan Char island as a bad place to go. Indeed, they say that they are encouraging their own people—Bangladeshis—to apply to Bhasan Char island and that it will not just be an outpost for Rohingya. My concern, however, particularly with the monsoon and so on, is that it is a very secretive environment, so we need to stress that we do not consider Bhasan Char island in that way. I know that this is a point of dispute. I would like to put it on record that the Bangladesh Government do not see Bhasan Char island as a bad place to be.

Mark Field: We have made it clear that we do not feel it is an appropriate place, for the reasons my hon. Friend rightly sets out. Out of sight is out of mind. There is a sense of it being almost like an Alcatraz or near enough some sort of holding pen, rather than a viable place for the longer term.

On my hon. Friend's previous point about the joint response plan, which goes to the issue of the overall humanitarian response, I am afraid to say that at the moment, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby will know, it is only partially funded. The current figure is 68.9%, which is \$654 million out of a \$950 million expectation. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID's relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Ultimately, we all know that the solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in Rakhine and in Burma more widely. The UN fact-finding mission—we are supportive of it and its evidence—uncovered evidence of a series of horrendous crimes. Its report makes for chilling reading. However, as I have said previously in this House, the Government believe that any judgment on whether genocide has occurred is not a political judgment but a matter for judicial decision. It is therefore critical that we work to ensure that a credible judicial process is put in place. The Burmese authorities want to demonstrate that there is no need for an international justice mechanism. They must show that their commission of inquiry will lead to an effective judicial process. I share many of the concerns expressed on the Opposition Benches about that process. What I would say is that the commission of inquiry does have high-ranking international observers. We therefore continue to maintain some hope, but it can work only if it properly holds to account those responsible for crimes, whether they are civilian or in the military.

Rushanara Ali: I have a great deal of time for the Minister, but I find it utterly shocking that, after everything he has heard and all that he knows—he knows a lot more than many others, because he is the Minister—he believes we should be even recognising the internal commission of inquiry. The Burmese military uses commission after commission to distract the international community. In the past, when his predecessors in government used similar lines, we would subsequently look away and thousands of people would have been killed and hundreds of thousands forced out of their country. The same mistake is happening again. He should

not have any hope for that internal inquiry. He should answer the question in the motion about the ICC and what we will do.

Mark Field: I think the hon. Lady has slightly misinterpreted what I said. I have very little faith in the commission of inquiry, other than the fact that within it there are international individuals who will hopefully be able to keep some lines of communication open. She is absolutely right that the Burmese authorities have given very little evidence in the past year to suggest that this will be anything more than a whitewash. As I say, there are individuals involved who I hope can keep lines of communication open. [*Interruption.*] In fairness, the Annan report was commissioned in part by the Burmese military. It provides a fantastic template, if only it were properly enforced.

Rushanara Ali: The Minister is right. We recognise the contribution of the late Kofi Annan, and we recognise that the commission's recommendations would be significant if only they were implemented. The Burmese military's answer to those recommendations was the 2017 attacks that brought about this crisis, with thousands of people killed and 700,000 forced out. That is their answer to people like Kofi Annan and others—independent-minded figures engaging and trying to help the Burmese Government. Their answer is further slaughter and genocide.

Mark Field: I very much respect what the hon. Lady has said, and, as she will know, I share her concerns. We will do all that we can.

If I may, in the time allotted to me, I will say a little more about what else we are doing in the international community. The Foreign Secretary is the Minister who visited Burma most recently, back in September. He made our expectations very clear to Aung San Suu Kyi, and repeated that message in a letter written jointly with the French Foreign Minister. He made it clear that if the commission of inquiry was to have any credibility, it must be transparent and independent, and must take full account of the international evidence brought to it. If it is not and does not, the Burmese authorities and their supporters at the United Nations will, in our view, have no grounds whatsoever for rejecting moves towards an international mechanism to secure that accountability.

Let me now say something about the UK's international action. We are, in the meantime, building on our success at the September session of the Human Rights Council, where we secured a regulation mandating the creation of a "collect and preserve" mechanism. That will support the preparation of case files for use in future prosecutions. I fear that some of the leading lights of the Burmese military will be there for some time to come, but that unique mechanism will enable evidence to be in place for those future prosecutions.

We have been clear with fellow members that the Security Council should take further action, and we have tried to build consensus on what that might be. I know that many Members would like the Security Council to refer the situation in Burma to the International Criminal Court, but a referral would be extremely difficult to achieve, because veto-wielding members of the Security Council would vote against it. I must say to the hon. Members for Tooting and for Bradford East and others that there is a risk that a vetoed resolution would be

[Mark Field]

counterproductive to our aims, because it would reduce pressure on the Burmese military, and would also undermine the very credibility of the United Nations.

I know that some look back at China's decision to abstain rather than vetoing the UN Security Resolution in 2005 referring the Darfur situation to the International Criminal Court. I believe that we should test what China is prepared to accept in this situation, but I also think we need to recognise that the way in which that nation behaved in 2005 in relation to a crisis in Africa may not be the way in which a China that is rather more assertive on the international stage behaves in relation to a crisis in its own neighbourhood.

Mike Gapes: The Minister says that China's interests in that part of Africa were not necessarily what its interests are in Myanmar. Is it not a fact that the Chinese Government see this region as essential to its belt and road strategy and its overall expansion of its investments, and therefore regards neighbouring countries as a strategic asset? Is it not very likely that the Chinese will continue to prove very difficult in the United Nations on this matter?

Mark Field: I fear that they will. There are the strategic and economic issues to which the hon. Gentleman has referred, and there is also—this was mentioned by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland—the sense of a non-interference strategy. To be fair, they believe that across the board in the context of sovereignty, but obviously there are issues closer at hand in regard to which there has been public criticism, and that will, I suspect, increase in the months and years to come.

I would like to think that we will continue to try to work within the UN, and that we should try to table a resolution if the opportunity arises, but I am trying to be as open as possible with the House about some of the fundamental strategic difficulties that we face in trying to table a resolution. Although I understand that there is a real sense of outrage, and a feeling that we need to be on the front foot, it might well undermine what we are trying to achieve in the short to medium term in building some sort of consensus among like-minded international states.

Imran Hussain: The point the Minister makes about the Chinese veto somehow emboldening the Burmese military further is lost on me, because the Burmese military at the moment are acting as judge, jury and executioner; anybody who thinks there is an ounce of real democracy in Burma is kidding themselves. The military have all the key seats, including, as the Minister knows, the Home, Foreign and Security Offices. If we do nothing, that will surely embolden the Burmese military further.

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and he will appreciate that these are very sensitive decisions that we are making on the international stage. I know that this debate will be read not just in Burma, but in the UN as well, where our group there will try to make some headway on the issue.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mark Field: I am taking rather longer than I intended, but this is an important debate and I wanted to take some interventions. However, I want now to come back to my speech.

Let me also say this very specifically about China's actions at the moment: China's forcing of a procedural vote as recently as October to try to prevent the fact-finding mission from even briefing the UN Security Council highlights, I fear, the level of opposition we are currently up against. But we shall continue to try to engage China on the need for accountability for this horrendous set of crimes, and our strategy of course is not constrained to the UN Security Council; we secured agreement as recently as 10 December at the Foreign Affairs Council to expand the EU's Burma sanctions listing. Seven senior military and border guard police officers were sanctioned by the EU in June for their roles in human rights violations in Rakhine in August and September 2017. We shall be adding more names to that list and expect to announce details early in the new year. These measures and their signal that the international community will take further steps to increase the pressure are noticed and are not welcomed by the Burmese military or indeed the State Counsellor.

Of course human rights violations continue to occur elsewhere in Burma, as has been mentioned by a number of Members. In the last few weeks three Kachin activists were convicted of defamation and sentenced to six months in prison for organising protests in which they were alleged to have criticised the Burmese military. Our ambassador had met them only a few days earlier, and both he and I have publicly protested at that sentencing.

The fact-finding mission report also highlighted that atrocities had been committed against both Kachin and Shan state minorities, and I heard some of the horrifying evidence for myself.

Dr Allin-Khan: I am sorry for intervening as I appreciate that the Minister has a limited amount of time in which to speak. However, I feel that I cannot sit here in silence while listening to the continuation of the debate without saying that the Minister has so eloquently spoken of the atrocities against a number of other minority groups unfolding as we sit here ready to go on our Christmas recess. I am proud to be British and proud to be in this Parliament, and we have a duty to call out all that is wrong globally. We sit here talking about this knowing full well that atrocities are continuing. When are we going to stand up, be counted and not be fearful of what the countries around Burma are going to be saying to us?

Mark Field: We are standing up in New York and in Geneva on a daily basis and being counted on this very issue—trying to take a lead. The Kachin and Shan issue is not an isolated example. This goes back to the issue of our being penholders, and one can look back through history to 1824 or 1945, but one of the desperate things is that those minorities fought on our side during the war while the Burmese Buddhist majority sided with the Japanese, and that is one of the reasons why we have an historical moral and ethical imperative. A number of those minorities have been considered as beyond the pale and not as citizens partly as a result of that episode; essentially that was seen as somehow being against the moves for Burma to have independence from the United Kingdom.

With the House's indulgence, I will touch on two more points. I will write to Members on some of the specifics, because I would rather not say anything inaccurate. With regard to family reunion for refugees, I believe

that the Home Office has written to the hon. Member for Bradford East, stating that the UK Government strongly support family unity, and that the Home Office has a comprehensive framework in place for refugees and their families. He made a good point that the refugees in Cox's Bazar clearly cannot go to Dhaka anytime soon to exercise those rights. He made the point on the Floor of the House, and I will do my best and will write to the Home Office to make clear his concerns.

Imran Hussain: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me at least to put this on the record. For months now I have been seeking to meet the Home Office in order to deliver hundreds of applications or information sheets that I have received from constituents who have relatives in Cox's Bazar, first so that the Home Office has that valuable information, and secondly to see whether anything could be done. However, the Home Office is refusing to meet me.

Mark Field: I am sure that was a rather mischievous intervention from the hon. Gentleman, but because it is Christmas we will let him get away with it. But he makes a serious point.

Let me touch on the issue of sexual violence, which was raised by a number of Members. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland asked about the legal status of children in camps. I will write to her, because I need to consult the FCO's legal advisers to be absolutely clear about the precise nature of that. As many Members will know, we have worked very closely and played a leading role with our advisers on sexual violence in Bangladesh. We have a team of experts trying to map and document human rights violations, partly for the longer-term development of evidence, but obviously also to try to train up Bangladeshi expertise in this regard. Clearly that is an important part of our ongoing work in the camps.

DFID is very much leading the way in supporting a range of organisations that provide specialised help to survivors of sexual violence in Bangladesh, including 19 women's centres offering a safe space, psychosocial support and activity for women and girls. At the last count, 53,510 women have been provided with midwifery care and advice. We also support projects in Burma as part of the preventing sexual violence initiative, including publishing guidance on support for survivors in a formal legal process.

In conclusion, we all know that the Rohingya people have a right to live in their home country in safety and with dignity—something we take for granted at this time of the year. For that to happen, those responsible for their persecution must be held accountable, and the Burmese state must show that it is serious about bringing an end to prejudice and discrimination against ethnic minorities who have suffered for so long. Burma will also continue to need the support of the international community if we are to see democracy, human rights and the rule of law embedded in that country for the longer term.

As things stand, we must prepare ourselves for what I fear will be a very long journey. We must remember that the Burmese people will have to endure every step of that journey, given the Government they have. That is why I will repeat today what I have said before: for

their sake, the UK will stay the course so that one day the people of Burma can live together in peace, justice and prosperity.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I repeat the offer that my door will remain open on the issue. One of the frustrations in the 18 months or so that I have been a Foreign Office Minister is that there are certain matters—I was going to say “easy wins”, but nothing is easy in diplomacy—that land on my desk and in relation to which I can achieve something in very quick order. I have spent a huge amount of time working on this issue, as a number of Members have been kind enough to point out. Perhaps I do not share the passion or anger shown by some Opposition Members, but I share their concerns and wish that I could achieve more. I wish that I could say that we had been able to achieve a huge amount in the international community. Sometimes, as I have said on the Floor of the House before, one of the frustrations and challenges of being in the Foreign Office is that we take two or three steps forward and then take a couple of steps back. We have made progress and a lot of work is going on, not only among my team in the Foreign Office but in New York and Geneva, and particularly in Dhaka, Rangoon and Naypyidaw, where we have our high commissions and embassies.

The truth of the matter is that this issue is very tough. It is one of those issues that is not open to a rapid solution. I wish it were. It breaks my heart: I am a father of two children and, not least at this time of the year, one recognises the conditions in which many Rohingya live, and not just for the past 18 months, because many of them have been living in those conditions for decades. We have to be in it for the long haul. The UK Government and, more importantly still, in many ways, the UK Parliament is in it for the long haul.

I thank everyone for what they have done. As I say, my door remains open and I will try to ensure that as the situation develops we speak to as many Members with strong concerns about this matter as we can. Work is in progress, and although there is not a great dawn ahead in 2019, I feel that we are taking a number of tracks, and hopefully we will not only have accountability and improve the humanitarian opportunities for those living in Cox's Bazar, but work with international partners to try to look properly to the longer term. As many people say, the issue in that part of the world is not just about the Rohingya today; it is about the precedent that is being set. Although we can never say never again, and they always seem like such hollow words, that is the real prize here. If we can do something and bring together an accountability process that is a precedent for the future, a lot of the very hard work on this matter that goes on, not only in the UK Foreign Office but in several other countries, will not be in vain.

3.56 pm

Rushanara Ali: Let me start by expressing my gratitude to my hon. Friends and other Members, especially my co-sponsor the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), for taking time to contribute to this debate ahead of Christmas. Everybody has spoken passionately and with conviction and courage about the importance of the need for the British Government to act, and we have highlighted our own experiences of why we need to act. I am grateful to the Minister for the work he has been doing and for what he has said.

[*Rushanara Ali*]

Let me sum up and reiterate some of the points made by my hon. Friends and Members in all parts the Chamber. The first is the importance of the reform of citizenship laws and the protection of all minorities—especially the Rohingya population, given the scale of the disaster, but also other minorities, including Christian minorities. There are conflicts throughout Burma that affect humanitarian access for other minorities, such as the Kachin.

Along with its humanitarian dimension, the particular focus of the motion is the need to seek an International Criminal Court referral through the United Nations. The Minister highlighted very well the complexities of getting such a referral, and we understand them, but we need to remind ourselves of some of the remarks that have been made, including “If not now, when?” If the Minister is not prepared to say when, for the reasons that he has explained—we fully appreciate the complexity and difficulty of international diplomacy—will he please make the commitment that he, and perhaps even the Foreign Secretary, will regularly report to the House, without our having to spend months trying to secure a Backbench debate that then gets delayed because of the wider crises that we face in this country, particularly given the uncertainties of Brexit and a potential no-deal situation?

The point about the referral and accountability and justice is well made and important. We are particularly passionate and determined that this foreign affairs team—the current Foreign Secretary, with the Minister and his colleagues—take action, because they have shown the greatest commitment so far. That includes the Foreign Secretary’s recent visit to Burma and his discussions with some of us before and after that. I am grateful for the time that has been given to involve Members of the House. This team has shown the most commitment to trying to get results, so we need to seize that opportunity, because we have had a lot of change, with a number of Ministers having moved. Although we have the Government’s commitment and understanding, we need action. Otherwise, we will keep coming back here to remind and re-educate subsequent Ministers, not because they do not care, but because they are having to learn fast, as this Minister had to do when, as a new Minister, he stood in this Chamber to respond to an urgent question when this crisis began. That is why we are absolutely determined to ensure that the Government take much stronger action and report back—every few months, I hope—with some results, rather than have us go round in circles.

The points on the issues relating to protection, particularly of women and children, are well made. I urge the Minister to make sure that DFID does more and that we do more to ensure that the outstanding funding is provided for the appeal, because without medium to long-term funding, the hand-to-mouth existence is going to cause further devastation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) mentioned the Jordan compact as a way of learning what else could be done and supporting

host populations, as has been the case in Jordan in respect of Syrian refugees. It is important that DFID and the Foreign Office explore those options. On the conditions in the camps, the International Development Committee highlighted the 200,000 people who would have been at risk if landslides had taken place as a result of flooding and cyclones. There is a real risk that that could happen next year. I know from spending the first seven years of my life in Bangladesh that the climate is very difficult, so I hope the Minister will do more with the Department to ensure that more support is provided.

I want to thank all the international and domestic non-governmental organisations that have supported the efforts, both in Rakhine and in Bangladesh. I particularly thank the Burma Campaign UK and Refugees International, which first took me to Burma when I was a newly elected MP, in very challenging circumstances. I also thank the faith organisations—the mosques, synagogues and churches—which have raised so much money; British nationals have raised so much money and shown so much generosity. I echo the appeal made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) for people to donate ahead of this Christmas to support people who are struggling to survive. I thank all of my colleagues for giving their time and sticking with this very important issue, because genocide cannot be taken lightly. That is why we must act.

I wish to thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for indulging us, and me in particular, in allowing me to speak for a bit longer than two minutes. I wish you a very happy Christmas, and I wish all colleagues, especially my co-sponsor, a very happy Christmas and new year.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Lady for her good wishes. I have allowed speeches to take rather longer than they ought to have this afternoon because this is a very difficult subject, and some powerful and impassioned speeches have been made. It breaks my heart to think of the way in which this Chamber and this Parliament are criticised for what happens for half an hour a week, given that for the other 40 hours of the week that we sit here in this Chamber and this Parliament we do some very good and important work. I am grateful to everybody who has taken part in this debate this afternoon, and I only wish that those who observe us would look now and see how positive and beneficial this Parliament is to the nation and indeed to the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House is deeply concerned by the ongoing humanitarian crisis facing Rohingya refugees; agrees with the findings of the UN fact-finding mission that genocide and war crimes have been carried out against the Rohingya by senior Myanmar military figures; calls on the Government to pursue an ICC referral for Myanmar through the UN Security Council; and further calls on the Government to put pressure on the United Nations to prevent the repatriation of the Rohingya from Bangladesh to unsafe conditions in Myanmar and continue to provide assistance to Rohingya refugees.

The Source NHS Drop-in Centre

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Iain Stewart.)

4.4 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I realise that the House has just been debating a very important subject, so I will not be offended if my hon. Friends leave the Chamber, despite my debating a very important issue for my constituents. I wish them on their way out a very happy Christmas and a prosperous new year.

The Source drop-in health centre is a nurse-led centre on the Horn Park estate in my constituency. It was opened in a partnership between the local council and health service under the single regeneration budget early in the 2000s in recognition of the unique situation of the Horn Park estate and its residents and the need to improve access to health services. The council provided a shop premises at a peppercorn rent, round five of the SRB paid for the refurbishment, and the NHS provided the staff and equipment.

The Horn Park estate is among the 20% most deprived communities in England, according to the index of multiple deprivation's latest figures, for 2015, and ranks 5,591 out of 32,844, which actually makes it one of the 18% most deprived. The estate is largely made up of council-built housing, and residents are mostly council and housing association tenants. It is located at the south-west edge of the Royal Borough of Greenwich and borders directly the London Boroughs of Lewisham and Bromley.

Being on the periphery of three boroughs always puts the community at a disadvantage when it comes to public services, as was recently highlighted by Professor Tony Travers of the London School of Economics. To the north, the boundary of the estate is marked by the A20 Sidcup dual carriageway and the A102 south circular, a similar dual carriageway. The community is therefore very isolated from its neighbouring communities in the Borough of Greenwich.

There is a small parade of shops that used to include convenience stores, a chip shop and post office. The post office moved into the convenience store, but that has now virtually completely closed, and there is now just the chip shop. An attempt was made to put in a satellite Sure Start centre in one of those shops, but that has since been closed, and the Source occupied one of those other empty shops in the middle of the estate. For everything else, the residents have to leave the estate, and there are many elderly people and families with young children on the estate, and 30% of them do not have access to a car.

The Horn Park estate lost its only GP practice in 1990, when Dr Denis retired. I remember campaigning to keep the practice open at the time. The Greenwich district health authority, which was then in charge of the health service in Greenwich, decided that the practice at Horn Park should be taken over by the Evans practice, based in Court Yard, central Eltham, over one and a half miles away. The Evans practice closed Dr Denis's satellite surgery on the estate and never provided any services locally. This was the beginning of a trend of gentrification in the location of surgeries, as a succession of GP practices closed surgeries based on council housing estates.

I have several communities in my constituency among the most deprived in England on the index of multiple deprivation. The Page estate, made up of four communities, is among the 20% most deprived, and the Middle Park estate, made up of three communities, has one among the 10% most deprived. The Brook estate is among the 30% most deprived. Lower Brook estate is among the 40% most deprived and the Horn Park estate has two communities among the 20% most deprived. With the exception of one community on the Page estate, they all have one thing in common: they do not have a GP practice.

When the clinical commissioning group closed the Source in 2016, it decided to invite expressions of interest from GPs in Greenwich to establish a branch surgery on the site as a replacement for the Source. No GPs stepped forward. In an attempt to justify its decision, the CCG claimed that there were six GPs within a "manageable distance"—less than 1 mile—from the Source's location in Sibthorpe Road. In fact, there are no GPs less than 1 mile's walking distance away. The nearest is actually 1 mile away, and the rest are more than 1 mile away—up to 1.5 miles away. There is no pharmacy on the estate, and the nearest one is 1.5 miles away, in a direct walk, at Newmarket Green on the neighbouring Middle Park estate. However, that is not a suitable walk for anyone with mobility problems or for a parent with children.

