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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Wednesday 6 February 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

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

Public Services Delivery: Technology

1. **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage the use of innovative technologies to improve the delivery of public services. [909024]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): Last month I announced five new public sector challenges, to be funded from the £20 million GovTech innovation fund. In the spring we will publish a strategy for the use of innovation in public services.

Chris Green: Can my hon. Friend confirm that the GovTech fund is being used to identify technologies with the potential to improve medical care and deliver better services at a lower cost?

Oliver Dowden: I am delighted to confirm that to my hon. Friend. There is huge potential here for improvement in public services. So far the GovTech Catalyst has funded two health-related challenges: the first seeks to improve the medication pathway for people entering custody, and the second will assess how machine learning could improve prediction and provision in relation to adult social care.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): At the weekend, 70 Labour MPs and Members of the European Parliament signed my letter to the Government asking them to review the operation of the EU settled status app for EU citizens, which is currently available only on Android phones and not on iPhones. What advice does the Cabinet Office give other Departments to ensure that no digital discrimination is embedded in the new technologies that the Government are rolling out?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the question of the digital verification system. It is perfectly possible to subscribe to it with any phone. The issue relates to the document verification, which can be carried out in respect of Android phones but not, currently, in respect of Apple phones. However, the Home Office is working on that as we speak.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I know the Minister will be aware that delivering public services in rural areas is particularly challenging. Will he consider how he could use tech and innovation to facilitate better public services in areas such as those that I represent?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the great aspects of the GovTech challenge fund is that it is often used in rural areas. In rural Scotland, for example, we are looking into how it could be used to help to ensure that the environment is properly managed, and we are working on other similar schemes.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Time and again, Mr Speaker, you have heard me raise the issue of deeply unsatisfactory broadband coverage in my constituency, which greatly impairs the delivery of vital public services. Responding to a question that I asked not long ago, the Prime Minister mentioned the shared prosperity fund. Might that fund be used to tackle the problem of very poor broadband coverage? If the Minister cannot give me an answer now, will he agree to meet me to discuss the issue?

Oliver Dowden: I am always happy to meet all Members, and I have heard the hon. Gentleman's representation in respect of the shared prosperity fund. Our industrial strategy has already committed us to spending more than £1 billion on digital infrastructure, including £176 million on 5G and £200 million on broadband for local areas. There is, I know, an issue with the Scottish National party Government getting the money to the frontline, which is why my right hon. Friend the Culture Secretary has announced that in future, money will go directly to councils.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): When it comes to the delivery of technology with the use of public money, we know whose side the Government are on: their mates in the megafirms. Their spending on Cloud provision with just one company, Amazon Web Services, has increased by 8,000% since 2015. The next time the Minister signs off another multimillion-pound tech contract, will he perhaps spare a thought for one of the UK's incredible small and medium-sized enterprises?

Oliver Dowden: The Government are committed to ensuring that SMEs win their fair share of Government contracts. Unlike the Labour Government, this Government have set the target of devoting a third of all spending to SMEs. However, the hon. Lady rightly raised the issue of Amazon Web Services. Let us look at the figures. AWS is a G-Cloud supplier. A total of £3.2 billion has been spent on G-Cloud. How much has been spent on AWS? Just £70 million, which amounts to less than 2.2% of total spending.

Public Sector Procurement

2. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on its proposed changes to public sector procurement. [909025]

Oliver Dowden: We are determined to deliver value for money for taxpayers through better procurement, and to support a healthy and diverse supply market. We recently announced measures including simplifying

procurement processes, taking account of social value when awarding contracts, and excluding large suppliers from Government contracts if they cannot demonstrate prompt payment.

Mohammad Yasin: I thank the Minister for his answer. The number of businesses receiving late payments from the Cabinet Office has nearly tripled in the past two years. Does the Minister agree that this makes a mockery of the Government's plans to crack down on public sector suppliers who pay late?

Oliver Dowden: Prompt payment is important to all businesses, particularly small businesses. That is why we have set a target for 90% of undisputed invoices from small and medium-sized enterprises to be paid within five days. We are making good progress, and six Departments are already exceeding that target. I know that there has been an issue in respect of the Cabinet Office, but I can give the hon. Gentleman the latest figures, from December, which show that 95% of invoices are now meeting the 30-day target and that 82% are meeting the five-day target.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Will the Minister join me in welcoming moves to roll over the WTO Agreement on Government Procurement—the GPA—and in welcoming the access that that would give to UK companies competing abroad and the opening up of our own markets to foreign competitors?