If the CCG truly wants to tackle health inequalities in Eltham, it could start by making services more accessible in the communities where they are most needed. It is unacceptable that it is possible to walk to five different practices within ten minutes in the most affluent area of my constituency, while the Greenwich CCG says that it cannot afford to keep a nurse-led service available on the Horn Park estate. Before its closure, the Source was dealing with over 5,000 patient visits per year, at an average cost of £26 per visit. This compares with £45 for the average cost to visit a GP, and over £80 for a visit to an A&E. These facts were completely disregarded by the GPs on the CCG when the decision to close the Source was made.

The Source was closed in 2016. Greenwich CCG's then chief officer explained that Greenwich CCG was forced by NHS England to reduce its planned spending by £15.5 million by March 2017. Closing the Source, she claimed, would save £75,000 a year. The total CCG budget for Greenwich in 2016 was just under £370 million.

The opposition from the local community forced the CCG to hold a consultation. I attended it with my constituents as, one after another, they stated how they valued the support, advice and treatment they got from the nurses at the Source. Each and every one of them told the CCG that it took at least three weeks to get an appointment with a GP. Rather than be concerned about this fact, the CCG just told the residents of the estate that they were completely wrong about the waiting times for GP appointments.

Further misinformation was circulated by the CCG to justify its decision. It suggested that the nurses at the Source lacked the necessary qualifications to prescribe or sign prescriptions. Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust, which employed the nurses at the Source, has confirmed that this was not correct, and that the nurses were in fact qualified as independent prescribers.

[Clive Efford]

The CCG's determination to close the Source generated such overwhelming opposition that it was forced to commission a report from the Picker Institute about the use of primary care services and the Source. This report concluded that

"the Source is a highly valued service"

by the local community. People were very positive about the wide range of services offered, the convenience and ease of getting an appointment, and the friendliness and approachability of the staff. The report found that local people were very concerned that local needs would not be met if the threatened closure was carried out, and that existing GP surgeries would be even more pressurised as a result. The report also found that GPs themselves recognised the value of the Source in relieving the pressure on their practices.

The report quotes a local resident saying:

"When you need to see a practice nurse quickly at my GP surgery, they just say—go to The Source".

Another resident said:

"Receptionists are the ones sending people to the Source".

Another said that

"within Sherard Road surgery there are posters up signposting people to attend the Source".

In fact, most GP surgeries in the area had posters advising people to use the Source. The report also found that ease of access and the ability to be seen on the day were very popular with local people, especially those with young children and the elderly. The Horn Park estate has many elderly and vulnerable residents. It is among the 30% most deprived areas in England for income deprivation affecting older people, according to the 2015 indices of deprivation. One resident explained:

"As a carer I find it easier to get my mother to the Source in her wheelchair than taking her all the way to Eltham on and off buses as I do not drive."

Many residents complained of having to wait three weeks for a GP appointment.

The Picker Institute took a month to compile its report, which was published in September 2016. It clearly showed that the Source was a highly valuable local facility, providing a vital service for local people, but that was not what the CCG wanted to hear. The day before the Picker report was published, it confirmed its decision to close the Source without even bothering to wait for the results of the consultation. The CCG announced the immediate closure of the Source and stripped all of the equipment out of the building.

In its 2016-17 annual report, the CCG acknowledged that

"as commissioners we have ambitious aspirations to put patients, carers and local people of Greenwich at the heart of our commissioning. We recognise that we have fallen short of our aspirations this year, especially on some of our work to reduce our expenditure as part of the Quality, Innovation, Prevention and Productivity programme, e.g. on decommissioning the Stroke Association and the Source as well as our plans to commission a musculoskeletal service where our consultation was very limited. We know that we still have a long way to go to improve our patient participation activity."

The issue here is what the words mean. If that is what the CCG believes, how is it that it is not listening to patients about the Source? The CCG claimed that 80% of

the work carried out by the Source fell outside the CCG's delegated authority—for example, sexual health. It said that the three nearest GPs in Greenwich offer nurse-led services and encourage patient participation in the same way as the Source. It said:

"There are also pharmacists close by."

None of that was accurate.

In 2016, NHS England and the CCG finally acknowledged the healthcare needs of the estate and the harm that the closure of the Source would cause. Moreover, the CCG recognised that Horn Park should be

"considered as an exceptional case",

because of the

"inaccessibility of general medical services for this deprived community, isolated as it is by its unique geographical location".

While opening a new branch surgery was

"not in alignment with the GP Five Year Forward View or the Greenwich CCG Estates Strategy, with their direction of travel towards larger and more sustainable general practices",

this was not, according to the report,

"sufficient reason to set aside"

the accessibility issues. That is the conclusion of the South East London Commissioning Partnership Group.

I also want to draw the attention of the Minister to a couple of reports that bear out the case for the Source. The Primary Care Workforce Commission found that nurse-led surgeries could mitigate the effects of GP shortages, helping

"address workload issues, improve the patient experience and sometimes deliver savings."

That was published in 2015. In 2010, the King's Fund talked about those surgeries supporting the value of continuity of care and patient experience showing improved patient outcomes and job satisfaction and professional development of the staff involved. It pointed to the fact that the quality of the service that the Source provided not only improved the health outcomes for the patients who use it, but gave greater job satisfaction, which, in turn, fed back as a valued service that the patients enjoyed. I can vouch for the committed staff who ran the Source and pay tribute to the excellent relationship that it had with the local community. This is how local health services should be delivered.

Since the closure, I have continued to receive complaints from residents on the estate about poor access to health services. In response, I recently consulted with local residents. We delivered a survey and introductory letter to every door on the estate that was on the electoral register—991 in total. We asked people either to complete the paper copy and return it to our freepost address or to complete it online, and we received over 200 responses, which is a response rate of over 20%. I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge that that is a very high response rate for a campaign of this sort. I also organised a petition calling for the Source to be reopened in Horn Park that has so far garnered nearly 700 signatures. Somewhere in the region of 900 local people have called for the centre to be reopened. Given that 1,964 people in Horn Park are on the electoral register, this means that something in the region of 45% of all adults on the estate have put their names forward to support this campaign.

The survey received 201 completed responses and 690 individuals have signed a petition calling for the Source to be reopened. Some 98% of respondents agreed that the Source must be reopened, 85% of respondents that had used the Source now find it more difficult to access health services, and 80% of respondents who had previously used the Source now rely on their GP to access the services previously provided by the Source. Over half—53%—of those who indicated how they used the Source accessed four or more different services at the centre. Some of the comments from the survey speak loudly in favour of reopening the service. Those remarks included:

“Advice close to home. If unwell no need to travel into Eltham for GPs getting an appointment can take a few weeks”,

“Reopened Source should provide all of the previous services (it can now take up to three weeks for a GP appointment)”,

“I would be happy with any walk-in service”

and

“Reopen the Source. Older people really need it”.

We need more facilities like the Source, not fewer.

On Second Reading of the Health and Social Care Bill, Andrew Lansley said, in response to Andrew George, the former MP for St Ives:

“He will see that, in the Bill, a specific duty is placed on the commissioning board and each commissioning consortium to reduce inequalities in access to health care. He will see also that, through the Bill, we will strengthen accountability where major service change takes place, because it will require not only the agreement of the commissioning consortium, representing as it were the professional view, but the endorsement of the health and wellbeing board, which includes direct, local, democratic accountability.”—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2011; Vol. 522, c. 610.]

The health and wellbeing board of the Borough of Greenwich is in no doubt that the Source should reopen. I pay tribute to the leader of the council, Danny Thorpe, who has committed to keeping the premises available so that we can do just that.

Reinstating the Source would address many of the objectives raised in the NHS plan such as staying healthy, ageing well, tackling clinical priorities and enabling improvement. It would also align with priorities in the Greenwich joint strategic needs assessment and would put tackling health inequalities back at the heart of this very isolated community. The CCG has acknowledged that Horn Park has “unique geographical characteristics”, and should be considered “as an exceptional case” because of the

“inaccessibility of general medical services”.

It accepts that there is a “substantial case” to treat it

“as an exception to the current direction of travel towards larger practices.”

The distances to local GPs were described by the CCG in 2016 as

“a manageable distance (around a mile or less)”,

but this is not the reality, and 85% of respondents who had used the Source said that they found it more difficult to access the health service after the centre’s closure. How is that improving healthcare? Forty-five per cent. of people on the estate have expressed support for it reopening. How is this local accountability? How is it possible to continue to ignore local residents and the health and wellbeing board about reopening the Source?

The Government claim to be putting £20 billion into the national health service. Surely some money can be found for this community that can go directly to delivering the health outcomes that the Government say they want to achieve.

In wishing the Minister a happy Christmas and a safe journey home, I ask her to join me in making a new year’s resolution to impress upon Greenwich CCG that it should reopen the Source and restore the health services that the community on Horn Park estate in my constituency so desperately needs.

4.25 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinéage): I thank the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) for securing this important debate and for the characteristically strong and comprehensive way in which he has brought this matter to the House’s attention. He always stands up for his constituents, and this evening is no exception.

This Government are committed to providing high-quality services, commissioned by clinical commissioning groups and NHS England on a local, regional and national basis. Ultimately, we want to continually improve health outcomes for individuals, communities and society as a whole. We believe that GPs, working with other healthcare professionals, are best placed to co-ordinate the commissioning of high-quality care for their local patients.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the Source in Horn Park with great knowledge. I totally recognise his concerns about the decommissioning of the drop-in centre in 2016, and I understand the importance of people having access to services near their homes. From what he says, it sounds like this service was well valued and well used, and the location of the estate poses unique challenges to people being able to access the services they need. Equally, that is always balanced against the provision of the right services of the best possible quality. My understanding from the CCG is that its decision to decommission the Source was part of a range of actions taken to ensure that it continued to make high-quality services available to the residents of Horn Park and reduce duplication. Greenwich CCG says that, since closing the Source, it has expanded the range of services available to residents of Horn Park. That includes opening a GP access hub clinic at Eltham Community Hospital, which is located within 2 miles of Horn Park. The GP access hub is open seven days a week, with appointments available from 8 am to 8 pm on weekends and on weekday evenings until 8 pm. Patients can book appointments through any Greenwich GP at a convenient time that suits them. Overall, the CCG says that it provides an improved quality of service for local residents. Unlike those seen at the Source, patients who attend that hub will be seen by a Greenwich GP who has access to patient records. The GP will have vital information on long-term conditions, allergies and vaccinations, improving the quality and safety of care.

It should be noted that Eltham Community Hospital already offers a broad range of high-quality services to the people of Greenwich, including walk-in blood tests and walk-in X-rays. It also provides public health services, including long-term contraception and help with smoking cessation. Alongside that, we are always keen to promote local pharmacies, which are on hand for a range of

[*Caroline Dinenege*]

services, including advice on various issues and flu vaccinations free of charge, but I note that the pharmacy on Horn Park estate has also shut.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's position. The Source was a much-valued local facility, and there are always concerns when a well-used and well-loved facility closes and clinicians decide it is time to move to a different model, although it is right that decisions about local health provision should be made at a local level. I understand his concerns about access to services. The CCG informs me that a local bus service—the B15—connects Horn Park estate with all three Greenwich GP practices and Eltham Community Hospital.

I have heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns about how the CCG has engaged with local residents and how it did—or, in fact, did not—listen to their views. I would like to be very clear that the Department does expect commissioners to engage properly with their communities before making any decisions on this level of service change. I am pleased to hear that the CCG has now agreed to facilitate and promote a further meeting on Horn Park in January 2019 with the hon. Gentleman and with ward councillors. I hope that that will be a good opportunity for him to raise what sound like some very valid concerns and to seek alternative options to present the evidence that he has collected in his petition and his survey. I very much look forward to hearing the outcome of that meeting and I hope that they will be positive for his area.

More generally, on 21 November, the Prime Minister announced £3.5 billion of funding for primary and community health care a year, in real terms, by 2023-24 under the long-term plan for the NHS. She also committed to grow spending on primary and community healthcare as an overall share of the NHS budget. As part of the development of this plan, we will be talking to system leaders, patients and other experts to understand how we can overcome certain challenges, like the one that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, in a sustainable and positive way. In the meantime, I do very much recognise his concerns and thank him very much for bringing them to our attention. I hope that his meeting with the local CCG proves to be fruitful and very much look forward to hearing its outcome.

As the last speaker from this Dispatch Box this year, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I take this chance to wish you, your team, the Clerks, staff and security a very merry Christmas—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am sorry to stop the hon. Lady when she is giving good wishes, but I think the hon. Gentleman might like to intervene. He does not have a right to speak again, but I am sure that the Minister will give way if he wishes to intervene.

Clive Efford: Yes, just briefly. I would like to stress one point. Horn Park is an extreme example of how health services have moved away from the most deprived communities. There is an issue about accessing health services. These are the communities that are most distressed and most in need of having direct access to those services. If the Minister ever has an opportunity to talk to Greenwich CCG, will she bear that in mind when she does so and draw it to its attention? I think we could improve our health outcomes a great deal if we were to address that issue.

I wish all those who serve us here in the House a very happy Christmas.

Caroline Dinenege: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and I will of course raise it in any conversation that I do have with Greenwich CCG. He is absolutely right to say that we should be doing everything we can to close the health inequalities that people experience up and down our country.

May I, Madam Deputy Speaker, wish you a very merry Christmas and a happy, healthy and peaceful new year?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you. As we approach the Adjournment of the House for the Christmas recess, I would like to thank everyone who works in this building, and in Parliament generally, who supports Members of Parliament in all the work that we do. We could not do without the Clerks, we could not do without all the other people who work here, and we certainly could not do without everyone in the Tea Room. I particularly wish a happy and peaceful Christmas to all Members of Parliament on all sides of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

4.33 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 20 December 2018

[DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Christmas Adjournment

1.30 pm

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank you for allowing me the honour of firing off on this debate this afternoon, on the last day before the festive break.

As Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, I should explain to hon. Members why we are here in Westminster Hall, as they will be used to this kind of debate taking place in the main Chamber. Having not had any time from the Government for eight weeks, and not having any assurances that we would get any at all, the Backbench Business Committee decided to hold this debate here to ensure that it took place. We knew that this slot was available about three weeks ago, and it was only last week that we found that we would get time in the main Chamber today, and we already had queues of debates waiting to take up that time.

It may be a Christmas carol to some Members' ears that I do not intend to use my contribution to discuss the intricacies of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. Instead, I hope once again to illuminate the Commons with tales from the frozen wastes of the north, and in particular from my constituency of Gateshead.

Gateshead is a wonderful place, as I am sure Members from all sides of the House would agree. It has actually hosted Conservative party spring conferences, and Conservative party members have enjoyed themselves in Gateshead. They were very welcome, although they have not come back recently.

We have much to be proud of—our angel of the north, our Quayside development, the Baltic, the Sage Gateshead regional music centre and our Gateshead Millennium Bridge that connects us to that village on the north side of the River Tyne, which I believe is called Newcastle. Then there is our town centre redevelopment, which has dramatically increased footfall, our sports stadium, once renowned for hosting major national and international athletics events, our Metrocentre, and our wonderful municipal Victorian park, Saltwell Park. And we have great people, who have genuine generosity of spirit and Geordie warmth. I could go on at length about the great things that Gateshead has to offer, but I feel, sadly, a bit like a scratched record. Having had the honour of chairing the Backbench Business Committee since 2015, I have participated in a number of these debates, and I do not want to repeat much of what I have said before about Gateshead.

Although it is always fantastic to have the opportunity to talk about the many great things happening in Gateshead, I am afraid to say that, for the last eight and a half years, they have happened through the prism of austerity. My local authority has lost well over £100 million per annum in annual revenue since 2010, and that has made life very difficult for many of the poorest people living in my constituency. That is set against the backdrop of a significant year-on-year increase in demand for services, which is partly due to the growth in population. Perhaps more concerning is the significant growth in demand for services to meet the increasing needs in our community. Adult social care demand is well up, and children's social care demand is increasing exponentially. There is no doubt that policies enacted by this and previous Governments have been driving down living standards and increasing the demand for social care services.

We are all well aware of the health benefits of preventive care, as well as the significant reduction in later costs if those preventive care measures are in place. However, in the north-east—an area with historically lower than average life expectancy—constituents have been pushed to breaking point and beyond by failing welfare reform policies, such as universal credit and personal independence payments. In addition, local authority provision has been pared back to such an extent that often some of those who are most in need still miss out.

It is all well and good for the Prime Minister to decree the end of austerity, but the numbers and the reality do not match the rhetoric. Gateshead, my own local authority, faces a funding gap in the next financial year of a further £29.2 million, rising to £76.7 million by the year 2022-23 and 2023-24. Withdrawing the revenue support grant to local authorities is a policy decision that the Government are entitled to make, but to do that without reforming the council tax system for collecting local revenue is reckless, bordering on criminal. It means that the two sides of the equation do not add up.

To put it in simple terms, when council tax was brought in in the early 1990s, everyone breathed a sigh of relief, because it meant the end of the community charge—the poll tax. Here we are, 28 years later. The council tax system was brought in with bands A to H, with band D as the median, and it was fine for a time. Once the revenue support grant is withdrawn, however, without rectifying the council tax banding system, a local authority such as mine where 65% of all the properties are band A cannot raise enough revenue to meet the needs of the community that it serves.

It is well documented that there is a correlation between cuts to preventive work and increased costs further down the line. The Government continue to give out platitudes and soundbites while constituents of hon. Members all across the House have nowhere else to go. The Government talk about parity of esteem for mental health and physical health, while cutting back on funding to the NHS for public health programmes and cutting local authority budgets—the 12 local authorities in north-east England will lose a combined £190 million from their public health budget, which is there to provide preventive health programmes. The Government talk about helping people into work, while leaving many of my constituents with no more than £190 per month to pay their utility bills and to feed themselves. Many of my constituents are left with £45 a week to live on.

[Ian Mearns]

Last week, I met a very severely disabled lady called Anna, who I first met four or five years ago. She is confined to a wheelchair and has had the mobility element in her benefits payments reduced. At the same time, she faces significantly increased charges for her daily care packages, because she requires round-the-clock care. She now does not have enough money to get out of the house more than once a week. It is sad, in the 21st century, that one of the most vulnerable people living in Gateshead—an intelligent woman, confined to a wheelchair—is not able to get out of the house more than once a week because of the constraints on her finances. The care packages that she pays for are sometimes nothing more than 15-minute flying visits.

The Government talk about solving the homelessness crisis, but they sit by while the right-to-buy programme continues to take the best stock out of our social housing. They talk about protecting private landlords and their tenants, but they model housing payments in universal credit on local authority allowance rates, not on the realities of real-world rental payments. They talk about opportunity for all, while fragmenting the education system so badly that a private academy trust operating in my local authority is closing a school of which I was chair of governors, having so badly mismanaged it over the past five years—and having seen the pupil population fall from 700 to 200—that they can no longer afford to keep it open. Schools face a recruitment and retention crisis, and a funding crisis, while increasingly being expected to rectify the social ills inflicted on their children by austerity.

I am interested in this sort of stuff, because I am a member of the Select Committee on Education and I am still chair of governors of a primary school in the centre of Gateshead, where 34 different languages are spoken by the pupil population. It is a poor community. That poor community, and those children, have seen a whole combination of things inflicted on them over the last eight and a half years—not just by the Department for Education but by a whole range of Government Departments—that have had a quite catastrophic effect on their lives.

We have had cuts over the years. First and foremost, one of the early ones was to something that affected children before they were born. We used to give health and maternity grants in this country to ensure that mothers conducted their lives in a healthy way during pregnancy, but they were cut. Hundreds of Sure Start centres have either closed or had their services curtailed. The previous Government were going to roll out a pilot project called ContactPoint to track children and ensure that no child fell through the cracks in the system. It came about because of cases such as that of Victoria Climbié, but it was abolished by the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove).

The play strategy, which was developed to ensure that we had fit playing environments in our communities, was abolished. A programme called “Play Builder”, which was designed to renew local authority municipal play equipment, was gone. The “Creative Partnerships” scheme, which was about cultural enrichment in our secondary schools, was abolished. School sport partnerships had two thirds of their funding taken away. Aimhigher, a programme aimed at getting youngsters from the most deprived communities into university, was also

abolished. Then education maintenance allowances went. The careers information, advice and guidance service went. Our youth and community services have been decimated. Add to that the cuts in local authority and welfare benefits.

All of this put together has had a devastating impact on some of the poorest children in our communities. The Government talk about making the welfare benefit system simple while cutting local authority funding, which has traditionally been the backbone of support for voluntary sector organisations. These sorts of services are invaluable when it comes to assisting people in difficulty. It is all talk, and from my perspective, as someone who represents Gateshead, I am afraid it always has been.

I said at the outset that I would not talk about Brexit, but how can I not? Some 57% of my constituency voted to leave, but that came after six years of Government austerity. Many of the social problems that have been identified brought about a situation whereby I would say to people on their doorsteps, “Look, we’ve got to remain in the European Union, or things will get much worse.” Some of my constituents would say, “Worse? What, worse than this?” and they meant it. We face poverty, homelessness, low pay and unemployment.

Before Government Members talk about their jobs miracle, let me say that the number of unemployed people in my constituency is 1,020 higher than it was in the same month last year, and the figure for youth unemployment is now more than 650. Those things were all caused by the Government’s policies, with little or no regard for massive regional variations or the widening north-south divide. Unfortunately, however we exit the EU, those problems will remain. It is shameful, frankly, for a so-called modern and prosperous country that the United Nations had to send a rapporteur to look at the effects of welfare reform on places such as mine in the north-east of England. It is equally shameful that Members from the governing party saw fit to grab food bank selfies earlier this month. I support the food bank in Gateshead, but I wish it did not have to exist. Given that it does exist and is needed, I will support it, but I work for the day when we do not need it any more.

Although people across the country who volunteer in food banks should be commended, it is a disgrace that millions of our constituents have to rely on donations for food. Although I wish every Member of the House and all staff a very happy, peaceful and restful Christmas, it is a time for reflection more than a time for celebration. I sincerely hope that Members across the House will spend some time over this festive period reflecting on how their choices in the voting Lobbies are directly affecting people in our communities, who are unable to enjoy this time of year as much as we would want them to. I wish everyone all the very best.

1.44 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Before the House adjourns for the Christmas recess, there are a number of points that I wish to raise. I will not sulk at this wonderful debate being downgraded—some might say—to Westminster Hall. It is not quite like having it in the Chamber; it is cosy and intimate, and we will just have to see how it develops.

I recently met Chris Green, director of the Summer Camps Trust. Thousands of children benefit every year from the experience of summer camp, learning new

skills, meeting new friends and enjoying the countryside. Many young people are also trained to be team leaders, giving them valuable skills for the future. I urge the Government to look into the wider provision of summer camps.

My local football team, Southend United, have broken their losing run. I am glad to say that, under their excellent owner and manager, we are now looking perhaps to reach the play-offs and have a stadium. I visited them in August, when they hosted the Community and Education Trust, which involved three teams of young people who were planning a social action project. I commend the National Citizen Service for providing opportunities for young people to give something back to the community in which they live.

Earlier this year I visited Heycroft Primary, an excellent local school, for a fundraising event in aid of mental health charities Young Minds and Mind. The wonderful organiser, Kelly Swain, educated herself about self-help wellbeing therapies, and her aim is to make a difference to families who suffer from mental health issues. The day was a great success, and I look forward to working with her in the future.

My constituent Mark Rice recently drove over a faulty manhole cover and sustained significant damage to his car. Apparently the local council are not responsible for this, and neither is the water company. So who is responsible for this? Mr Rice has had to pay for the repairs, and he is rightly concerned that this will affect his future insurance premiums. I encourage the Government and the water company to look into this case and see if we can get an answer.

Another of my constituents, Ms Pauline Morris, recently met me to discuss non-invasive prenatal testing. Such a test can provide the parents with indicators on the presence of Down's syndrome. I thought that the usual amniocentesis test was enough, but apparently it is not any more. Too many women have to go through the old-style test, which can, depending on the results, necessitate further and potentially dangerous tests. The solution is non-invasive prenatal testing. The chairman of the Southend clinical commissioning group has informed me that the test will be rolled out over three years. That is not soon enough, and I call again on the Government to see whether they can speed up this non-invasive testing.

A Southend lady called Sue Lesser launched a book called "Take a Poem with Breakfast". The collection, written by her, is dedicated to all people living with dementia—it is really in honour of her mother, who suffers from it—and any profit will go to the Alzheimer's Society. I hope that she sells out of copies of her book.

I spoke in a recent debate in Westminster Hall, when it was a pleasure for me to congratulate all the staff and volunteers at Southend University Hospital on the wonderful work they do. Del and Lindsay Rudd contacted me earlier this year to tell me about their personal experiences. I was not surprised to learn that the renal unit is, in the words of Del and Lindsay,

"a credit to the Hospital, the Town and the NHS."

I could not agree more. Another constituent, Helen Prince, came to my surgery. She is an ambassador for the 70/30 Campaign, which is working towards a

70% reduction in child abuse and neglect by 2030. As a parent myself, I absolutely support her campaign and I hope that everyone in the House will sign up to it as well.

I have been trying to get some answers on behalf of my constituent, Carolyn Mason. Anyone can set up an employment agency—indeed, I used to run one before I became a Member of Parliament. I think the regulations are too lax at the moment. Ms Mason is a reputable owner, but there is some sharp practice going on in the industry generally.

Last week I asked the Leader of the House for a debate on the stress and anxiety caused by scam telephone calls and emails. All of us, as Members of Parliament, receive them all the time. Sadly, my constituent Ben Giles recently lost half of his savings as a result of such a call—this is a highly intelligent gentleman. I cannot stress enough the importance of stopping this wicked practice.

I dread to think how many accidents happen when pedestrians cross busy roads. Another constituent, Cliff Short, is better placed than most to comment on the situation, as he has been a police officer and a taxi driver for some 30 years. After identifying zebra crossings as a point of danger—extraordinarily—Mr Short created "red zebra". When pedestrians approach a crossing, the flashing beacon switches from yellow to red, alerting drivers of the presence of a pedestrian. It is a simple but potentially life-saving idea, so I hope the Department for Transport will look at it.

I am proud to be the president of the Leigh Orpheus male voice choir, which sang in the Palace of Westminster earlier this year. This is its 50th anniversary.

Recently, a number of my Essex colleagues went on a boat trip down the River Thames. A number of people might say that it was a pity it did not sink, but we successfully negotiated the way from Tilbury to Southend pier. The trip was to support Essex Port of London Authority, to learn more about planned infrastructure projects, and to look at the Thames crossing and a potential new Thames barrier. We heard about opportunities for the expansion of the port of Tilbury and the benefits to the economies of both Essex and Kent. I support both those projects. Essex PLA is looking at providing a commuter service from the end of Southend pier into the City of London.

Hippo Cabs is a wonderful organisation that ensures that elderly residents who are disabled actually have a life. It offers a first-class service. I very much support Mr and Mrs Biswas, who run that wonderful service.

We yet again had our annual centenarian tea party in October. I have worked out that, in 34 years, I will qualify for one myself if I am around then. It would perhaps be unique for a Member of Parliament to do that. The pupils of Westcliff High School for Boys did a splendid job of engaging with those centenarians.

At long last, at Fair Havens, our wonderful new hospice, we had a sod-turning ceremony in October. We are about £850,000 short, but it will be opened in February 2020.

Like the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), Southend had a visit from the Taiwanese ambassador recently. It was a wonderful visit, and he said that he enjoyed it more than Cleethorpes. [*Laughter.*] He didn't actually. He was shown the Forum,

[*Sir David Amess*]

the Focal Point gallery, South Essex College and Ventrica, a local company. I hope there will be some trading opportunities opened up into the future.

We have a wonderful jazz centre in Southend. Digby Fairweather welcomed Sir Michael Parkinson to open it. I hope that people throughout the United Kingdom and the wider world will visit it.

Last month, I visited the local watch station of the National Coastwatch Institution, which provides a vital service in monitoring the coastal waters and keeping watch for emergencies such as overturned boats or fishermen in trouble—I do not know whether it would have helped the Essex Members if our boat turned over. Other activities such as surfing, diving and canoeing are also monitored. We should not take its service for granted.

We had a wonderful active ageing day in Southend. It reinforced the idea that if people keep active as they age, they will live longer.

Earlier, the House paid tribute to Les and his two colleagues, who have a combined 120 years of service to this House—absolutely fantastic. We are very grateful to all the people who help us go about our business in the House. They are wonderful.

I recently hosted a reception for the National Association of Boys and Girls Clubs. I was once patron of Basildon Boys Club, which does a fantastic job. Belonging to a club gives young people a great start in life, a place to go, things to do, and helps them develop positive relationships, so I really do commend them.

This November was complex regional pain syndrome awareness month. I met the charity Burning Nights and CRPS patients to hear about what more can be done to support those living with the painful condition. We laugh about people who have got a back problem, but it is not very funny to have one. The problem cannot be seen. In the UK, an estimated 15,000 people are diagnosed with the condition each year. There is some lack of awareness among GPs and others, so we need to do more to raise awareness about it.

I have been honoured to be the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis. I would like to give a special mention to a local constituent, Carla Cressy, who has been instrumental in forming the group, which has a wonderful make-up. Through her charity, she has been campaigning for greater support for the 1.5 million women in the UK living with that dreadful condition. Raising awareness of endometriosis in schools and among healthcare professionals and employers is critical to ensuring patients get the right treatment and support. I look forward to the meeting next month with the Under-Secretary.

We were all invited to the reception in the House of Commons organised by the British Toy and Hobby Association, which does a very good job in raising awareness of unsafe and dangerous toys. Local charities in Southend were very grateful for the toys it donated.

Hollie Gemmell is a parish nurse and fitness consultant in Southend. She organises dance shows designed to help the elderly reminisce, exercise and have fun. Her shows are very popular. She really does a wonderful job for elderly people.

Last week, Southend Borough Council approved ambitious plans for building an exciting and prosperous future for the town. Looking forward to 2050, the plans set out a vision for Southend that will create a place to live, work and visit that we can all be proud of. It includes investment in our roads, regeneration for our High Street, which my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) mentioned this morning, and open spaces to help us flourish as a digital city. I welcome this opportunity.

I make no apology for thinking that it is obviously an oversight that Southend is not already a city. I will not desist from raising this issue in the House at every opportunity until we become a city.

In the Amess household on 25 December, the word “Brexit” is banned. Every time I leave my house, someone stops me and wants to talk about Brexit. When I go shopping, everyone wants to talk about Brexit. When I am on the train, they want to talk about Brexit. I am sick to death of hearing the word “Brexit”, so on 25 December, it will not be mentioned in our house. Regardless of what the House decides, I will be leaving the European Union at 11 o’clock on 29 March next year. I wish all colleagues a very happy Christmas and a healthy and prosperous new year.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I call Siobhain McDonagh.

1.57 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Hanson. I was expecting to come a little further down the list, but I am delighted to be called so early.

It is something of a relief to be attending a debate with time for issues other than the B word—although we are all mentioning it. Although Brexit has been all-consuming of the Government’s time, energy and actions, the day-to-day reality for my constituents and those outside the Westminster bubble is quite different. There are 130,000 children who will wake up on Christmas morning without a permanent place to call home. My local accident and emergency unit is so full that my constituents have been left queuing outside it in the cold. The pressure on our police means that antisocial behaviour is running rife in my local town centre—an area crying out for more bobbies on the beat. Although the Government have found billions of pounds for contingency planning for a no-deal Brexit, our vital public services teeter ever closer to breaking point.

I want to use my time today to bring to hon. Members’ attention three of the issues most important to my constituents. Let me start with housing. A year ago to the day, I spoke in this debate about the homelessness crisis across the country. I have reread my speech, and it is disheartening that every single word is still applicable one year on. In fact, if anything, the situation is now worse. Some 80,000 households across England will spend this Christmas trapped in temporary accommodation. Last year, I brought to Parliament’s attention the 86 homeless families in my constituency housed in a converted warehouse in the heart of one of south London’s busiest working industrial estates. One year on, many of those families are preparing for yet another Christmas in that so-called temporary limbo. They do not have the facilities to cook a Christmas dinner. They

have no space for a Christmas tree, with families of up to five people sharing a single room, and there is little chance of presents, with every penny possible set aside to save for the extortionate deposit that may one day provide the golden ticket needed for the private rented sector. How many more families must be trapped in this limbo before the Government make absolute priorities of tackling homelessness and building the social housing and genuinely affordable homes for which we are so desperate?

The second issue is universal credit, which has been at the forefront of debate over recent months. For my constituents, the botched roll-out of the supposed flagship reform of the benefits system has undoubtedly caused chaos and misery. Take my constituent Mrs D, who wrote to me earlier this week and said:

“Universal credit has been a complete shambles for my family. We’ve explained to the children that Santa won’t deliver much this year and that there won’t be a Christmas dinner. Universal credit doesn’t make work pay, it puts you in debt.”

Another constituent of mine, Mrs L, was made redundant last year after 10 years working as a school administrator. Since January, she has worked on an agency basis for an employment agency. Universal credit assesses a person’s circumstances within a set monthly assessment period, however, so the dates of their universal credit claim and monthly pay packet are of paramount importance. For Mrs L, that has proven to be a nightmare. She anticipated a payment on 22 November, but was not paid until 18 December and, for the first time in her whole working life, she finds herself in rent arrears. She is now so worried about the irregularity of her payments that she questions whether it is in her financial interest to work for the agency. That makes a mockery of the idea that the system helps people to get into work. How much longer will the Government stand idly by while the least well-off continue to fall through the broken net of universal credit?

I will use my remaining time on a more positive note, to highlight a quite different organisation in my constituency, which is changing the lives of so many young, vulnerable constituents. The WISH Centre is a charity that prevents self-harm, and offers a community-based model that provides therapy and counselling in schools and at the centre. Over recent months, the Centre for Mental Health conducted an evaluation of the WISH Centre. The results were outstanding and worthy of being brought to the attention of the Chamber.

The report found that an extraordinary 81% of young people who have been helped by the WISH Centre have either significantly reduced their self-harm, or have stopped altogether. The young people themselves describe the project as holistic; it focuses on their strengths and builds resilience at each individual’s own pace. The report highlights the relief brought to sufferers, parents, carers and teachers, and evidences cost savings in both mental health and school budgets. Its recommendation is clear: the WISH approach should be introduced by clinical commissioning groups and authorities across England. Fortunately, the WISH Centre is actively looking to share its methodologies more widely, and I will happily introduce any hon. or right hon. Member to the scheme, if they would like more information.

With the Government trapped in Brexit turmoil, I sincerely hope that the Christmas period will bring them time to reflect on the day-to-day reality of those who I have described.

“People just walk past us and they are supposed to be going into that building to change the world that we live in.”

Those are the words of Jamie Leigh, who has been sleeping rough outside the gates of the Parliamentary Estate. I sincerely hope that the Government offer her more hope in 2019.

2.4 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I too was expecting to come later in the order of speeches—Christmas has come early for me. Happy Christmas to everyone, and thank you to all the staff who run this place. I have said that now, so I will not repeat it.

I want to raise the subject of the danger caused by a drug called isotretinoin, which I have already spoken about—perhaps four times—in the House since becoming an MP. To date, I have to say, the collective view of the House has had little impact on actually sorting it out. Isotretinoin, also known as Accutane or Roaccutane, is a drug used to treat severe acne primarily in teenagers—mainly boys. It has dramatic effects: it clears acne up pretty quickly, but its side-effects can be enormous. It can cause severe depression and impotence in those who use it.

My concerns stem from contact with constituents, particularly one lady. She is the mother of a young man who has suffered enormously from isotretinoin. At the age of 16, he was given the drug for eight months. As a result, he suffered—forgive my language—complete erectile dysfunction, which has had a life-changing effect on him and, indeed, on his mental state. He is now in his early 20s, and it has of course had a dramatic effect on him. He has been through university, too.

Unsurprisingly, his mother is distraught, in particular because her son is now almost unwilling even to discuss the matter. I believe that we can all understand that. It must be very difficult for a young man to discuss such a matter with his mother. I, personally—I know I am from another generation—could not even have dreamt of talking about such a matter with my mother. I am really pleased that things have moved on, but I can still see the real difficulty for young men who have to discuss or bring up such matters.

I gather that there is an impact on young women, too: they can suffer a lack of libido. It is certainly considered a pretty dangerous prescription for a young pregnant woman, and doctors are careful about prescribing it if there is any chance that a young woman is pregnant. Pregnancy, however, can come as a pretty big surprise—it certainly has in my life and in my family. There is no fail-safe. [*Laughter.*] Hon. Members may laugh, but we have all been there, have we not?

Isotretinoin can work very well, but for a small percentage of people, when it strikes, it has devastating effects. There is now well-documented evidence that it leads to suicide. I have brought those cases up when I have spoken about the matter before, but I do not intend to repeat them. Suffice to say, I am pretty sure that there is a direct link between the use of isotretinoin and some suicides.

If someone is depressed and feels that their life is over and that they are finished, they give up the will to live, which I have seen in some soldiers. I have seen a soldier who, when told of his injuries, said—forgive my language—“Oh, shit,” and he died, right there and then. I am quite sure that that could be the case for young men and women—particularly young men—in this situation.

[Bob Stewart]

I know that isotretinoin is a miracle drug for some—my daughter tells me that a lot of her friends use it—but for that small percentage of people who are deeply affected by it, causing problems such as depression and erectile dysfunction, it is devastating. Medical professionals warn people about the drug, and are careful about prescribing it, but I wonder whether, in view of the risks that we do not know about, we should be prescribing it at all.

I checked to see whether I personally could get hold of isotretinoin pills, and do so with relative ease and without a prescription. Of course, I used the internet. I did that yesterday. In this country, obviously, a prescription is required, but not so for companies based abroad. For example, a Canadian company called Online Pharmacy came up almost immediately. It offers Accutane—the same thing—and 10 pills cost £49.24. Delivery by air costs about £11.24, although I do not understand why that is quite so expensive from Canada to the UK, and apparently takes two to four weeks—I did not realise stuff would take that long to get across the Atlantic by air. The parcel, when it arrives, has discreet packaging so that no one knows what it contains—I am thinking of teenagers here, hiding it from the parents. It worries me, obviously that our teenagers—I still have two—can simply order this stuff and receive it, while parents have no idea. Incidentally, Online Pharmacy also promised to provide two free Viagra tablets, which is somewhat darkly ironic considering the problems I am talking about.

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency—our regulator, on this side of the Atlantic—issues warnings to healthcare professionals on the risks, such as in October 2017, but nothing more instructive than that. The agency has declared that the matter is being closely monitored but, considering the anecdotal evidence and what are to me the clear problems caused for a small percentage of people who use it, that is not good enough. As I mentioned, there have now been four debates in Parliament in which Members on both sides of the House have expressed concern, and so I suppose I am representing them all today. I bring it up again because we had this debate in Westminster Hall about six months or so ago, and I want it to be kept to the forefront. I represent all parts of the House when I speak today.

Surely it is time for the Department of Health to establish a major investigation into this drug and, perhaps as a precaution, to order that prescribing it should be halted until we are absolutely certain that we can at least identify those people at risk, or mitigate those risks much more than we can now. I am sorry to raise such a difficult problem, but I do so only because, on behalf of all Members of the House, I think that we should continue to press for this matter to have a proper investigation by the Department. I wish everyone to think carefully before use of isotretinoin—in particular those people who might be listening and thinking of using it, which includes my kids' friends—because I really think that it can have tragic outcomes.

God bless, everyone, and happy Christmas. I also thank those staff who come in and out all the time—I never quite know what they do, but they seem to be here for 10 minutes and then flit out. They flit in and flit out,

and those of us who sit here hour after hour wonder whether we could take a break. I am sure they go out for a quick drink or a cigarette. I thank those staff who sit here listening to the likes of me warbling on for far too long. My warbling ends now—happy Christmas, everyone.

David Hanson (in the Chair): For the information of the hon. Gentleman, his warblings are being written down line by line by those staff, who are from *Hansard*.

2.15 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), whom I have got to know quite well through serving together on the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs. He brought a very important matter to the House's attention with his characteristic compassion and worldly-wise experience.

There have already been several good speeches. I fear that the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) is leaving, but his was a tour de force, a lesson to us all. I understand that in Southend, his Christmas address to the nation is viewed much as the state of the union speech is seen in the United States. I cannot possibly comment on all the matters mentioned, so I will refer to one, which was the rise of Southend United—Bradford City are in the same division. They are beginning to win games, and I note that our fixture at Valley Parade against Southend is on 19 January. The hon. Gentleman will be most welcome if he can escape from Southend for the weekend.

I intend to put three matters before the House. On the sporting theme, I will discuss Keighley Cougars, the rugby league team in Keighley. At this time of year, many of us visit primary schools, whether as the local MP, or as a parent or grandparent, and I will discuss one school in particular which has been improving over the past few months, Oldfield Primary School. Then I want to bring to the attention of the House a couple of early-day motions that might have passed people by.

First, I will talk about Keighley Cougars. Since the 1950s, this is the 20th occasion on which Keighley rugby league has been mentioned in this House. It was first mentioned by one of my illustrious predecessors, Mr Hobson, in the 1950s when he described Keighley rugby league club as one of the 30 “big fish” professional clubs at the time. I will not go through all 19 references, but it would be remiss of me not to mention Mr Gary Waller, who sadly passed away shortly after I returned to the House last year. One of my first duties was to pay tribute to him. He was very much involved in Keighley rugby league at its height in recent times—it was called “Cougar-mania”, in the 1990s.

Before the Super League, the Keighley Cougars were the first team to bring a bit of razzmatazz to rugby league. They went up the divisions and, in April 1995, they were leading division two and looking forward to promotion to the top division. What happened? They had three games to go, and they were told by the emerging Super League that they were not good enough for it: London and Paris—can you believe it, Mr Hanson—would be in the Super League, but not Keighley Cougars.

The Keighley Cougars did much good in the town. We have heard about local organisations doing good in their towns, notably from my hon. Friend the Member

for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). When Keighley Cougars were at their height in the 1990s, crime actually fell in the town by about 15%, because people had something to believe in and the youngsters had something to get involved in.

I will not rehearse the history since that period, but it has been difficult, now reaching its nadir. Over the summer, the club was taken over by Austria Holdings. The controlling force, one might say, behind Austria Holdings is a Mr Shane Spencer. The rugby league did not judge him to be a fit and proper person to run Keighley Cougars so someone else held the licence.