Oliver Dowden: I know that my right hon. Friend has a great deal of experience in this area, and he is absolutely right to highlight the importance of the GPA. I am pleased that we have made progress and reached agreement in principle for the United Kingdom to join the GPA, and I am confident that we will have that in place shortly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is not the Minister guilty of a bit of jiggery-pokery? [Hon. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] The fact of the matter is that if the Government looked at good examples such as Huddersfield University and Kirklees Council, they would see the way in which they emphasise local and regional procurement, which brings in jobs and wealth and retains them in our communities. Why do this Government not do the same?

Oliver Dowden: We are absolutely committed to ensuring that we get the very best suppliers, which is why we have introduced a balanced scorecard approach. That allows suppliers to take into account a wide range of factors, including environmental factors and factors relating to the quality of produce. Those are the sort of reforms that this Government are committed to introducing.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The Government give a very welcome emphasis to the employing of small and medium-sized enterprises in Government contracts, and that is very good stuff, but does the Minister not agree that in reality, Government procurement processes are so complex, so difficult, so massive and so expensive that it is actually companies such as the defence primes that get the contracts and then hammer down the prices

they pay to their subcontractors? How can we find better ways to ensure that SMEs win some of those valuable contracts?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the issue of SMEs winning contracts. This is why we have abolished complex pre-qualification questionnaires on small-value contracts, for example, and in November I announced that if major strategic suppliers were not paying their small providers on time, they could face being excluded from Government contracts.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I am aware that current statute means that wage rates cannot be mandated, but it is possible to use the procurement process to encourage employers to consider paying the real living wage in the context of fair work policies. Indeed, that is the process undertaken by the Scottish Government. Will the Minister consider following Scotland's lead and using procurement to ensure that employers pay the real living wage?

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I hope that he will acknowledge the progress that this Government have made in introducing a national living wage for the first time. The effect of that national living wage, which will rise by almost 5% this April, is that an average person working full time on the national living wage will be almost £3,000 a year better off—and that is not counting the massive increase in the personal allowance that also cuts their taxes.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Of course, it is not a living wage; it is just a minimum wage re-badged.

The Government have repeatedly insisted that Interserve's "current intentions are a matter for the company itself."

However, it emerged last night that Cabinet Office officials were playing an active role in talks to negotiate a rescue package. It seems that the Government cannot make up their mind whether they have a responsibility to intervene and protect public services and jobs or whether to let the market decide, so which is it?

Oliver Dowden: The Government are absolutely clear that their principal task is to ensure the continued delivery of public services, and that is what we have ensured in respect of our strategic suppliers. The hon. Gentleman raises the case of Interserve. I welcome this morning's announcement, which I am sure he has seen, which demonstrates that it is making good progress towards refinancing, but we are clear that that is a matter between the lenders to that company and the company itself. The Government are not a party to those negotiations.

Information Law

3. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his Department's policies of the Information Commissioner's January 2019 report, "Outsourcing oversight? The case for reforming access to information law". [909026]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The Government are fully committed to transparency and openness across the public sector and have already introduced a range of measures to increase transparency in contracts. That means that we are publishing more

data than ever before to the benefit of taxpayers. I am grateful for the Information Commissioner's report, which we will consider carefully, but we have no plans at present to legislate further in this area.

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply but, as the Information Commissioner tells us, the Government spend £284 billion a year on external suppliers that are currently beyond the scope of freedom of information laws. The Information Commissioner tells us that that would have made a difference at both Grenfell and Carillion, so why will the Government not commit to real transparency and adopt the Information Commissioner's recommendations?

Chloe Smith: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster set out an important package of measures last year to improve transparency in contracting. However, I do not think there is evidence that the collapse of Carillion could have been anticipated by the reforms in the report. Indeed, the relevant Select Committees said that Carillion's directors were responsible, not the Government.

Public Life: Intimidation

4. **Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of intimidation faced by those in public life. [909027]

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): The increasing prevalence of intimidation in public life can seriously damage our democracy, which is why the Government have consulted on a new electoral offence of intimidating candidates and campaigners. We are currently analysing the contributions to the consultation, with a response due to be published soon.

Dr Offord: What progress is the Department making with online platform providers to ensure that they develop and implement automated techniques for content removal and address take-down times for offensive material?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point that he has made strongly before, which is to his huge credit. We have been clear that much more needs to be done to tackle online harm. Too often, online behaviour fails to meet acceptable standards, with many users powerless to address such issues. A joint Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Home Office White Paper is expected to be published in the near future and will set out legislative and non-legislative measures detailing how we can tackle online harm and set clear responsibilities for tech companies to keep UK citizens safe. We want to ensure that we do that in a fair and proper way.