On 11 December, Austria Holdings gave up control of Keighley Cougars (2010) Ltd. According to Companies House, Mrs Claire Auty took 75% control over Keighley Cougars. Keighley Cougars is still in special measures with the rugby league, which will not let it sign contracted players for the new season, only months away. It is a very suspicious situation because the day afterwards, there were bankruptcy proceedings against the said Mr Shane Spencer in Wakefield court, which have been adjourned until 4 January. Keighley Cougars fans are deeply worried. I have called upon Mr Shane Spencer to stand aside; we do not know who Mrs Claire Auty is and she has made no statement as far as I am aware about what she intends to do with Keighley Cougars. We need new ownership.

I looked back at all those references to Keighley Cougars and Keighley rugby league in *Hansard*; many are about conflict between rugby union and rugby league, and how rugby league felt it was not getting a good deal down the decades. I can announce that Keighley RUFC, chaired by Mr Graeme Sheffield, has confirmed that it is quite happy to ground share with Keighley Cougars next season. There are a couple of consortia that will come to the fore—I understand the rugby league has had at least two approaches.

It is incumbent on the rugby league, particularly after those bankruptcy proceedings on 4 January, to take firm action—it has the powers to do that—and to issue the licence for Keighley Cougars to another more secure and presentable group of individuals, hopefully with a supporters' trust so that Keighley Cougars can rise once again. It is on a terrific site—the cricket club is next door; Steeton AFC now play at Keighley Cougars. It could be part of the regeneration of Keighley, but we need firm action by the rugby league, just as it took firm action to save the Bradford Bulls a year ago.

I will move on to the second item I want to bring to the House's attention: Oldfield Primary School, which is a small village primary school that had a bad Ofsted report in the spring. It was two days away from going into a federation of local community schools called the Footprints Federation. It did badly in the Ofsted report, but over the last few months it has shown remarkable improvement. My office has been inundated with letters from parents. I will read one, which commends the new headteacher, Angela Vinnicombe, who is the head of the Footprints Federation, and her staff. My constituent says:

“The difference they have made to the teaching, the learning, the building itself and more importantly the morale and enthusiasm of the staff and children is absolutely second to none. Quite frankly I am gobsmacked as to how this has not been recognised by the relevant bodies and I'm hoping you could have a voice in this matter”.

What has happened, David Hanson—sorry, Mr Hanson. I got slightly carried away. One of the advantages of meeting in this Chamber is your chairmanship. If we were in the main Chamber, that would not be possible. If we revert to the main Chamber next year, I hope you might be elevated because there may be some changes afoot, I hear.

Anyway, the “relevant body” that the parent was worried about is, in fact, the regional schools commissioner, Vicky Beer. It is hard to get hold of Vicky Beer; I think it would have been similarly difficult a century or so ago to get hold of the Viceroy of India. I have managed to get through to some of her officers. The regional schools commissioner has decided that the school should be academised. I do not like to take an over-ideological approach to education—there are good academies in Keighley and there are good community schools. But if it ain't broke, don't fix it. I have asked for a meeting with the Minister for School Standards and I hope he will grant that, so I can bring down one parent, one governor and one teacher to plead the case.

Children are having their Christmas lunches and festivities, unsure of the future. The preferred academy is Bronte Academy Trust, which runs three schools in my constituency. It has good teachers and staff. It has had one or two teething problems and has only been going since 2016. Some parents and teachers from Bronte Academy Trust have approached me and said that they do not really support what is, in effect, a hostile takeover. Bronte Academy Trust will be better sticking to improving the three schools it already has. I hope that we can take a non-ideological approach and think principally about the education of the children at Oldfield. I will visit the school as soon as it comes back on 3 January.

I promised I would refer to a couple of early-day motions that Members may have missed. One has a Christmas theme and the other looks ahead to the new year. The first, with the Christmas theme, is early-day motion 1931 in my name on Boxing day trains. I will not labour the point because I have mentioned it before in debates, but it is a disgrace that there are no Boxing day trains except for on four lines in the south-east of England. I have constituents who cannot return home to Yorkshire for Christmas from London because they have to be at work on 27 December or they lose their jobs.

There are many bank holiday sporting fixtures—I will come back to two or three of those. There are retail sales—our high streets need that boost. The good news is that, in a debate on transport in Yorkshire yesterday, the Rail Minister offered to meet me in January to look at Christmas and Boxing day 2019. I hope that the shadow Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) will also agree to meet me, so by next December we can have a cross-party commitment on Boxing day trains. There are already Boxing day trains in Scotland to an extent.

Let me turn to the second early-day motion. One of the great things of this year was England's sporting success in the World cup. In Keighley, at the said Keighley Cougars, we had a cross-community showing of that semi-final match. I speak as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Portugal—that may have escaped your attention, Mr Hanson. I was elected this week and it was a close-run race. Next summer in Portugal, England will play football in the UEFA nations

[John Grogan]

league finals. My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) has drawn attention to the fact that it will be hidden away on subscription TV. It will not be available to the nation—we will not be able to have community showings of it. I hope the Government will take some action on listed events. I call upon Comcast, which has taken over Sky, as a gesture to the English nation, to make the game available free to either the BBC or ITV, so the nation can enjoy it as a whole.

Finally, we are looking forward to Christmas and I am particularly looking forward to attending midnight mass at Leeds Roman Catholic Cathedral. For the second year in a row it will be live on the BBC, such is the quality of the choir—last year on BBC 1 and this year on Radio 4. After my Christmas lunch, my attention will turn to Boxing day; as a sporting enthusiast, Mr Hanson, you will know there are plenty of sporting fixtures to look forward to—even if you cannot get to them by train.

Last year, I managed to place some charity Christmas bets; as someone observed, only one of the four actually came home. I must put on record that this year's bet is with Betfred in Ilkley, which has put up the majority of the bet—it put up £80 and I put up £20. If we win, all the money goes to the homelessness project Bradford Nightstop. I am backing Leeds and Burnley to win, Bradford to eke out a draw at Sunderland and, for racing fans, I am backing Waiting Patiently, the Yorkshire-trained horse, in the King George at Kempton. Happy Christmas to one and all.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I am slightly disappointed that he has not put money on Liverpool versus Newcastle on Boxing day.

2.29 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan). His remarks about his connection with rugby league remind me that my late father set up all the BBC camera positions for every rugby league ground in the country when he formulated its coverage of the sport. Indeed, he was an extremely good friend of the late Eddie Waring, who of course was originally the rigger for the cables at rugby league grounds and became a commentator only in an emergency, when the commentator failed to turn up.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I want to report on a few things—some on which progress is being made, which is good news, and some on which work still needs to be done. Of course, some of us are still celebrating last night, when Tottenham overcame Arsenal 2-0 at the Emirates. More importantly, though, disgracefully, a bottle was thrown by a thug in the crowd at the man of the match and goal scorer, Dele Alli. That raises serious problems for all football grounds. If people get into the habit of doing that, players and linesmen might be seriously injured. We need to reflect that people can be competitive at football and support their team, but they do not need to behave in a thuggish manner.

Let me refer to the Select Committees on which I have the honour of serving, which do excellent work. I do not expect Members' sympathy, but those of us who

suffer on the Procedure Committee wrestled for some weeks with the question, "What does 'meaningful' actually mean?" I am not sure we came up with the answer, and I look forward to the Government's finally coming up with one in the new year.

I press my hon. Friend the Minister to encourage the Leader of the House to provide the Backbench Business Committee with more time in the main Chamber. We did not have business in the main Chamber for nine weeks, which, in my view, made us almost redundant as a Committee. That is extremely regrettable, because the debates we put on are well subscribed and very positive.

Bob Stewart: I have never been on the Backbench Business Committee to make a selection, but what my hon. Friend says is a shock to me. I thought the Committee's business was built into the timetable; I did not realise it could be shifted. I thought it was part of the set programme. As a normal Member, I am really quite surprised that it is not. Others are nodding in agreement. I think that is wrong—we should have that time, because it gives us power.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The reality is that a certain number of days are given over to the Backbench Business Committee in a year. However, this is a two-year Session, and the Government have refused to increase pro rata the number of days in the main Chamber provided to the Backbench Business Committee.

I am also a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. We have inquiries ongoing into the future of the high street, which is very topical, and leasehold reform. What house builders are doing to sell out freeholds to finance companies from under the feet of people who bought leases on properties is a scandal. We also have ongoing inquiries into fracking; the tragedy of Grenfell, which continues; building regulations and fire safety in general, on which there is much to do to ensure that people's homes and business are safe; and social housing law across the country. Our Committee's work is very topical and relevant.

During the year, I have been engaged in setting up three new all-party parliamentary groups. The first is the APPG for Council of Sri Lankan Muslim Organisations UK—COSMOS—which seeks to combat the prejudice and quite disgraceful antics of the Sri Lankan Government against Muslims in Sri Lanka.

The second concerns the holocaust memorial, which will go alongside Parliament. It will be a long-standing memorial to the horrors of the holocaust, and the education centre will educate people of all ages about what happened during the holocaust and why we must never allow it to happen again. The former Chief Rabbi said that Jewish people in this country fear that what is going on now is similar to what happened in Germany in the 1930s. For Jewish people in this country to feel that way is a tragedy—a tragedy for them and for all of us. In 2019, we must redouble our efforts to combat all forms of antisemitism and send a signal to all people that, whatever their religion, they have the right to celebrate that religion in this country. We must do that on a long-standing basis.

The final all-party group I set up was the APPG on building communities, which aims to encourage the building not just of new housing but of communities. That is something that has to be developed.

As many colleagues know, we had London elections during the year. I pay tribute to my colleague Manji Kara, a long-standing councillor in Harrow East. He chose to leave his safe ward and fight a much more difficult one, and as a result stepped down from the council after 14 years' exemplary service. Even more importantly, I pay tribute to Christine Bednell, who stepped down as a councillor after 47 years, only because of her ill health.

I will spare Members my prepared notes about all the contributions I have made to debates since September. Apparently there have been 32 of them, so I am sure everyone is grateful that I will not refer to them. However, I will mention some important faith-based activities. First, we have a long-running campaign for Jains to be able to record their religion in the 2021 census. I support other groups, such as the Sikhs, who want to ensure that they have the right to record their religion, but Jains at the moment have to tick, "Other"—there is no measure in the census of whether they celebrate their religion. That needs to be changed.

We had the good news this morning that legislation will be brought forward next year to remove caste as a protected characteristic from the Equality Act 2010. We expect that long-standing provision to be repealed by the summer. That is positive news, which will be warmly welcomed by the Hindu community across the country. The Government's proposals in that respect are very positive.

My constituency is the most multi-religious and multicultural in the country, bar none, so I have enjoyed the opportunity to participate in many activities with faith groups in the past year. I visited 10 temples on Hindu new year's day, and over the Christmas period I shall celebrate with the Jewish community at one of our local synagogues. I will be visiting the Muslim community shortly after the new year and celebrating with the Hindu community on new year's day itself, as well as visiting churches. It does not end at Christmas—the Greek Orthodox Church in my constituency starts the new year two weeks later, with its Christmas celebrations, so I shall join in with those, too.

The casework I am dealing with at the moment stems predominantly from Harrow Council's failure to provide the service it should. I criticise it perennially for a number of things, but one of the key problems is its failure to communicate with local residents when they have complaints. According to our statistics, we are dealing with more than 30 cases a week where the council has simply failed to respond to reasonable requests from the local authority about the service that it should be providing.

In the new year we have some good news coming up, which I have raised on many occasions. The new building at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore, in my constituency, opened a couple of weeks ago and the patients and staff—medical and non-medical—moved in, which is positive. I have been pushing for this for 12 years and I am delighted that it has come to fruition. I congratulate the board and everyone who has made it possible. There will be a royal opening in March, which the local community will celebrate.

In my constituency, we recently opened the first state-sponsored Hindu secondary school. The Secretary of State came to open it, which was positive, and it

demonstrates what can happen when local people come together and demand the right for a faith-based school, if that is what they choose.

There are two new developments coming on stream: the Elysian retirement community is being built alongside Stanmore station and Jewish Care is setting up a care facility for newly retired people, which will lead on to live-in care in Stanmore. These are two positive measures that are going to be warmly welcomed in the local community.

This year homelessness and the problems of people sleeping rough have been particularly important. My Homelessness Reduction Act became law on 1 April and the duty of public authorities to refer became law on 1 October. Those things are already having a dramatic effect on combatting homelessness. Some 58,660 households were assisted in the first three months that the Act was operational. I take the view that just one person sleeping rough is an absolute national disgrace, but without this change in the law it would have been much worse. We must prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place; under the legislation that has been extremely successful. I am glad that we have the Housing First pilot initiatives. They will enable rough sleepers to be housed and to be given the level of support they need to put them back on the straight and narrow.

I urge my hon. Friends in Government to make sure that we are building the homes that people need, at prices they can afford, both around cities and beyond. It is no good building homes that people cannot afford and for them to feel envious of the people that have them. At this time of year, when many people are generous towards the homeless, we must remember that homelessness happens not just at Christmas, but every single day. There are 320,000 people across the country who are homeless, sleeping on sofas or rough sleeping. It is our duty as politicians to make sure that those people have a home of their own that they can rely on.

Mr Hanson, I wish you, all the staff, all colleagues and especially the staff in my office a very merry Christmas and a happy, peaceful, prosperous and, above all, healthy new year.

2.44 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, in these unusual surroundings. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for ensuring that the debate took place today. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I would like to associate myself with his comments regarding our Jewish colleagues, friends, family and communities across the United Kingdom, both for the remaining part of this year and in the future.

I hope to talk about a number of matters, including one which was brought to my attention this morning and which raises great concern. I heard today that the RZSS WildGenes laboratory at Edinburgh Zoo has said that in all probability the Scottish wildcat is now extinct as a gene pool. The gene pool of one of the most endangered wild mammals in the world, which resides in Scotland in very small numbers, is now so affected by the domestic cat that it cannot be identified separately. The only gene pool we have is in approximately 100 Scottish wildcats that are in captivity. With the enormous challenges

[*Martin Whitfield*]

that face this country and the world, it is interesting to look at one small aspect, in this case an animal that lives in the United Kingdom, was far more widespread in past decades and is now literally extinct in the wild. If the follow-up tests that are currently being done confirm this, it would be truly tragic news.

As we approach Christmas, it is a salutary lesson to think that in the United Kingdom we were asked to take care of a mammalian group and we have managed to do that so badly that it has fallen into extinction. We look at the giant panda, the tiger and the elephant—all of which rightly require care—and yet we may have let one of the most important and unique groups of animals slip into extinction on our own doorstep. I find that very saddening, but I compliment Edinburgh Zoo on the work that it does.

Bob Stewart: One of the great things about these debates is that we always learn something—I had no idea about the information that the hon. Gentleman has given us about the iconic Scottish bobcat. I am still a bit unclear; is he saying that the Scottish bobcat is still there in the wild, but has mated with domestic cats and become a sort of mixture of the two? In other words, does it remain in the wild, not as a bobcat but as something mutated?

Martin Whitfield: A more succinct description I could not give. The gene pool is now so diluted that individual Scottish wildcats that have been caught and tested in the wild are almost impossible to distinguish from domestic cats. That is the nature of cats generally, but it is disappointing that we have reached that stage. The only gene pool with a guarantee of wildcat status exists in the 100 or so that are kept in zoos and wildlife parks around the world.

I thank the teachers and teaching staff of East Lothian and those who work for East Lothian Council, as well as the pupils who have done so much this year, such as those at North Berwick High School who held a UN model assembly at which schools from around Scotland gathered to debate important matters. It was a great privilege to go into what were effectively committee sittings and listen to highly intelligent and articulate young people discussing such important matters—indeed, some of their ideas and proposals merit consideration in this House. I feel very hopeful for the future and for politicians to come. At primary schools I have visited, children have asked questions that I just could not answer; I had to do the honest thing and tell them that I did not know, but would go and find out.

I want to mention people who have invisible disabilities, and the work of Grace, a campaigner from Prestonpans in East Lothian who created Grace's Sign. I also want to mention Judith Dunn, whom I invited to Parliament on #AskHerToStand day. It was such a wonderful day: so many women came from all around the country, and it speaks so positively of what we can achieve.

The Civil Nuclear Constabulary is a strange and almost unknown group of police officers who protect our nuclear establishments, but who are separate from the police force and are a civilian group. They are the armed backup to our police forces. They have been in a pension dispute for a long while now; I was able to ask a

question about it this morning in business questions. This Government have kicked down the road the question of their pension settlement and when they can retire. I had hoped that for this Christmas they would have had a present of knowing what was going to happen to them; I sincerely hope that by next Christmas they have an understanding.

I wanted to talk about universal credit, which has been in my constituency since 2016. We are not a constituency where it is being rolled out; we were one of the test beds. East Lothian reflects the statistical make-up of the United Kingdom and particularly Scotland very accurately, so it was a test bed for universal credit, and it has not gone well. We have problems with universal credit that go beyond that roll-out. It was a great pleasure to hear hon. Members making points earlier about the significant difficulties where there are two payments in one month and then nothing follows in the next month, and the pressure that that brings to bear on families and individuals. Other people are persuaded—I use that word carefully—by advice from the Department for Work and Pensions to set up their own business and then, 11 or 12 months down the line, are let down by the very system that persuaded them to set up their own business because their earnings are such that they suddenly lose their benefits.

I want to talk about the WASPI women—the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. Many women in my constituency, who are well through their administrative complaints procedure, have received a letter that their case is now being stopped because of the High Court case to allow the judicial review. My understanding is that that letter is incorrect and actually all that has happened is that their case has been postponed until the outcome of the hearing. However, again, it is an indication of how communication from the Government to our constituents is so far from being clear and understandable that it brings more challenges.

With only 99 days to go, however, I want to spend two minutes mentioning the real threat of a no deal. It has come up before and I fear it will come up again, but it needs to come up for a reason. I asked the Prime Minister who she would blame if there was no deal, and she indicated that it would be Parliament's responsibility. It may well, in one view of it, be Parliament's responsibility, but the Government are the Executive, with the power to ensure that that does not happen.

I can talk about the announcement today that the word “unlikely” has been dropped from the preparation notes that have been issued. I can talk about the 3,500 troops who have been placed on standby, the cut to any holiday requests from 1 April, the reversion to World Trade Organisation rules, the fact that we do not have an immigration policy that can come in in just over six weeks' time, the fact that the problem at the Irish border will not be resolved by then and the bottom-line forecast that no deal will be an economic disaster into the future.

Some people have suggested that it is a ruse—that it will never happen. Some people have said, “It could well happen. We don't know.” Some people have said, “Oh, don't worry about it,” and some people have said, “Everything will be fine.” People see many versions of the future, but I know it rests with the Prime Minister and within the power of the Government to say, “No deal won't happen.” I disagree vehemently with leaving the European Union, as do my constituents, but putting

that political decision to one side, I find the executive decision about whether to put the country in a position where it will leave with no deal saddening, upsetting, annoying and frustrating. I also find it—I choose this word carefully—irresponsible, and I would expect far, far more of any Government of the United Kingdom.

At Christmas, I urge that the risk of no deal be removed so that we can move on in whatever way suits the United Kingdom. That will remove the fear. As the children said to me at a high school when I asked them about Europe, “But it’s our future.” It is their future. I am not asking to stay in Europe or for a people’s vote, both of which would be brilliant; I am saying, “Please remove this option, which has no agreement across the House.” For whatever reason it is still on the table, but it is the one thing that should be removed.

I wish everyone a very happy Christmas and a very peaceful and prosperous new year.

2.54 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield). The comments he has just made about Brexit, which is of course the most contentious issue we face, highlight the fact that these end-of-term debates, even when discussing such serious issues, are always conducted in a good-natured way. It is always a pleasure to take part in them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) raised a particular issue that I suspect none of us were aware of, and highlighted something that could affect any of our constituents. Others, such as the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan), have focused on various aspects of their constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who is not in his place, had the temerity to suggest that Southend should have city status, when he knows full well that Cleethorpes is the premier resort of the east coast. He suggested that the Taiwanese representative to the UK would have said that Southend beats Cleethorpes, but I know the Taiwanese representative could not possibly have said that. He is too much of a diplomat, and he will also know that his opposite number in Taipei spent part of her childhood in Cleethorpes, so he would be on dangerous ground if he were to make such an outrageous comment.

Sporting themes have been touched on, so it would be remiss of me not to mention Grimsby Town Football Club. Many perhaps do not know that they play in Cleethorpes; Blundell Park, their home ground where they have played since 1898, is indeed in Cleethorpes. Another anomaly is that Cleethorpes Town Football Club, who play in the northern premier league, actually play in Grimsby. Such are the oddities that surround Grimsby and Cleethorpes, where the only recognition that there is a border is when you come to passport control.

More seriously, there are a number of issues I particularly wanted to raise that affect the local area. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) mentioned the role of local authorities, and of course he is a long-serving local authority leader. I have two local authorities serving my area, both unitary councils—North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire. As an aside, I hope some future Government will consider

imposing unitary authorities across the country, because I think they are far more efficient and would lead to more resources being made available to provide frontline services.

I recognise the continuing constraints on Government budgets, but I will repeat what I have said on a number of occasions: local authorities need additional resources, and the cuts that have been made to them, although necessary, have probably gone as far as most authorities can manage. It is not just the essential services that those authorities provide, such as adult care, dealing with looked-after children, waste collection and so on, but those things that, while perhaps not essential, improve our quality of life—libraries, parks, open spaces and the like. The feel-good factor plays a part; if we have a nice environment to live in, the reality is that antisocial behaviour is reduced and we all enjoy the facilities provided.

North Lincolnshire Council has the advantage of the business rate pilot, which was introduced last year with the 75% deal. Unfortunately, North East Lincolnshire Council, which applied for it this year, was not given the go-ahead. I have not yet had any feedback on the reasoning for that, but I will put on the record my hope that that will be rectified in future.

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

Local enterprise partnerships also affect local economic policy. Both my local authorities are members of the Humber LEP and also the Greater Lincolnshire LEP. As a result of the review currently taking place, there is a possibility that local councils will be able to have membership of only one LEP. I can understand the logic of that. It tidies things up from a purely administrative point of view, but I hope the Government will focus their attention on the LEPs that are less successful. In our area, the Humber LEP focuses on the offshore renewables sector and skills that are vital to our local area, and the Greater Lincolnshire LEP focuses on food and seafood processing in the Grimsby/Cleethorpes area. The industry employs more than 5,000 people and works very closely with the Greater Lincolnshire LEP on several projects.

I am pleased that both the Business Secretary and the Local Government Secretary have given me and council leaders the opportunity of putting our case personally to them, but I hope they will take note of what was said, and, where there is a successful operation of local enterprise partnerships, support it and allow it to continue. I am sure the administrative ease of being a member of only one can be overcome.

I also draw attention to another aspect of the local economy: our successful designation earlier this year as a part of the Greater Grimsby town deal, which was the first town deal that the Government agreed to. Previously we were familiar with city deals. Under both Labour and Conservative Governments, the focus on cities has been quite successful with city regions and the like, and there has been a boost to many of our cities as a result. However, in recent years many of our provincial towns have fallen behind and they need additional support if they are to revive their local economies. The town deal for Greater Grimsby—this is crucial—is private sector led and involves the whole community. We have representatives from the LEPs, the universities and English Heritage, or whatever it calls itself now, as well as from

[*Martin Vickers*]

the local authorities, both Members of Parliament and so on. It is wide-ranging and there are large employers in the area. I thank the Government for the designation and for the support that they have given subsequently. The local authorities are extremely pleased and they will of course be a key part of the town deal.

The Humber ports are another important part of our local economy, particularly Immingham in my constituency and neighbouring Grimsby. The Grimsby and Immingham port complex, measured by tonnage, is the largest port in the country. It is absolutely crucial, as Members will appreciate, to the local economy. I hope that in the post-Brexit world, we will seriously consider free port status, which I have raised with various Ministers. Indeed, I am fortunate enough to have been elected chairman of the all-party group on free ports. It is a concept that needs serious consideration and could give a real boost to northern coastal economies.

A recent report published by the Mace consultancy talks about superports in the north of England that could increase employment opportunities considerably. I hope that that is given serious consideration. We had a debate in this Chamber about two months ago when the Exchequer Secretary was reasonably supportive of the project, given the constraints of Government policy at the moment. He said it is technically possible to create free ports and free zones while we are members of the EU, but port operators and businesses have pointed out to me that there are far too many hoops to get through and hurdles to get over to make it a sensible project.

I will conclude by mentioning direct rail services. The Minister who will respond to this debate is a former Rail Minister who took a great interest in this project and a similar service to his own constituency. He also represents a coastal community and will be aware of the great opportunities that open up if we can get direct services, particularly to London. On the "Today" programme yesterday, John Larkinson, the interim chief executive of the Office of Rail and Road, hinted that he was rather enthusiastic about increasing open-access operators on the network. That might be possible. As the Minister knows, there were previous applications from an open-access operator to operate services up the mainline and then from Doncaster through Scunthorpe to Grimsby and Cleethorpes. The operator withdrew an application that was going to be submitted earlier this year because of the review that is taking place.

I now hope that the Government will enthusiastically support open-access operations, including on Boxing day, which the hon. Member for Keighley mentioned in his early-day motion and which he will be pleased to know I have already supported. I hope the Minister and shadow Minister will take on board the need to get to Cleethorpes more easily from London, York and Blackpool, and from all parts of the nation because, as I said in my opening remarks, it is the premier resort of the east coast.

Finally, Mr Robertson, I wish you, everyone in this Chamber and the House, and all our constituents a happy Christmas. I should acknowledge, as other Members have, all those who play such an important part in our local communities, running charities, voluntary groups and so on. Without them, our communities would be much the poorer. Happy Christmas to one and all.

3.7 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to have you join us and chair this section of the debate, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) on the tour—indeed, it was a tour de force—of his local economy and on talking about the railway system. I want to give him assurances and even more hope by saying that a Labour Government will bring the railways back into public ownership so that they belong to the people of our country, and we will ensure that there is good connectivity to Cleethorpes.

Martin Vickers: We had direct services to Grimsby and Cleethorpes, but the nationalised British Rail withdrew them in 1992.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue. We are not going back to British Rail. We are moving forward to a new model of public ownership that has been tried and tested across the industry, and we are ready to put it in place as soon as we get the first Queen's Speech, which I am sure will not be too long now.

I want to talk about the disposal of public assets and the associated issues that are prevalent in my constituency. I will talk about the Post Office, the consultation and what is currently happening. I will talk about Bootham Park Hospital and a decision that is currently on the Minister's desk. Also, time permitting, I will touch on Bootham Crescent, the football ground that I am sure many are familiar with. I will start with the Post Office.

As we speak, a consultation is going on about the future of the Crown post office, which has been at 22 Lendal since 1884. We have lost many post offices from the city, but that one is in a prime location because of the flows of tourists and residents into the city from the rail station and by bus, and because of its accessibility for vehicles, particularly for disabled people, who can be dropped there. People are attracted to that part of the city, which is thriving—good news in this day and age—not least because it is opposite Appleton's pie shop, which is Britain's greatest pie shop. That is a good place from which people can orient themselves around York, and it is a successful part of the city.

It has been decided that the Crown post office will close its doors. It will be moved into WH Smith, not far from Lendal—but far enough, in Coney Street. That will be seriously detrimental to the people of the city. We have learned that the consultation will not be on whether the move should happen, because we are told that that has already been determined, so I have questioned what it is about. York post office is one of the few profitable post offices, and I think it is fair to say that those concerned are almost going through the motions of a consultation on the move. I find it deeply distressing that now is the time chosen for a consultation, because we all know that staff throughout the country work incredibly hard at this season of the year, to ensure that parcels and cards are delivered on time. At the same time, the future of their jobs, and where they will be located, is in question. The consultation on 28 December is at the busiest time of the year.

I find it disturbing that the Post Office has not done its homework. I have had several meetings now and glaring gaps have appeared, particularly with respect to

access issues. I mentioned how accessible the Lendal post office is. WH Smith, into which it might move, is a struggling business in York. I have been in there and seen how empty it is. My grandfather spent his working life there, and it is an important business to my family, so I am sorry to see it in that state. In that area there are many boarded up shops and the economy is struggling, for a number of reasons, one of which is business rates.

Business rates are incredibly high in York, because of the valuations on businesses, not least because of offshore landlords trying to keep their investment levels up. That is why we need a transition away from a business rate system. Surely, it is a perverse economic choice to move the post office from a thriving area of the city to an area that is, frankly, dying. Not only that, but the new area will be less accessible. It is accessible to pedestrians walking along Coney Street, but not to cars. However, the city is putting in counter-terrorism measures that will restrict access completely. The Post Office was completely unaware of that when I raised it, but it means that disabled people will not be able to get to the post office. Bicycles can be parked outside the Lendal post office, but that will not be possible in Coney Street. The move is detrimental.

The post office is, of course, moving to a back corner of WH Smith, out of sight and out of the way. It is a cramped space, and that is a poor model, particularly given the traffic that comes through at this time of year.

Bob Stewart: Welcome to the Chair, Mr Robertson. All the post offices in my constituency have been moved into WH Smith. That is something that I fought hard, as I am sure other hon. Members have done. One reason, which the Post Office explained to me and which is quite battle-winning, in a way, is that in my constituency—although obviously not in York, which has a profitable post office—£1.30 was being paid out for every pound taken. It was not economically viable. People do not use the post office any more, and the services of the old post office, such as vehicle taxation, are now done online. I do not know how we will solve that problem.

Rachael Maskell: We have many franchised post offices in York that are successful; but in the instance I am discussing, it is a poor decision.

As to access for Royal Mail, and for moving cash in and out of the post office, it has been suggested that a back alley can be used. There have been health and safety assessments of that process and it has been deemed unsafe, so that is a concern. Many York businesses bank at the post office and many business people say they are not willing to walk through a shop and join a queue to bank there. Therefore the move will pull business away from the post office.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The hon. Lady and I have both spoken at the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, and we are both aware of the paltry amounts that sub-postmasters are being paid, in particular to deal with banking transactions. Although Post Office Ltd is making huge profits, it is not passing them on to the people in the franchised sub-post offices that rely on that kind of work.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. We have learned that people have been moving on to WH Smith terms and conditions, as new employees. Of course, we are talking about minimum wage jobs, and highly skilled people are currently working across the postal service, so it is detrimental right across the board.

I would like the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), to become more active in the process. We are told as we go through the consultation that many things are commercially confidential, and I respect that; but she must scrutinise the figures, looking particularly at the predicted footfall, and ensure that the evidence is robust. If public services such as the post office are downgraded, clearly my community will miss out on that vital service, but so will the wider economy, which benefits from people coming into the city and using the post office at Lendal. I trust that even at this hour the Post Office will take note of those serious concerns about the withdrawal of business and the inaccessibility of the building, and reconsider the decision for the sake of residents.

Bootham Park Hospital is a lovely, iconic building that was built in 1777 as a mental health hospital, which has served our city. Its doors closed in 2015, three working days after a decision by the Care Quality Commission. I have debated that issue, and the failures that took place, in this House, but my concern is how the site is being disposed of by NHS Property Services and the Health Minister.

Services closed last year and the site became available and was put on the market. The clinical commissioning group was asked whether it had any requirement for the site. It said, “No, because we’re building a new mental health hospital that is due for completion in 2020.” The site was therefore to be disposed of but, as the “for sale” sign went up, the acute trust based next to Bootham Park Hospital said, “Hang on a minute—we have urgent clinical needs that cannot be addressed because our campus is too small. We therefore need to ensure that transitional care is built on the site.”

The trust wants to put physiotherapy services on to that site. As a former physiotherapist, I understand how important it is to ensure that we have proper transitional care and address the serious delayed discharges that happen at the hospital. Key worker accommodation could also be put on the site. We are planning a One Public Estate bid to put 190 housing units on the site, which is supported across all political parties, health providers, the York Civic Trust, Historic England and the local authority. We will also put dementia care and extra care facilities on the site. There is an incredible opportunity to address some of the real challenges to our health service by releasing that space to health services.

At the same, the “for sale” notice has been put up to earn a capital receipt by turning the site into more luxury homes and a luxury hotel. We seriously do not need either in our city. We urgently need health facilities. I raise this today following a distressing meeting with the Minister for Health earlier this week, who told me that he was considering not pausing the process and proceeding with the sale of the site. The people of my community will face real health challenges in the future if the sale continues, so the sale is therefore clinically detrimental.

[*Rachael Maskell*]

The reality is that if people are held back in hospital because there is no transitional care for them, other people will not be able to access healthcare. We saw a real crisis in York last year—the trust itself described how bad things got when it called the situation a war zone—when the hospital was just not big enough to deal with the local population, which is seriously growing; there will be another 10,000 people by 2030. It is therefore absolutely crucial that the Health Minister pauses this process and looks at the health needs of my community, to ensure that we have the right facilities in the right place for the future.

I will close by talking about Bootham Crescent. Many will know that it has been there since 1932 and is a site of real historic interest to the footballing world. I have learned so much in the last few weeks about, for instance, the tunnels that run under the pitch. Fans used to travel down them at half time to get to the other end. I understand that all sorts happened in those tunnels; I will leave that to the imagination of hon. Members. The site will be disposed of as York City move into their new ground next season, which we hope will bring success; they definitely need it. We want to ensure that the site is utilised for the benefit of our city.

We also want recognition of the site's social history over nearly a century—when listing sites of interest we should not only look at physical structures but think about that social history—including the team, which originally came out of Rowntree's, and all the social history of York that surrounds it. We should ensure that we have a real memory of all that has taken place on that site, which will honour our city as it moves forward. These spaces in our city have such significance to York. It is really important that they are dealt with delicately as we move forward.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak, Mr Robertson. I wish everyone a very peaceful Christmas. It is a time of great reflection on all that is ahead of us and the difficult choices that we have to make. We preside over a country that is so divided at this time. I trust that the unity that Christmas brings can also bring unity to our nation.

3.23 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and also to follow the hon. Member for York Central (*Rachael Maskell*). I will come on later to the issue of NHS land, but I will first concentrate on a serious situation that is still ongoing—the closure of Gatwick airport due to drones.

I led a debate in this Chamber on 18 July 2017 on drones and their conflict with aircraft. I mentioned that, on 2 July 2017, the runway at Gatwick was closed twice—once for nine minutes and once for five minutes—due to drone activity. Five flights were diverted and nine were held in a holding pattern. The runway has now been closed for more than 18 hours and will not reopen until 7 pm at the earliest. This is an incredibly serious situation involving the criminal activity of someone flying industrial-type drones in and over the airspace of an airfield.

When this situation is over, the Government and the aviation industry must look at this incredibly seriously. This kind of disruption to hundreds of thousands of people going about their ordinary business—seeing their loved ones at Christmas, going on honeymoons, going on holidays—is completely unacceptable. Technical measures, whether geofencing or guns that can fire nets to ensnare drones, must be put in place. If not, we will see this happen again. We warned about it when it happened on a small scale a year and a half ago. It has now happened on a large and costly scale.

Bob Stewart: I do not understand why the runway has been closed for so long. Surely, if a drone is flying, people identify it, find out where it has come from and bring it down. The runway has been closed for a heck of a long time. Are there a series of these damn things going up?

Jeremy Lefroy: As I understand it, the drones had gone but came back again, and the police are trying to find out who is controlling them. They have no means of stopping them flying other than by shooting them down, which they are loth to do because of stray bullets. We have to look immediately at serious measures to deal with this threat. If this happens again at Heathrow or other major airports, we will see considerable disruption to people's lives and losses to the economy.

Nearly six years ago, the Francis report came out as a result of the terrible things that happened in Stafford Hospital over several years. Since then, a huge amount has been done to put that right and to make the County Hospital, as it is now called, one of the best-performing hospitals in the country for A&E services. For many weeks now, the A&E there has either admitted or discharged more than 95% of patients, and sometimes as much as 98%, within four hours. I pay tribute to the staff who have been through that difficult time since the 2000s and stuck at it right through to now, making the hospital a credit to the NHS.

The hospital still faces a lot of challenges. There is not enough activity there; we need to see more day case and elective work. I have been talking with the clinical commissioning groups and the University Hospitals of North Midlands trust to see that that happens, because it is vital that the hospital is maintained and grows. I also pay tribute to Paula Clark, the trust's retiring chief executive. She took over at a difficult time from Mark Hackett, who himself had steered the hospital and the trust through difficult times. Paula has done a great job in the last three years, and I wish her well in retirement.

On the matter mentioned by the hon. Member for York Central, there is additional NHS land in the hospital's grounds that is currently not being used. It is my firm belief that that land should be retained for health purposes—NHS purposes or allied health purposes, such as care. This kind of land, in or near to a town centre, is precious. There is other land. We are already building housing at two and a half times the national average. We do not need more housing in that area. We need to preserve that land for other related activities.

I will turn to several issues that I have dealt with over recent years and will, I hope, continue to deal with next year. The first is the work of unpaid carers, which goes unsung. They work year in, year out to look after their loved ones, without reward; they sometimes receive a

carer's allowance, but that has not gone up in recent years. They do it for love, because they are devoted to the people whom they care for. In Staffordshire we have had certain funds available for breaks for carers, but those funds have been reduced and may eventually not be there at all. It is vital that carers, particularly unpaid carers, and other support services have the opportunity to take those short breaks, which they would not otherwise be able to do.

I intend in the coming year to concentrate on this area and to try to encourage both local government and national Government to look at it. Of course, it is not just down to local and national Government. Local charities and other organisations are vital in the support for unpaid carers, and at Christmas, I want particularly to pay tribute to them.

The businesses in the Stafford constituency are an outstanding bunch. There are all types, from the smallest to the largest. A couple of weeks ago, I had the honour of taking the ambassador of China to businesses in my constituency—both to General Electric, where he saw the plans for a bid for a major offshore wind farm, off the east coast of Scotland, which is potentially coming to fruition, and to Perkins, a subsidiary of Caterpillar, that makes wonderful large diesel engines; they are getting more efficient all the time. It also manufactures: it has a manufacturing plant in China.

I took the ambassador to Shugborough Hall. Shugborough is the former home of Admiral Anson and of Patrick Lichfield. Shugborough has been retaken by the National Trust in the last couple of years. It was an honour to show the ambassador the dinner service presented to Admiral Anson in, I think, 1744, when his ship, which was on a round-the-world voyage, limped into Canton at the time that it was going up in flames. His men helped to put out the fire of Canton and, as a result, he was given that magnificent dinner service by the grateful inhabitants.

I had the honour, on another occasion, of visiting a local business set up by Barry Baggott and now owned by German investors, who have put a great deal of money into it. That shows how small-scale manufacturing can and does thrive in the United Kingdom. The business makes high-speed washing machines for glasses and cups that are used in Costa Coffee and other such places around the country. It is a local, British business. It gets an order one day; it makes the machine and delivers it the next day. That is the kind of just-in-time manufacturing that can and does take place on a small scale, not just on the large scale of motor plants.

As I mentioned, Stafford is building housing at two and a half times the national average, in accordance with the plan that we have, and that is right, but I want to see the infrastructure. I am not prepared to see, in our next plan, large-scale housing being proposed without the relevant infrastructure being put in at the same time or in advance. I would also like to see more green belt. It is fine that we are allocating greenfield as well as brownfield land for new housing. I have no problem with that: we have to meet housing needs. But I think that if we also brought back or introduced some more green belt—that would protect, for instance, Stafford from merging into Stone, which I see as a risk at the moment—people would be prepared to accept more housing, because they would see that more green belt was being put in place. At the moment, people do not know where the

expansion of Stafford northwards and Stone southwards will end, because they just see more and more proposals for housing on greenfield land.

I come now to the issue of Stafford town centre. A major part of it is thriving. We have just seen the newest Odeon cinema in the country open. We have now two cinemas, having a few months ago had none, because the old one was closed: it has now reopened, I am very glad to say. That part of the town centre is thriving, but the north part of the town centre and the market square need a great deal of support and help. We need to repurpose some of the buildings. We need more people living in the town centre. However, we also need to see more local independent businesses thriving, and that relates to something else that the hon. Member for York Central mentioned—absentee landlords for properties, who keep rent prices high. Even if the properties come within the rates support, whereby rates do not have to be paid, the rent is too high and the overheads are too high, and local businesses cannot afford to be there. We need to work on that and to encourage the parts of town centres that are currently neglected to come back into use and thrive. That is also right at the top of my agenda.

It was a great honour to welcome a few weeks ago the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), for a visit to Staffordshire Women's Aid's new refuge in Stafford. Building it up over the last few years has been a magnificent achievement by that organisation and the local community. We also had the opportunity to take the Minister to Eagle House to see the work of the Housing First project, which Stafford Borough Council has introduced and which has had a great effect. At this point, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for all the work that he has done on homelessness. I am sure that the Housing First project is partly due to his sterling work.

One issue that has come up and which has been raised by colleagues is the new psychoactive substances, which are causing great distress. In Staffordshire and particularly in Stoke and Stafford, we have a terrible thing called monkey dust. I do not know whether others have seen this problem across the country. Monkey dust seems to be in our area particularly and it has a terrible effect on the people who take it. It makes them more aggressive and has led to quite some problems with antisocial behaviour. The police are on to it, but we have to be vigilant all the time to ensure that new psychoactive substances are dealt with and the production, wherever it is, is closed down as soon as possible.

I would like to turn to one or two international matters, Mr Robertson. Given your strong interest in Ethiopia—where I am a trade envoy for my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—you are well aware of the importance of creating jobs and livelihoods for the hundreds of millions of young people across the developing world and particularly across Africa. The population of Africa is expected to double from 1.2 billion to 2.4 billion and it will have the highest number of young people on the globe, on this planet, by 2060. Therefore it is critical that the United Kingdom supports Governments such as that of Ethiopia, whose population is now more than 100 million, and others as they try to develop opportunities for young people.

[Jeremy Lefroy]

The alternative to that is what we have seen over the last few years, which is migration and, often, migration under the compulsion of human traffickers. I saw some Ethiopians in Calais at the beginning of this year. They had reached Calais through that kind of pressure and were seeking to come over to the United Kingdom to work. Unless we provide and see created the kind of opportunities that I have described for young people across Africa and in developing countries elsewhere, the kind of crisis with refugees that we saw in 2015 will be as nothing compared with what we see in the future.

It is critical that we work together. That is why, as chair of the international Parliamentary Network on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, I have tried to set up a global coalition for youth employment. But the issue is not just Africa. In September, I was in Kosovo, talking with its Government and Parliament, at the invitation of its Parliament, about its problem. It has 60% youth unemployment, and that is a country in the heart of Europe.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, it has been a great honour to see the work done by so many British institutions around the world to tackle malaria and the 18 or so neglected tropical diseases. Those institutions include the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, the University of York, Keele University and, in Scotland, the University of Stirling. The problem is that progress, which had been superb since 2000 under Labour, coalition and Conservative Governments, has stalled because of the resistance of the malaria parasite to the drugs and the resistance of mosquitoes to the insecticides on bed nets, which had been so successful in helping to reduce deaths and incidences by more than half over that period. Therefore it is vital that we keep going with the work and research that is being done, across our universities, for new insecticides and drugs.

I will close with the issue of human rights and, in particular, religious freedom. I am sad to say that I see the space for human rights closing in many parts of the world, rather than opening up, and the same goes for religious freedom. It is vital that this country remains a beacon for human rights and religious freedom and that we do not succumb to the kinds of pressures that we see in other countries, where people are forced to keep quiet about their sincere beliefs. When we see our international partners going in the wrong direction, and we know which countries those are, it is vital that we encourage them—often this is better done privately—to recognise that allowing people to practise their faith, or lack of faith, is vital to the human soul. With that, I wish everybody here a happy Christmas and new year.

3.39 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What an appropriate and enjoyable way to round off my first full calendar year as a Member of Parliament. It is great to recap—indeed, I was just looking at my stats. It feels like it has been a whirlwind in some ways and an eternity in others, but it is certainly never boring. In the past year, I have spoken in 167 debates, so clearly I cannot shut up in this place, but it has been good fun and a challenge, too.

The best feeling as a Member of Parliament—a view probably shared by many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who spoke so powerfully about various issues close to his heart—is being able to achieve a really good outcome for a constituent. It may seem like a trivial administrative exercise for the Member of Parliament, but it can have a life-changing impact on a constituent. That has really been the most rewarding aspect of being a Member of Parliament, and I reflect on the power of elected Members to do good. We are all here fundamentally for the right reasons. In the context of a confrontational and acrimonious national debate, we should take cognisance of that as we approach Christmas, and focus on the good aspects of being Members of Parliament and serving in the public interest.

The debate on Brexit rumbles on about the most appropriate measures in the national interest. I share the sentiment of my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) about the urgent need for the Government to rule out the prospect of a no-deal Brexit, because it is quite clear that that would not be in the national interest. This Government—any Government—must govern in the national interest. It is not on for the Government to hold us to ransom in that way. Blackmail of Parliament is not appropriate in a democracy. It is appropriate now for the Government to rule out a no-deal Brexit.

I was all geared up and prepared to speak in the debate on the draft agreement, but, of course, the Government moved the goalposts on that. I understand that the vote will now be held on 16 January, which will be my 30th birthday. What better birthday present than the opportunity to vote down this utterly moribund and rubbish deal, which will not serve our national interest in any way whatsoever? I look forward to Parliament then taking control of this process and exerting the will of the people, which was not clearly expressed by the Government and is not being reflected by the Executive branch of our democracy. We must reassert the will of Parliament to deliver in the national interest. I am looking forward to a challenging first quarter of 2019, as we steer the ship away from the rocks, hopefully towards a calmer course, back to prosperity and stability.

One of the greatest challenges in my constituency this year has been the roll-out of universal credit, which started at the end of November. As many hon. Members have mentioned, it has been very challenging, not least for the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian, which has been a pilot area for the roll-out. The fact that it is rolling out in Glasgow, an area that already has significant social challenges, not least in my constituency, is a particular concern. Once full migration happens, I will have the largest number of universal credit claimants in Scotland—over 16,000—so I am bracing myself for the impact of that change on my constituency casework. I hope we can help people as much as possible to avoid the worst effects of a social security system that has moved away fundamentally from the founding spirit of the Beveridge principles: that we should create a floor below which none should fall and above which everyone can rise.

As a society, we must restore the principle that we have a minimum level of dignity that no one can fall below. We need to restore that, because the current situation is simply not on. An unfortunate measure is the rate of homelessness. I mentioned in the House that,

on average, two people a week are dying in Scotland as a result of having to sleep rough. The average life expectancy of those living on the streets is just 39. In Glasgow, the picture is that, in the last year, 5,300 people found themselves homeless. That figure covers just homeless applications, and does not include those who do not present themselves to apply as homeless.

The council in Glasgow had a statutory duty to house 4,200 people. There are only 8,000 social rented lettings available per year in Glasgow, so the council was able to secure accommodation for only 2,400 people. The physical capacity of the state to help people is failing. That is not on and we need to address it. That is a shameful figure. It should be a fundamental human right to have shelter. We should restore that to the principles of the governance of this country. That is something I hope we will find a consensus on in the new year.

As a Member of Parliament for the only city in Scotland that is a dispersal area for asylum seekers, another challenge has been immigration and asylum cases, which account for the bulk of my casework. We work very hard and are challenged by the situation that faces a lot of people. People have come to this country in the most appalling circumstances. I could regale members with many tales of incredible human resilience and courage. It is quite moving to understand what the people who have been able to exist in those circumstances have been through. However, to then see the cold bureaucracy of the Home Office stifling what resilience they have left and destroying what hope they have in their future is devastating for me, as I recognise my limitations as an elected Member to help them. Often, we do get good outcomes, which is reassuring, but it feels like a constant war of attrition. It cannot be right. We have to look at a more compassionate basis for our asylum and immigration system as we move into 2019. I hope we can achieve that together as a House.

We have to recognise the extent of human suffering that exists in our communities, often cheek by jowl with great prosperity. A lot of the people who find themselves in these situations are very dignified and do not want to talk about the extent of the hardship they face, but none the less, it is there. I want to pay tribute in particular to the Rev. Brian Casey and the Rev. Linda Pollock, two Church of Scotland kirk ministers who have risen to the challenge of the hardship faced by a lot of asylum seekers in my community and have mobilised so many in their congregation to work to help many people facing deportation, detention—without limit, in many cases—and the constant fear of being sent back to their torturers and tormentors. At this time, when we think of Jesus being a refugee, it is appropriate to reflect on the way we treat some of the most vulnerable people in the world who are in our midst.

I also pay tribute to the incredible work of the pupils at Springburn Academy, who rallied to the cause of two of their fellow pupils, Pakistani Christian boys who are facing persecution and had family members killed in Pakistan, by arranging a huge petition. That is a really appropriate thing to think about as we move into the new year: people do rise to the challenge, and our communities are resilient and will act in what they see to be the best interests of their fellow human beings. I think that Government should step up and try to follow the example of the compassion shown by our communities.

Another key issue in my constituency is the number of drug-related deaths, which in Glasgow is more than 1000% higher than the European average. It is a critical issue. It is a public health emergency in my city. It is urgent that policy is adapted and reflects the urgency of this crisis in Glasgow. In the new year, I am looking forward to the establishment of the first heroin-assisted treatment facility in Glasgow, hopefully by the summer. In due course, we hope to expand its scope into a full safe drug-consumption facility, which will enable people to interact in a clinical environment to consume drugs and minimise the harm that they face as a result of their addiction, and treat addiction as a public health rather than a criminal justice issue. I will persist with that in the new year.

I also want to pay tribute to the amazing community organisations, some of which I have mentioned. The Beatroute art centre helps to engage people who are socially excluded in the wonderful joy of exploring and realising their musical talents. The Barmulloch Community Development Company has just been awarded the *Architects' Journal* award for the best public building of 2018, for developing a brand new, state-of-the-art community centre in the heart of Barmulloch, which is an amazing facility in the heart of a community that has historically been quite deprived. It shows that even the poorest communities in our country deserve world-class public services and public buildings, and we should develop our communities in that way, with nothing less than the best quality provision for everyone.

I also recognise Possilpoint, which does amazing work to support disabled people in my constituency, as well as Possibilities, which does similar work. Possilpoint also has a charity called Young People's Futures, which does a great amount of work to divert young people from being snared by the drug barons and organised criminals in my constituency, and show them that there is a better way forward. That is a really worthwhile effort, particularly by Ann Lawrance, who leads that work.

The Mallard charity provides care for adolescents, particularly those suffering from severe disabilities who require respite care away from their families. It does an amazing bit of work to give their families an opportunity for time away from that constant need to care for their family members. Again, however, once that child transitions from adolescence to adulthood, there is a cliff edge and no support. We need to work hard to look at how we can provide care provision for young people through their adult years, and have a national care service, as Labour has proposed, so there is a cradle-to-grave approach to care and it does not simply drop off a cliff when someone reaches the age of 21.

The Carntyne credit union also does great work, particularly through its food bank, to support people who are suffering at this time of year. The Balornock uniform bank promotes an environmentally sustainable way to save money by exchanging school uniforms. Kids grow so quickly that people can do that without feeling shame, because it makes perfect environmental sense to have an exchange. It is a worthwhile and wonderful project that was started by a constituent.

The Quarriers and Penumbra also do amazing work. Penumbra deals with people who have faced problems from alcohol-related brain injuries. That is a cross-section of the amazing work that I have encountered when

[*Mr Paul Sweeney*]

going round my constituency as a Member of Parliament in the last year. They are all wonderful people, who are often hidden in plain sight—someone going about their private life would not know, but they can be there without anyone being aware of it. Discovering those amazing activities and championing them as much as I can is one of the most wonderful aspects of becoming a Member of Parliament. Hopefully, somehow, some of those amazing pockets of excellence will be embodied in national policy one day.

Another major issue that erupted in Glasgow this year was the tragic fire at the Glasgow School of Art, of which I have been trying to champion the restoration. Hopefully we can find a way forward for that wonderful, iconic building—the most important architectural edifice in my city. As someone who has championed the built environment in Glasgow for many years—long before I was a Member of Parliament—it is very close to my heart.

It is also a reflection of how we need to treat the quality of our public realm and our public buildings in cities across the UK, many of which were built at the highest watermark of Britain's industrial and commercial prosperity between 1870 and 1914. Most of our city centres are Victorian and Edwardian in character, and they are now of a certain vintage, which means that intensive intervention will be needed to maintain the quality of the built environment in our urban areas.

We have to look, as I will in the new year, at how we adapt our public policy to preserve the wonderful built environment of our great cities across the United Kingdom. In particular, I will look at policies such as VAT, which is levied on renovations but not on new builds. Right away, that creates a 20% perverse incentive against renovations vis-à-vis new builds. We have to look at those sorts of perverse incentives as they apply to our urban areas and ensure that we maintain the amenity of our great cities.

The Springburn winter gardens is a major project that I have been championing in my constituency. It is a category A listed building and the biggest glasshouse in Scotland, but sadly it has been derelict since 1983. It is my personal mission to see it restored, and I hope we will make big progress on that front in 2019. We have already seen encouraging movement through various funding applications.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who talked about the closure of a local hospital and the disposal of the site, I am concerned by the major issue of Stobhill Hospital in my constituency, where my younger brother and I were born. It closed as an in-patient hospital several years ago and it has been left to total rack and ruin by the NHS board in Glasgow. More than £1 million of lead and copper cabling has been stripped away by organised criminals, which is a huge loss to the national health service. It has simply walked away and does not care about the ongoing maintenance of such buildings once they are no longer in use.

The site is also a huge blight on my community. I have engaged with the health board on how we bring forward the community to look at the future of that site and manage it in the future. There are often short-sighted policies about the clinical focus of the NHS, but we

should look at the legacy of now redundant buildings and how they can be used for a new public purpose to continue to improve our communities. I will do that in the new year as well.

Coming from a shipbuilding background, I have often contributed to defence-related debates in the House and raised the issue of our shipbuilding and associated industries. I am hopeful that in the new year, we will continue to make the case to the Treasury and the Ministry of Defence about the importance of maximising the power of public procurement in this country to pump-prime and provide a sustainable future for our heavy industries, such as shipbuilding, because a huge skill base is invested in them.

If we were to build every ship required by the Ministry of Defence in this country, we would achieve a saving to the Treasury of 20% through wage and supplier payments, rather than giving that to Fincantieri in Italy or Daewoo in South Korea. They are not bidding so low out of altruism; they want the contract because it makes economic sense for them to build those ships. We should take the hint and build them in the UK. We should have a consistent policy that for every major public sector industrial procurement contract that can be done in the UK through our UK manufacturing base, the first preference should be given to UK-sourced manufacturers to maximise the impact of the public purse and the multiplier effect across the UK economy.

That has never been more important than in the last few days. A major crisis has erupted with the potential closure of the St Rollox railway works in my constituency, which could lead to the loss of 200 jobs. The railway works has been there since 1856—the dawn of the railway age—and it would be an absolute tragedy for a community that once built 60% of the world's locomotives to lose its last railway works. Of course, I am sat next to my hon. Friend the Member for York Central, whose constituency is another major centre of the railway industry. It is important that those skills are there.

The enterprise is fundamentally viable. I will do everything I can to protect and secure the future of the railway works, even if that requires a workers' buy-out or some means of the workers taking ownership of the site. One of the big problems that the site has faced is that it became a branch plant of a works in Milton Keynes. It then became owned by a German company, which is not out there battling for the works, but treats it as a marginal part of its operation. If that site was the master of its own destiny, the management and entrepreneurial spirit of its team could fight for it, and it would have a better, more prosperous future.

We should reflect on the structure of ownership of major industries in this country. The railway works is one example of how great talent and skill, and a critical mass of wealth creation, can be destroyed through the ignorance and lack of entrepreneurial spirit of faceless multinational corporations that come and strip assets and value out of our communities. We have to fight back against that, and I will work on that.

Another major issue I have raised this year is the plight of veterans, and particularly veterans' suicides, which is a huge problem, including for a significant number of people in my former regiment, the Royal Regiment of Scotland. We continue to raise the problem

of the mental health of veterans and those in service in the armed forces. We need to continue to rise to that challenge.

It is the duty of the state to provide a minimum level of support in accordance with the military covenant to ensure that those who have served our country in the most challenging circumstances are not left behind once they leave the service—they must be sustained in their careers afterwards. We must do more to protect them. It is simply tragic that so many of them are not being heard, or when they are being heard, that they are not being properly cared for. Often, people have reached out and tried to get support, but they have been ignored or they have not been properly satisfied. It is a horrible situation and we have to do more to raise awareness.

Finally, MPs' unsung heroes are their staff—the people who support us and stand behind us. I could not do it without my staff and I want to namecheck them: Tom Dickson, James Burns, Hollie Cameron, Stevie Grant, Angus Bugg-Millar, Pat Rice, Alex Paterson, Sophie Dicker and Jordan Agnew. Every one of them has made me the MP that I can be today. It is a reflection of their efforts that I won *The Herald's* Scottish MP of the year award this year. I was quite chuffed with that unexpected accolade, but I could not have done it without them. I am merely the figurehead of the operation, but there is a much more robust and intelligent cohort behind me that makes it all happen. I am sure I speak for all hon. Members when I pay tribute to our staff and those who support us, and wish them all a great Christmas and a happy new year.

3.58 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I intend to do a quick run round the room and touch on what other hon. Members have spoken about, but I will make it short.

We owe the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, a debt of gratitude for his work throughout the year. He talked passionately about Gateshead. He even dragged me there—sorry; he arranged a visit to Gateshead for the Education Committee and I had a lovely time. I especially liked the wonderful Gateshead College.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) had a long list of organisations in his constituency, and I will emulate him in a minute. He hopes to still be an MP at 100, by which time Southend may have reached city status.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) talked about issues that affect all hon. Members present, such as housing, the effect of really expensive rents and the effect of universal credit, which has puts lots of people in our constituencies into debt.

The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) spoke about iso—

Bob Stewart: Isotretinoin.

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He spoke about the dangers that some young people, in particular, are going through as a result of using it. He really wants the drug to be reviewed and perhaps its use halted, to save people from the horrendous symptoms that they can experience.

The hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) spoke about rugby league. Yes, I remember it when I was growing up; I remember Eddie Waring and Keighley in their heyday. I know that he spoke about other things, too, but I really have to move on.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) gave us a very sobering reflection on religious freedom and how important it is in this country. He talked about Jainism, about Sikhs and about the problem of getting religious information on censuses.

I was quite horrified to hear about the wildcats on “Good Morning Scotland” this morning. As the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) said, they have been interbreeding with feral cats, which is an animal welfare issue. He also talked about Brexit and universal credit.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) gave a great summary of the previous speakers; he was probably much better at that than I am. I am grateful to him, in that respect, because I have been able to rush through some of the others. He also spoke very knowledgeably about the work of his two local authorities, as well as speaking about Humber ports and direct rail connections.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) spoke about post offices. As Members will know, I have a personal interest in them, having lost my own post office. The post office in Wishaw was closed for three weeks, because it was not possible to get another person to take over the sub-postmastership, which caused my constituents great suffering. She also spoke about NHS land and what happens to it, which is another real issue, as did the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who also talked about drones. I cannot get an earlier flight from London City airport because what has happened at London Gatwick has had an impact right across the United Kingdom; it is really serious. He also talked about work overseas, especially in Africa, and I am grateful to him for some of the knowledge he gave me that I did not have beforehand.

I seriously hope that I have not missed anyone out. I will move on to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who has had a very interesting time since he became an MP. He cut right through a number of things. He is an enthusiastic supporter of the Glasgow School of Art, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). His own constituency has the famous St Rollox rail works, which I know. My husband took me to Springburn on our honeymoon, to show me where he had been born and lived. However, when we turned the corner, we found that the building he had been born in had been demolished. I make light of it, but there is Springburn Museum for the hon. Gentleman's delectation and delight, in which there is a picture of my husband on coronation day in 1953, watching his sisters in a race to celebrate the Queen's coronation. I will not mention where I was then.

With your indulgence, Mr Robertson, I will mention my own constituency of Motherwell and Wishaw, of which I am extremely proud. It is a haven for refugees and has been since 1919. The first group that I can remember are the Lithuanian refugees who came over after the first world war. There have also been Polish refugees and, more recently, Congolese refugees, who were taken to Motherwell, and the Syrian refugees, who

[*Marion Fellows*]

have also been placed and welcomed in my constituency. Indeed, when there was a move by some right-wing organisations to demonstrate against refugees being settled in Wishaw, I am very proud to say that many citizens of Wishaw stood at the bottom cross in Wishaw and campaigned for the refugees' successful integration, which I believe is really happening. In Motherwell and Wishaw, when children of refugees go to school and meet local children, it becomes a real exercise in getting along together.

I will also talk a bit about what I did as an MP when I was first elected in 2015. We saw a need and we set up the Poverty Action Network, because we knew there were lots of local organisations fighting poverty and we wanted to bring them together and facilitate the exchange of ideas. We have the Basics food bank; St Vincent de Paul; Lanarkshire Links; Voluntary Action North Lanarkshire; Scottish Action for Mental Health; Neighbourhood Networks; Made4U in ML2; Citizens Advice; Motherwell Baptist Church; Safeguarding Communities—Reducing Offending, or Sacro; Women's Aid; Routes to Work; Big Lottery Fund; Christians Against Poverty; The Haven; Lanarkshire Community Food and Health Partnership; North Lanarkshire Disability Forum; Alzheimer Scotland; Getting Better Together; NL Leisure; Motherwell Football Club Community Trust, because Motherwell is now a community-owned football club; Families Against Murder and Suicide; Chris's House, which helps families who have suffered the suicide of a family member; Lanarkshire Cancer Care Trust, to which I am especially grateful as it transported my late husband to a hospice on a weekly basis; Community Care Scotland; North Lanarkshire Carers Together; Wishaw, Murdostoun and Fortissat Community Forum; South Wishaw Parish Church; Miracle Foundation, which provides parties and support for young children who have lost parents or other close relatives; Lanarkshire Baby Bank; One Parent Families Scotland; the Welfare Rights Team in North Lanarkshire Council; North Lanarkshire Partnership; Scottish Welfare Fund; NHS Lanarkshire; and Police Scotland, especially the police based in Motherwell.

Mr Sweeney: I loved hearing about the history of the hon. Lady's connection with Springburn. Sadly, Springburn Museum has now closed down, but I hope that the wonderful exhibit she referred to can be recovered for the renewed Springburn Museum in the winter gardens, which I mentioned.

I also just wanted to say that I was really impressed by the reference to Motherwell, which I did not realise was a co-operative or a fan-owned club. Perhaps that is a great sign of Scotland's tradition of the co-operative movement, and perhaps in 2019 we can see a further extension of the wonderful co-operative movement in Scotland and across the UK.

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for his intervention. It gives me a chance to say that Motherwell Football Club Community Trust does very good work because it is able to reach groups that other organisations cannot reach, such as men who have not worked or men with drug problems, by bringing them into the stadium. Generally it is men they bring in, although I hope to buy a half-price season ticket in the new year.

I, too, have been doing a lot of work on universal credit. It has been rolled out in North Lanarkshire for about nine months now, and we had the manager who was responsible for its introduction in Lanarkshire at one of our Poverty Action Network meetings. I have to say that some of what she said did not chime with the reality of what has happened, but I do not blame her personally. Nevertheless, there are still real differences and real challenges to be met, because universal credit is causing great hardship, both for those who receive it and for North Lanarkshire Council, whose rent arrears have risen astronomically.

In fact, one of the things that has most made me proud, and most made me upset, is that in the last two weeks I have been to food bank drives—I ran one myself in Motherwell town centre and the local Tesco ran one, too—and when I spoke to the fundraiser in Tesco, she said, "Marion, we don't even have to tell them what to do. We don't need to hand out the leaflets. They know what to buy, and they buy it in bulk. And it's often those who have the least who help the most." I pay tribute not only to my own constituents, but to constituents all over the UK who make these donations. And may I just say that in the 21st century, it is shameful indeed that we need to do this?

Mr Robertson, I have tested your indulgence, and I want to make sure that both the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth)—the Opposition spokesperson—and the Minister get a chance to contribute to this debate, so I will stop there.

4.9 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for that comment.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) for securing the time for this debate in Westminster Hall; I think that it has worked quite well here, actually. When he began his speech, his comments suggested that he did not quite trust the Government actually to deliver; I cannot imagine why. However, having had so much time to discuss the chaotic and now—frankly—reckless handling of Brexit by the Government, it is a crucial time for hon. Members to have a chance to talk about other issues affecting their constituents. However, to quickly look back, this time last year we had just voted against the Government's attempts to sideline Parliament on the deal. That should have been the point at which the Prime Minister took a different, more inclusive path to involve MPs and Parliament in that proposal. However, it is 12 months later, and in the past few weeks we have seen the problems that have arisen as a result of not choosing that inclusive path. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) that it is irresponsible not to rule out a no-deal Brexit: it is entirely possible to do so, and to take away some of the fear and uncertainty of our constituents.

I think that all colleagues here today share a frustration that other policy areas are not being addressed, some of which we have heard about. For me, one of the most important crises facing the country is social care, and recently, the Green Paper has yet again been delayed: it has been delayed five times since summer 2017, when

we were promised it. We are now being told that it will be published at the first opportunity in 2019, so perhaps the Minister could take back to the Government the message that the first opportunity needs to come very quickly. That delay is also tied up with the NHS plan, on which I chaired a session with NHS England in Parliament last week. We know that plan is ready, but again it has been delayed, and we do not know when it is coming. That means that local health providers are facing great uncertainty at what is a very busy time for them, which is not acceptable.

We have actually passed legislation in the past year since we last rose, and although we sometimes think this place is a bit arcane, I am pleased that Dame Laura Cox's report on bullying and harassment has been published, and that the House of Commons Commission has agreed a way forward. I hope that there will be some progress on that, and that conduct across the House will improve.

We have heard a great range of speeches today—I have enjoyed these debates when I have heard them in the past, because we get to learn an awful lot. My hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead took us through a number of issues in his constituency. To me, one of the main issues was the cuts that are happening, not just to local government but to all the partnership bodies and charities that are working together, and the impact that is now having on local people. We had the usual sweep from Southend: I too am looking forward to the centenary party for the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). The thing I learned most is that Brexit is going to stop in the Amess household on 25 December, for one day only. We all look forward to that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) reminded us of the debate that she so powerfully led in this place last year. The fact that those poor families are yet again in that so-called temporary accommodation is really scandalous. We are all aware of the issue of rent arrears from universal credit that my hon. Friend mentioned, and I would certainly like to take up her offer of more information on the great work that the WISH Centre is doing for young people—as, I am sure, would many hon. Members. I had not heard the debate about isotretinoin, but I know that the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) will keep that debate going and keep it in Members' interests.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) about the trials and tribulations of the Cougars, and the breakthrough that is rugby league and rugby union co-operating on something. That has taken a number of years, so if that is happening, there is hope for all sorts of co-operation breaking out. My hon. Friend also highlighted an important issue about the scandalous lack of accountability of regional schools commissioners for the very important decisions that they are making in our communities. We have perhaps all experienced that, and I wish my hon. Friend luck in addressing that issue. Mr Robertson, you missed out on an important contribution: we have a tip for the King George VI on Boxing day. We are all going to be waiting patiently at Kempton, so that was very useful. I completely agree with my hon. Friend about Boxing day travel. Fans will be travelling from Brentford to Bristol City on Boxing day, and public transport is important every day of the year for local people, but is

especially important for grounds on Boxing day. That is a really important campaign, and I wish my hon. Friend well with it.

We heard from the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) about the great work that he has been doing, particularly on housing and other issues. I commend him for his vital work on the holocaust memorial, and the importance of continually combating antisemitism in our country. From my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian, we learned a lot about cats—perhaps more than we wanted.

Martin Whitfield: Wildcats.

Karin Smyth: Yes, wildcats. I visited Edinburgh Zoo as part of the British–Irish Parliamentary Assembly this year, and it does some great work, so I wish my hon. Friend good luck with that. As I said, I agree with him about the major part of his speech: the irresponsibility of the Government on Brexit.

I agree with much of what the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) said about the local enterprise partnerships: some are better than others, and it is for local people to help out in their communities. I look forward to the Labour Government sorting out those direct trains for him. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about the issues around Coney Street, and we have all been affected by the so-called consultation by the Post Office. That is something we all recognise, and I know that my hon. Friend will make sure the Post Office does its homework better. Regarding Bootham Park Hospital, she and I have joined forces with NHS Property Services on the importance of NHS estate being part of those communities and overcoming the fragmented nature of the health service, working better to help local communities with big, important decisions. Again, my hon. Friend is right to highlight the social history of places such as our football grounds: those public spaces need to be taken into those communities and consulted with properly.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) has reminded us of the debates he has raised previously about drones. What has gone on today is shocking; we have not caught up with all of it. I also agree with him about new developments—I have a number of those in my constituency—needing infrastructure when they are built, particularly GP access and school places, which help to get communities on board. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on his first full year, and his 167 contributions to debates. Well done.

Mr Sweeney: It was 168.

Karin Smyth: Sorry, 168. I also congratulate him on *The Herald* award, and welcome him; he has been a great addition to Parliament.

Before I wrap up, I will take this opportunity to thank all staff for the smooth running of this place: the porters, the Clerks, the security staff, the postal staff, and the others who people perhaps do not see quite as often. I hope they get a well-deserved rest. I thank all the public services in my constituency of Bristol South, which keep our city running so well. I have spent the past year with Avon and Somerset Constabulary, working on the parliamentary scheme: that has been a real eye-opener, and I commend them on the work that they will keep doing.

[Karin Smyth]

Like many hon. Members, I look forward to spending the recess with my family—I hope they do too. If not, there are some great choices of activities to take part in. We have “Aladdin” and “A Christmas Carol”, and the Tobacco Factory in my constituency is turning the theatre into a giant adventure playground to tell the charming story of “The Borrowers”. Some Members might recall this story: a family of tiny people who secretly live in the walls and floors of an English house, borrowing anything they can find upstairs. Let us hope it does not come to that in the coming year. From cotton buds to crisp packets, what the Borrowers do is the original upcycling—a wonderful theme for Bristol, which prides itself on its approach to environmental issues. In previous speeches, I have urged Members to visit Ashton Gate stadium, the home of Bristol City, to watch the football or the rugby. This time, I suggest to colleagues that they “spice up their life” and “only take a minute” to get tickets to the Spice Girls or Take That at the stadium—but “I don’t want to talk about” the Rod Stewart gig. On that note, I wish everyone a very merry Christmas.

4.17 pm

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. In the time I have left, I will do my best to do justice to everyone who has taken part in the debate. Christmas and the new year are a time to look backwards and a time to look forwards. Every year, Opposition Members are given the gift of hindsight, which is denied to Government Members—if only we had that hindsight. We might even get crystal balls this year, who knows? They could be rather cloudy though, as who knows what might happen in the future?

As many Members have indicated, we are currently grappling with themes of great importance and complexity, so it is worth remembering that our ability to engage in such deliberations arises from us having a mandate from our constituents. What we have heard today reminds me that what goes on in each of our constituencies gives us the insight that enables us to participate in the much more momentous and wider debates that are now taking place in the Chamber. We have also heard about the rich tapestry of voluntary activity and third-sector organisations across all our constituencies. At this time of year, more than ever, they deserve our praise.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), not just for chairing the Backbench Business Committee, but for being so assiduous in seeking time for Back-Bench business. I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that we should have more of it, and that it should be protected when we do have it, so that it is not squeezed by the unexpected and shifted into less sociable hours. I wish him well in that endeavour.

As ever, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) delivered on all our expectations. I think it is fair to say that his speech was exhaustive, if not exhausting—not just for him, but for those of us who had to listen to it. I repeat my offer that if he wants Southend to get city status, I will support that if he returns the favour and backs Blackpool for city status. We can have a two-for-one. That is only fair. His comments on the girls and boys club were absolutely spot on.

Blackpool has a fine girls and boys club that does so much across the town as a whole and deserves far more recognition than it sometimes gets. As for his centenarian tea party, the reason it has so many attendees is because Southend is the happiest place in Britain, and people who are happy live longer. If someone wants to be a centenarian, clearly they should move to Southend.

On a more serious note, the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and many other Opposition Members expressed concerns about homelessness and universal credit. I think the two are to a certain extent brought together. She was right to comment on rough sleeping. I know she was in the Chamber for the urgent question earlier today. We talked about some of the Government’s approaches through the rough sleeping strategy. From my constituency, I know some of the challenges that those who are homeless have accessing universal credit, for example. There is a need to get people from the Department for Work and Pensions into our homeless hostels to ensure that people can sign up and access the benefit, as well as set up the bank accounts they need. The accessibility of basic bank accounts is a problem I have been trying to tackle with the Department. The new Secretary of State, far from standing idly by—I gently observe that—is trying to ensure that the benefit rolls out as effectively as possible. I recall a time when the Labour party supported the principle of what universal credit is trying to do.

I entirely recognise that Opposition Members will want to pressure us over how we deliver and roll things out—that is entirely right and proper—but representing a seaside town with a seasonal economy, I know that UC gives us an opportunity to ensure that people do not need to keep signing off and on each time their job situation changes. That they can have more secure access to benefits remains the right principle. We have to redouble our efforts to ensure that we deliver it appropriately.

I agree with the hon. Lady on many of her comments on homelessness. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) cited figures on life expectancy that always shock me whenever I hear them and bring home to me why the situation is so appalling. As politicians, we obsess about rules, regulations, structures and delivery bodies. The essence of our decision making should be the dignity of each and every person. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East mentioned, one rough sleeper is one too many in any civilisation or society. He is thanked so much by the House for his work on the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 that it almost becomes commonplace, but the figures he cited show what a difference it made. We should be grateful to him for that.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for educating me about isotretinoin and I am grateful for his input. I know he will keep on campaigning on that issue. We will ensure that the Department of Health and Social Care gets to hear about it again.

Rugby league never gets enough coverage in this place or the wider world. I was watching “North West Tonight” the other week and learned that Red Star Belgrade has started a new rugby league team. I am sure the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) will share my delight at that. The tentacles of rugby league are stretching far and wide of late. I have met Vicky Beer.

Perhaps I can brief him later on how I found the experience, rather than say it at the Dispatch Box. We will leave that there. I agree with him about Boxing day trains. The spirit was willing when I was rail Minister, but the flesh was very weak. One more push from the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) might help deliver that. When we discuss Vicky Beer later, perhaps the hon. Member for Keighley can also explain what he thinks the UEFA nations league is actually about. I still do not understand the consequence of it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East spoke powerfully about religious freedom, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). I learnt more from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East about the various religious calendars of the world's religions than I ever did as a good Catholic boy—holy days of obligation only! I am grateful to him for that educational activity, if nothing else.

I am also grateful to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) who spoke about nature issues. I had not really thought about the Scottish wildcat until today, and he has broadened my sum of knowledge. I am also grateful to him for mentioning, even briefly, the issue of invisible disabilities. It was one of the key things that I wanted in the transport accessibility paper I did at the end of my time as Rail Minister. He may wish to look at that paper to see what he can borrow to implement in Scotland. We were trying to be as fertile as possible with our ideas.

I am so glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) is now tipping his constituency to be the queen of the east coast, because there is no vacancy for the best seaside resort generally. I say, as the MP for Blackpool, that that was a sensible move on his part. He has reminded me that my time as Rail Minister has a long legacy, as we have only just heard from the Office of Rail and Road about its sudden new-found enthusiasm for open access rail. Actually, that has taken about 10 years, rather than the one since I was the Minister. My new ombudsman was launched last week, which I am keen to point out in the one time I get to be at the Dispatch Box.

The hon. Member for York Central reminds me of what I have been missing since we last sparred in debates, which we did all too often. I might actually start to agree with her, because I had a Crown post office in the heart of Blackpool, and it too was moved into a WH Smith. That was not just into a corner, but into the basement where no one had a chance of seeing it, and there were accessibility issues. I urge the hon. Lady to keep fighting on that one.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford rightly spoke about drones, which are an issue he was so perspicacious in debating a year ago. We all get the sense of urgency on the issue, given what happened at Gatwick. I was also delighted to hear about the high-speed washing machines that he referred to. All my constituents know that if they want to find me, they have to visit the local Costa Coffee. Now, when I am sitting in there, I can think of the washing machines whirring away behind the scenes to make sure I have a clean cup each time.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East has been reviewing his statistics as he finishes his first full year. As someone who used to do that, can I warn him that the tyranny of TheyWorkForYou.com can be an unpredictable guide to future activity? The further he

shins up the greasy pole, the fewer his opportunities to participate might be. As Scottish MP of the year, he is clearly destined for great things, and he will perhaps find that he has fewer and fewer opportunities to speak. I was trying to decode his tie—tartan fading into grey. Is it some hidden message to the SNP? I do not know. I was trying to work it out.

Mr Sweeney: Just for the record, the tie is actually a gift that I received from Home-Start Glasgow North, which is a charity that helps people with childcare. It was a very nice gift. I think the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) has the same tie, so there is an ecumenical approach to us wearing it.

Paul Maynard: I am glad to hear it. I know that Home-Start is a very fine charity in all its branches across the country, so I am happy to pay tribute to it.

I was delighted to hear that the hon. Gentleman is such a fan of the Glasgow School of Art. The one time I went to Glasgow was especially to see that very building, so I certainly wish him well with that.

I will end by making the observation that one of our biggest challenges as Members is to maintain our good will, even in this season of good will. I always try, particularly when participating in this debate, to recognise that we all ultimately want the same thing: to make the lives of our constituents better and to make the common future of the country a better place. We may differ over the paths that we take to get there—some of us more than most, perhaps—but I like to think that for the vast bulk of us in the moderate mainstream, there is far more that unites us than divides us.

When I hear the rancour of some debates, it genuinely saddens me, because it makes it harder to reach the best decision in the national interest. When we have had such a divisive and rancorous period since the referendum, it is incumbent on all Members, even when we disagree on the fundamentals, to recognise that what underlies that is a desire for the best outcome for the nation as a whole.

In the final minute, it would be remiss of me not to thank you, Mr Robertson, for chairing the debate, the whole Panel of Chairs, the Deputy Speakers, Mr Speaker himself, the House staff, the catering staff, the parliamentary security, the cleaners, the librarians, and everyone else. I apologise to anyone I have missed out, but I thank them anyway as well.

I end by asking us all to remember those who are facing their first Christmas alone, those who may have lost loved ones over the course of the year, and those who may face significant hardship at this time of year. It is a time when we turn to our families, but some people have no family to turn to and do not have those opportunities. Although it is a time of great good will to all and good cheer, it can also be a very bleak time for many people, and I am sure that what will unite all of us in the Chamber is to think of everyone in our constituencies and to wish them the best for the year to come, and to hope that we get the very best outcome that we can, whatever happens in our crystal ball, on 14 January.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Best wishes to everyone from the Chair as well.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Thursday 20 December 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

UNFCCC Conference of Parties

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): The 24th conference of the parties (COP24) to the United Nations framework convention on climate change (UNFCCC) took place in Katowice, Poland, from 2 to 15 December. I led the United Kingdom delegation, accompanied by the Minister for Asia and the Pacific, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field), and the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey). As a demonstration of the UK's action at all levels, the First Minister of Scotland and the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for the Environment also attended, as well as the Deputy Premier of the Government of the British Virgin Islands, representing the UK overseas territories.

The UK's priorities for COP24 were to accelerate the global political momentum to combat climate change by i) securing a rulebook that would enable the historic Paris agreement to be effectively implemented; and ii) engaging in a constructive dialogue on ambition (the "Talanoa dialogue") that would generate confidence and enhance action. In doing so, we were also determined to promote the UK's global climate leadership.

COP24 was an important moment, representing the culmination of three years of negotiations and following shortly after the publication of a landmark scientific report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that highlighted the severe consequences of failing to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

In the negotiations we succeeded in securing our main objectives by delivering an operational rulebook to drive genuine climate action, creating a level playing field, while allowing for flexibility and support for those countries that need it, in light of capacity. Inevitably there is still work to be done, particularly on carbon markets, but the overall picture is of a rulebook that enables the Paris agreement to be taken forward in practice, marking a move from negotiation to implementation.

The UK championed the latest climate science during COP. We played a central role in the progressive alliance of countries striving for a legal outcome that coupled robust rules with a call for more ambitious climate action—both through supporting the High Ambition Coalition's Stepping Up Climate Ambition statement and through regularly convening the Cartagena dialogue of progressive countries.

Outside the negotiations, the UK had a visible presence at COP. We celebrated one year of the powering past coal alliance (PPCA) that was launched last year. The

UK pavilion had over 50 events showcasing UK international support, domestic action, and low carbon expertise. We also made new domestic commitments, including the announcements of a clean growth grand challenge mission to establish one net-zero carbon industrial cluster by 2040 and at least one low carbon cluster by 2030. To kick-start this mission we will invest up to £170 million to develop and deploy low carbon technologies and enable infrastructure in one or more clusters, and we will also provide up to £66 million to develop new technologies and establish innovation centres to support the transformation of our foundation industries.

The UK reaffirmed our commitment to supporting climate action, highlighting recent announcements including an additional £100 million of UK climate finance for the renewable energy performance platform (REPP) to support 40 renewable energy projects in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as £106 million for green construction and £60 million to build capacity to drive clean growth and emissions reductions in key developing countries.

We were also pleased to support Poland as COP presidency in their role, both through constructive engagement on negotiations and also in their three political declarations. The Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), signed the declaration on "just transition", promoting efforts to ensure no workers or communities are left behind in the transition towards a low carbon future. The UK co-developed Poland's declaration on e-mobility (building on our successful zero emission vehicle summit in Birmingham in September), and we also supported their declaration on forestry.

We now turn our attention to 2019 and beyond, including the UN Secretary General's climate summit next September, which will be a vital step as countries look to raise their ambition ahead of 2020. COP26 in 2020 will be a pivotal moment to encourage and take stock of global ambition and prepare the ground for further action. It is for that reason that the UK expressed interest in hosting COP26, continuing to show our global leadership in climate action. However, we note the interest of other countries and will engage with them on this matter. Our priority is to ensure that the conference of the parties is a success.

[HCWS1231]

TREASURY

Finance (No. 3) Bill: EVEL

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I have today published a written submission outlining the Government's analysis of how the English votes for English laws principle relates to all Government amendments tabled for the Report stage of the Finance (No.3) Bill.

The Department's assessment is that the amendments do not change the territorial application of the Bill. The analysis holds if all the Government amendments are accepted.

I have deposited a copy of the submission in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1227]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Pay Review Body Appointment

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am pleased to announce that the Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), has appointed Vice-Admiral (Ret'd) Sir David Steel as the next ex-military member of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. His appointment will commence on 1 March 2019 and run until 28 February 2022. This appointment has been conducted in accordance with the guidance of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

[HCWS1230]

Future Nuclear Deterrent

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): On 18 May 2011, the then Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Liam Fox), made an oral statement to the House, *Official Report*, column 351, announcing the approval of the initial gate investment stage for the procurement of the successor to the Vanguard-class ballistic missile submarines. He also placed in the Library of the House a report “The United Kingdom’s Future Nuclear Deterrent: The Submarine Initial Gate Parliamentary Report”.

As confirmed in the 2015 strategic defence and security review, this Government have committed to publishing an annual report on the programme. I am today publishing the seventh report, “The United Kingdom’s Future Nuclear Deterrent: 2018 Update to Parliament”. A copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS1229]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Agriculture and Fisheries Council took place in Brussels from 17 to 19 November. The UK was represented by Lord Gardiner of Kimble, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, and Lords Minister.

On fisheries, the focus of the Council was EU quota negotiations, involving decisions on fishing opportunities for the next year for quota stocks in the North sea, Atlantic, the English channel, Irish and Celtic seas. Fishing opportunities are set under the rules of the reformed common fisheries policy, which aims to have all stocks fished at sustainable levels by 2020 at the latest.

Prior to the Council, a number of negotiations had taken place with third countries, such as EU-Norway, which set fishing opportunities for certain stocks. The EU share of these opportunities were endorsed at the Council.

This year’s discussions were challenging for all member states given scientific advice on quota, which included a recommendation of zero total allowable catch (TAC) for five key species for UK fishermen, and the full

implementation of the landing obligation from 1 Jan 2019—a requirement to cut the wasteful discarding of fish.

The agreed deal ensures that there are now workable solutions to alleviate the risk of choke closing economically important mixed fisheries while also preventing fish from being wastefully discarded unnecessarily. The agreement also includes a commitment to review scientific data as the new regulation comes into effect.

Total fishing opportunities agreed for 2019 included increased quotas for:

West of Scotland monkfish (+25%)

Western hake (+28%)

Skates and rays in the English Channel (+10%)

Limits remained the same for other stocks including Celtic sea sole and pollack— and where the science showed it was necessary, quotas were reduced for certain stocks, including herring in the Celtic sea.

Increases in quota for hake, haddock and megrim will benefit the whole of the UK. Increased quota for monkfish will provide a boost for the Scottish fleet, while Northern Ireland has benefited from an increase in Irish sea cod. Agreements on sea bass will offer welcome support to the inshore fleet in Wales.

The primary focus for agriculture was a debate on the post-2020 CAP reform package, including three legislative proposals: the first on CAP strategic plans; the second on financing, management and monitoring of the CAP; and the third on common market organisation (CMO) of agricultural products. The Commission welcomed engagement from member states and outlined some of the areas to be considered, including the budget and the performance monitoring system. In the discussion that followed, member states stressed the importance of simplification and shared their views on convergence and the need for a transition period. Under the same item, Croatia also gave an update on its inter-parliamentary conference on the future of food and farming.

The Commission also informed Council about the new bio-economy strategy and mentioned initiatives by member states, such as the BIOEAST conference, which Hungary gave an update on under the same item. The UK intervened to welcome the aims of the new strategy and encourage co-operation between member states.

Six other items were discussed separately under “any other business”:

The Commission set out its proposal to amend the present CAP legislation for payments in 2019-20, with the UK intervening in support and to call for additional flexibility.

Italy gave an update on forest damage.

The Commission informed Council about actions taken following the 2017 Fipronil eggs contamination incident.

The presidency discussed the progress of legislative files, namely unfair trading practices, spirit drinks, and fertilisers.

Poland gave a presentation on the situation in the pigmeat market situation.

The presidency and Commission updated Council on the plant proteins conference held in Vienna in November.

[HCWS1222]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Agreements with Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The UK has reached agreement with Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway (the “EEA EFTA states”), and separately with Switzerland, to resolve the issues arising with those states from the UK’s exit from the European Union. The Government have been clear that their first priority as part of securing a smooth and orderly exit from the EU was to provide certainty for citizens. As such, we announced in February that we were seeking agreements with these countries, similar to the UK’s withdrawal agreement with the EU.

The EEA EFTA states participate in the single market and other EU-led initiatives. As a result, the agreement with them also addresses a small number of the other separation issues that we have agreed with the EU in the withdrawal agreement.

The EEA EFTA agreement will cover:

Citizens’ rights. As with part two of the withdrawal agreement, the agreement ensures that citizens falling within scope will have broadly the same entitlements to work, study and access public services and benefits as now.

Goods on the market, public procurement, intellectual property, and data protection. Provisions in this agreement broadly mirror the arrangements set out in the withdrawal agreement. Where necessary, small technical adaptations have been made, in line with existing technical differences between EU law and the EEA agreement.

Ongoing judicial proceedings. This will allow UK lawyers to continue to appear before the EFTA court in cases which are ongoing at the point of exit.

Police and criminal justice. These provisions broadly mirror the arrangements set out in the withdrawal agreement, but for the smaller subset of police and criminal justice matters in which Norway and Iceland participate.

Governance arrangements. As for EU citizens under the withdrawal agreement, EEA EFTA citizens will be covered by the Independent Monitoring Authority for the Citizens’ Rights Agreements (IMA). A joint committee consisting of the UK and the EEA EFTA states will be established to oversee this agreement.

The agreement reached with the Swiss Confederation will lay out the arrangements for citizens when the current EU-Swiss free movement of persons agreement ceases to apply between the UK and Switzerland. This supports the ending of free movement after we leave the EU. The terms of this agreement protect the rights of Swiss citizens in the UK and UK nationals in Switzerland, ensuring that they can continue to contribute to their communities and live their lives broadly as they do now.

Together, these agreements will protect over 50,000 UK citizens living in these countries and nearly 30,000 citizens from these countries in the UK.

It is also the Government’s intention that the rights of these citizens would be protected in the event of a no-deal outcome with the EU. The citizens’ rights agreement with Switzerland already addresses this. We are discussing a separate citizens’ rights agreement with the EEA EFTA states for a no-deal scenario.

I will be depositing these agreements and explainers today in the Libraries of both Houses. The Government intend to sign both agreements before exit day and legislate for them through the EU (Withdrawal Agreement)

Bill. Both agreements are subject to ratification processes in each of the relevant states, including the provisions of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act (CRaG) 2010 in the UK.

[HCWS1220]

General Affairs Council 11 December

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting on 11 December in Brussels. A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union’s website at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2018/12/11/>

Multiannual financial framework 2021-27

The Council held a policy debate on the multiannual financial framework (MFF) for 2021-27. Ministers had a constructive exchange of views on the main political priorities, setting out the implications of the current proposals for their citizens and on their national budgets, ahead of the first substantial debate on the MFF at the December European Council.

Eighteen-month programme of the Council

Ministers endorsed the 18-month work programme of the Council of the European Union. The programme was prepared by the incoming trio of the presidencies of Romania, Finland and Croatia and the High Representative, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Council. The future Romanian presidency presented the trio’s programme of activities from 1 January 2019 to 30 June 2020. The three main areas of focus for the trio are: unity, delivery and building a reinforced narrative on the future of the EU.

Preparation of the European Council on 13 and 14 December 2018 and European Council follow-up

The Council discussed preparations and draft conclusions for the December European Council. These included the next MFF, the single market, migration and external relations. As part of the discussions on external relations, Ministers considered the Commission’s disinformation action plan, which seeks to protect the European elections in May and other national elections. I intervened to welcome in broad terms the joint report on disinformation, and to call for follow-up actions to evaluate the EU’s response.

On migration, I underlined the importance of the conclusions in recognising continued efforts to tackle people smugglers and to intensify third country co-operation. I highlighted the future EU/League of Arab States summit as an excellent opportunity to improve co-operation with a strategic partner.

Rule of law in Poland—article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

The Council held a hearing under article 7(1) treaty on European Union (TEU) on the rule of law in Poland. The Commission updated Ministers on the situation regarding the rule of law in Poland. In response, Poland provided Ministers with a presentation on the evolution of its judicial reforms. The Council is expected to return to this matter at a future meeting.

Values of the Union—Hungary | article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

Ministers exchanged views on the procedure following the European Parliament’s triggering of the article 7(1) TEU procedure for Hungary. As part of this procedure, Hungary provided the Council with its written contribution on the issues raised by the Parliament. The Commission has provided a factual contribution on pending infringement procedures against Hungary.

European semester 2019—annual growth survey

The Commission presented the results from the annual growth survey and noted that the EU economy was entering its sixth year of uninterrupted growth. This prosperity was attributed to individual member state and EU actions, with the desire to see greater cohesion between funding and EU economic policy aims in the future.

EU budget for 2019

The Council endorsed the agreement reached with the European Parliament on the EU budget for 2019. The total commitments are set at €165.8 billion, which is an increase of 3.2% compared with 2018. Payments amount to €148.2 billion, 2.4% more than in 2018.

[HCWS1228]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**Public Health Grant**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Today I am publishing the public health allocations to local authorities in England for 2019-20, based on the 2015 spending review profile.

Through the public health grant and the pilot of 100% retained business rate funding for local authorities in Greater Manchester, we are spending £3.134 billion on public health in 2019-20. We will be spending in excess of £16 billion on public health over the five years of the 2015 spending review until 2020, in addition to what the NHS spends on preventative interventions such as immunisation and screening.

The 2019-20 grant will continue to be subject to conditions, including a ring-fence requiring local authorities to use the grant exclusively for public health activity.

Full details of the public health grants to local authorities can be found on gov.uk and have been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. This information will be communicated to local authorities in a local authority circular.

[HCWS1221]

HOME DEPARTMENT**Immigration: Children**

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government remain committed to relocating the specified number of 480 unaccompanied children to the United Kingdom under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016, commonly known as the “Dubs amendment”. The first 220 of those children arrived under exceptional circumstances as part of the UK’s comprehensive support to the clearance of the Calais camp from October 2016. During this time, this Government took unprecedented action to remove vulnerable children from a dangerous situation where they were at risk of violence and abuse.

Following discussion with delivery partners, we have decided to remove the date criterion for when children had to have arrived in Europe to qualify for transfer to the UK. Delivering section 67 in a safe way, which respects individual states’ national laws and the best interests of children, remains a priority for the Government.

This decision means that participating states—France, Greece and Italy—will now be able to refer the most vulnerable children, regardless of when they arrived

into Europe. To be eligible for the scheme, it must be in the child’s best interests to come to the UK, rather than to remain in their current host country, be transferred to another EU member state or to be reunited with family outside of Europe. We continue to ask participating states to prioritise unaccompanied children who are most likely to be granted refugee status and/or are the most vulnerable.

It is this Government’s hope that removing the date criterion will speed up transfers and will enable participating states to more easily identify children for transfer as soon as possible. We are grateful for the ongoing support to meet this commitment from the Governments of participating states, delivery partners and UK local authorities. Ensuring the safe relocation of children under the scheme as soon as possible is dependent on appropriate care placements being available for children once they arrive in the UK. The Home Office continues to work closely with local authorities across the UK to place children as quickly as possible and in a location where their individual care needs can be met.

[HCWS1255]

EU Settlement Scheme

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Secretary of State for the Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) is today laying before Parliament a statement of changes in immigration rules [HC 1849], copies of which are available in the Vote Office. The changes implement the next phase of the roll-out of the EU settlement scheme, for resident EU citizens and their family members to obtain UK immigration status. The immigration rules for the scheme came into force on 28 August 2018, for the purposes of an initial private beta test phase, involving 12 NHS trusts and three universities in north-west England. This successfully proved some key elements of the scheme in a live environment, and we published a report on its findings on 31 October 2018.

A second, expanded private beta phase began from 1 November 2018 and will end on 21 December 2018. This has tested the online application process as an integrated, end-to-end process. It has been available, on a voluntary basis, to staff in the higher education, health and social care sectors across the UK, and to some vulnerable individuals, being supported by a small number of local authorities and community groups, in order to test the operation of the scheme for those with support needs.

We will publish a full report on the second private beta phase in January 2019. However, the initial findings from this phase have been positive. By 13 December 2018, more than 15,500 applications had been made and more than 12,400 of these had been concluded, enabling the new system and applicant interaction with it to be tested at scale: 71% of the concluded applications were granted settled status, with the rest granted pre-settled status, and many received their decision within 24 hours; 77% of applicants who provided feedback said that they found the online application process easy, or fairly easy, to complete. More than 90% of applicants successfully used the identity verification app to prove their identity remotely, with the rest required to submit their identity document by post.

We have also learned lessons from this second private beta phase which have enabled further improvements to be made. These include improved functionality in respect of how an applicant verifies their email address; an increase in the size of files an applicant can upload, should they need to provide supporting evidence; and updates to the caseworking system.

In light of the successful testing of the online application process during the private beta phases, we have decided to proceed, as planned, with the start of the wider public implementation of the EU settlement scheme from 21 January 2019. From that date, the scheme will be available to resident EU citizens (and their EU citizen family members) with a valid passport, and to their non-EU citizen family members holding a valid biometric residence card, so that they can prove their identity remotely using the identity verification app, which is an integrated part of the online application process.

We currently anticipate that the further implementation of the EU settlement scheme will be secured through further immigration rules changes to be laid before Parliament in early March 2019, so that the scheme will be fully open by 30 March 2019.

[HCWS1226]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Future Leadership of UNAIDS

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Since the beginning of 2018, the UNAIDS Secretariat has been in the spotlight due to allegations of harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying and abuse of power within the organisation. As Chair of the UNAIDS programme co-ordinating board (PCB), the UK played a key role in establishing an independent expert panel (IEP) on prevention and response to harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying and abuse of power. The resulting report published on 7 December, provides important recommendations to enable the UNAIDS Secretariat, and its leadership, to take action to tackle these issues, ensuring zero tolerance within the organisation.

The IEP report is highly critical of the UNAIDS Secretariat and its senior leadership. Like others, the UK is very concerned about these findings. As Chair we have worked with the board to ensure a robust response to the IEP report's findings, to allow these critical issues to be addressed swiftly and comprehensively.

The UK recognises the critical role that UNAIDS plays in the global AIDS response. However, the UK Government have been very clear that we expect all the organisations we work with to operate to the highest standards on the issue of harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying and abuse of power.

The IEP made it clear in their report that addressing these issues within the UNAIDS Secretariat requires new leadership. While the UK welcomes the decision by the PCB to initiate the process for the recruitment of a new executive director immediately, it is also vital to signal a strong response on these critical issues within and beyond the organisation. For this reason, the UK expects the current executive director to step down.

[HCWS1223]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Personal Independence Payment

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I would like to update the House on the improvements my Department is making in personal independence payment (PIP). The guidance available to PIP case managers was updated in August 2018 to ensure those who are awarded the highest level of support whose needs are unlikely to improve or will deteriorate receive an ongoing award with a light-touch review at the 10-year point. Following on from the introduction of that guidance in August, we have now commenced activity to review the claims of existing claimants on the top level of support to identify those individuals who, in light of the new guidance, should be receiving an ongoing award. This is still in the early stages and being dealt with in date order, prioritising claimants whose awards are coming up for an award review, but commencing this activity is a really important step to reducing the number of individuals having to undergo an unnecessary award review where their needs are only likely to deteriorate.

A copy of the guidance for case managers has been placed in the House of Commons Library and is available at: http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2018-1113/UIN_174062_-_Award_period_guidance_10.10.18.pdf.

The light-touch review process and guidance itself has not yet been developed, but we aim to do so well in advance of the first such reviews taking place. We intend to consult with stakeholders as part of that process.

My written statement of 25 June 2018 (HCWS793) informed the House that my Department had begun an exercise to identify anyone who may be entitled to more support under PIP as a result of the MH and RJ decisions of the upper tribunal. The MH decision broadened the interpretation about how symptoms of overwhelming psychological distress should be assessed for the purpose of mobility activity 1 in PIP. The RJ decision concerned how the Department considers a claimant to be carrying out an activity safely and whether they need supervision to do so. I committed to regularly updating the House of developments regarding this administrative exercise.

The Department has today published an ad hoc release of management information on the administrative exercise: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/dwp-ad-hoc-analyses#2018>.

As at 23 November 2018, 140,000 cases had been cleared, of which 1,000 had been paid arrears. The average payment made is approximately £4,500. We are monitoring the numbers of, and reasons for, revised awards closely and making regular quality checks in order to ensure that our decision making is accurate and fair.

Given the complexity of the exercise we have started at a relatively small scale to test our processes and ensure they are effective before ramping up. At the same time we have recruited over 250 additional staff to increase resources available for this exercise, with more to follow over the coming months.

In addition, we are redirecting resource from other areas of PIP. This means the administrative exercise will conclude in 2020. Some DLA to PIP reassessments that would have taken place in 2019-20 will move to the following year. I believe that prioritising cases where claimants are entitled to arrears is the correct approach.

Further information on how the administrative exercise is being undertaken is set out in an updated frequently asked questions. I will deposit a copy of this document in the Library of the House.

Furthermore, I would like to inform the House that the Department implemented another upper tribunal decision on 17 December and will commence a review exercise in the new year.

This exercise regards the decision in OM which was handed down on November 2017. This decision refers to DLA claimants transferring to PIP, who failed to

attend or participate in their PIP consultations, and who had their DLA terminated as a result, but where, subsequently, DWP decision makers or tribunals have decided the claimant had a “good reason” for not attending or participating. The decision states that in these instances claimants’ DLA awards should be reinstated, until a final decision on their PIP claim, and back paid, as necessary. We accept that the same approach applies where claimants who failed to provide information or evidence were later found to have “good reason” for the failure to comply.

The Department has been working at pace and taking the necessary steps required to implement the ruling. We expect around 4,600 people to gain as a result of this review exercise, all claimants who benefit from the upper tribunal decision will be notified by the Department.

[HCWS1224]

Petition

Thursday 20 December 2018

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

European Baccalaureate Qualification

The petition of teachers at, parents of pupils at, or friends of the Europa School Culham, Oxfordshire,

Declares that in relation to the Europa School, the school currently offers children who attend the school a final qualification of the European Baccalaureate (EB). The ability of the school to offer this qualification has been extended by the Department of Education to 2021. However, uncertainty over the school's ability to offer the qualification after 2021 is causing difficulties for students and much uncertainty.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to ask the Department of Education to allow the Europa School in Culham, Oxfordshire, to offer to its students from 2021 the European Baccalaureate as an equivalent to A levels regardless of the status of the UK in respect of its membership of the European Union.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John Howell, *Official Report*, 24 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 400.]

[P002276]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

We recognise that Europa School UK is currently facing a period of uncertainty in light of ongoing discussions with the European Schools Board of Governors about the ability of the school to offer the European

Baccalaureate once the UK leaves the EU in March 2019. We thank Europa School for continuing to support its students through this time and were very pleased to hear of the 100% pass rate for students who completed the European Baccalaureate in 2018.

Officials from the Regional Schools Commissioner's Office, International Education Division and Education and Skills Funding Agency are working with the school to support their future planning.

The Government were successful in securing a provision in the Withdrawal Agreement, as agreed by the EU Member States on 25 November, that allows for Europa School's continued accreditation as a European School until the end of August 2021. This is subject to renewal of accreditation by the European Schools Board of Governors. We recognise that Europa's preference would be to continue to deliver the European Baccalaureate post 2021.

Beyond the terms set out in the Withdrawal Agreement, accreditation to deliver the European Baccalaureate is only available to schools located in an EU Member State. The Government are, therefore, not in a position to allow Europa School to offer to its students, from 2021, the European Baccalaureate as an equivalent to A levels, regardless of the status of the UK in respect of its membership of the EU. This would be dependent on a decision by the European Union Member States and Commission, through the European Schools Board of Governors, to change their rules on accredited schools. At present that seems highly unlikely.

As a responsible Government, we urge the school to put in place plans to implement an alternative curriculum. We welcome the fact that the school has put in an application to be able to deliver the International Baccalaureate qualification from September 2020. This qualification would allow the school to retain its advanced language teaching and a unique offer of education to pupils.

We appreciate the difficult position the school finds itself in and the Department is committed to ensuring it will support the school with their plans by maintaining regular contact and by continuing to work with the school.

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 20 December 2018

EDUCATION STEM Subjects

The following is an extract from questions to the Secretary of State for Education on 17 December 2018.

Anne Milton: The Government's industrial strategy specifically targets STEM shortage skills. Between 2012 and 2018, entries to A-level maths rose by 25%. It is now the most popular A-level. Exam entries for GCSE computer science have increased from 2013, when it was first examined, from just over 4,000 to more than 70,000 in 2018. That is in part down to the £7.2 million funding that is going into maths hubs. A number of programmes have given STEM a real drive in schools and further education.

Letter of correction from the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills:

Errors have been identified in my response.

The correction information should have been:

Anne Milton: The Government's industrial strategy specifically targets STEM shortage skills. Between **2010 and 2018**, entries to A-level maths rose by 25%. It is now the most popular A-level. Exam entries for GCSE computer science have increased from 2013, when it was first examined, from just over 4,000 to more than 70,000 in 2018. **£7.2 million of funding annually is going into maths hubs.** A number of programmes have given STEM a real drive in schools and further education.

The following is a second extract from questions to the Secretary of State for Education on 17 December 2018.

Anne Milton: For instance, since 2010 we have seen 26% more women entering STEM A-levels. However, we recognise that the take-up for physics is notably low and we have put money into the Stimulating Physics Network. I praise hon. Members who have taken part in the Year of Engineering. We know that at primary school girls and boys have similar levels of interest in STEM subjects, but that that tails off quite substantially at secondary school. We are doing research to understand that better. [*Official Report, 17 December 2018, Vol. 651, c. 512.*]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills:

Errors have been identified in my response.

The correction information should have been:

Anne Milton: For instance, since 2010 we have seen 26% more women **entering STEM A-levels in England.** However, we recognise that the take-up for physics is notably low and we have put money into the Stimulating Physics Network. I praise hon. Members who have taken part in the Year of Engineering. **We know that girls' interest in STEM subjects tails off quite substantially** at secondary school. We are doing research to understand that better.

Cost of Living: Higher Education

The following is an extract from Education questions on 17 December 2018.

Afzal Khan: According to a recent report in the *Huffington Post*, the living costs of students in Manchester has rocketed by 37% in the last 10 years. Cost should not be a barrier to accessing the country's best universities, such as the University of Manchester. What is the Minister doing to encourage universities to keep students' costs affordable?

Chris Skidmore: Students who started their courses in the current academic year have had access to the highest ever funding levels to support their living costs. We now have a system of support that targets those from the lowest-income families, who need it the most. A record number of 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds went to university this year, 68% more than in 2009. [*Official Report, 17 December 2018, Vol. 651, c. 519.*]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan).

The correct response should have been:

Chris Skidmore: Students who started their courses in the current academic year have had access to the highest ever funding levels to support their living costs. We now have a system of support that targets those from the lowest-income families, who need it the most. A record **rate** of 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds went to university this year, **52%** more than in 2009.

TREASURY

ONS Decisions: Student Loans

The following is an extract from an Urgent Question on ONS Decisions: Student Loans on 18 December 2018.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): In the short term, will the Treasury review the inflation-busting 6.3% rate, and in the longer term will the Government admit that feeble wage growth is at the bottom of this problem?

Elizabeth Truss: That is a slightly strange question from the hon. Lady, given we have just seen the highest **real** wage growth for 10 years coming through our economy.

[*Official Report, 18 December 2018, Vol. 651, c. 652.*]

Letter of correction from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West).

The correct response should have been:

Elizabeth Truss: That is a slightly strange question from the hon. Lady, given we have just seen the highest wage growth for 10 years coming through our economy.

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**not later than
Thursday 27 December 2018**

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