10. [909033] **Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Are the Government looking at the effects of social media intimidation on our democracy? A wide number of pieces on social media, involving both misuse of data and funding of unclear origin, are intimidating and influencing political debate in this country.

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady makes a good point. We are looking at exactly that, because we must ensure that people have a clear view of what is true, fair and appropriate online.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Someone came to my surgery this week and clearly made an implied threat to me, a number of Members of this House and a former Prime Minister. However, if I report any of that, I am breaching the confidentiality of the person who came to see me, so I want to know the Minister's advice.

Brandon Lewis: I do not think that my hon. Friend would have been breaching confidentiality, because if such conversations are happening, that represents a threat that he would be well within his rights to report to the police.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I have been subjected to online intimidation. Does the Minister agree that we need to drive home the message that the secrecy of the iPhone or keyboard is not protection enough for people to spew vile, intimidatory statements and messages to anybody in public life?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. All of us in public life should call out such things when we see them. We must be clear about what is unacceptable and report it to the authorities where appropriate, so that people feel able to engage online in a proper and fair way without intimidation or abuse.

Tiers of Government: Collaboration

5. **Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): What steps he has taken to review how different tiers of Government work together. [909028]

9. **Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): What steps he has taken to review how different tiers of Government work together. [909032]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): We are committed to working productively with all levels of government, including local authorities, directly elected Mayors and devolved Administrations across the UK. We will also work closely with the devolved Administrations to review the formal structure of inter-governmental relations.

Mr Clarke: People across the Tees Valley are delighted at the devolution model led by Ben Houchen, our excellent Conservative Mayor. Ben is delivering on his manifesto promises, which included rescuing Teesside airport and leading the regeneration of the steelworks. Will my right hon. Friend commit the Government to maintaining their excellent record of support for Ben's work in getting Teesside on the front foot again?

Mr Lidington: I pay tribute to the leadership that Ben Houchen and his colleagues on the Tees Valley combined authority have shown. They have very ambitious plans, and we look forward to continuing our joint working with them on a local industrial strategy to drive productivity, growth and employment in the Teesside region.

Paul Girvan: In light of there being no Executive in Northern Ireland, what measures are being taken to ensure services can be delivered for Northern Ireland?

Especially within the public sector, we have had difficulty in getting decisions across the line. We need ministerial intervention.

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Gentleman knows, Parliament agreed to change the law late last year to give Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office greater powers in giving directions to the Northern Ireland civil service, but the answer is for the political parties in Northern Ireland to come together so that we can see the Executive and the Assembly restored. That is the way to give effective representation for effective decisions to be taken.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that there is no formal machinery for the Parliaments of the United Kingdom to work together and to scrutinise the work of the Joint Ministerial Committee and the Executive functions that work together. The Interparliamentary Forum on Brexit again met in January and called for this. Will he support this Parliament and provide it with the necessary resources so we can institute proper interparliamentary machinery in the United Kingdom?

Mr Lidington: We are very open to proposals from my hon. Friend's Committee and from others in this House and the House of Lords. We are working together with the devolved Parliaments and Assemblies. If Parliament will lead, the Government will support it.

7. [909030] **Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): One way in which the Government are coming together across Departments is through the Leader of the House's working group on the early years, which is supported by the right hon. Gentleman's Department. Will he ensure that that review remains ambitious and radical in its proposals and does not become a victim of departmental-itis?

Mr Lidington: Having spoken to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House about this on a number of occasions, I do not think anybody can doubt her determination to ensure that this issue is given proper priority. I expect proposals from that group later this year.

Devolution

6. **Bill Grant** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of power to local authorities. [909029]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The Smith Commission was clear that the Scottish Government should work with the Scottish Parliament, civic Scotland and local authorities to develop ways in which greater devolution within Scotland could be provided.

Bill Grant: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. Does he agree that local authorities are best placed to deliver local services, rather than taking a centralised approach?

Mr Lidington: I think that that is right. For example, it will be very important to involve local authorities in my hon. Friend's constituency and in neighbouring constituencies in taking forward our ambitious proposals for an Ayrshire growth deal.

Voter ID Pilot Schemes

8. **Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): Whether his Department plans to conduct further voter ID pilots; and if he will make a statement. [909031]

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

Mr Evans: I know different local authorities are using different methods as to what constitutes ID, but does the Minister believe enough progress will be made so that, should this Parliament go the full five years, we will have voter ID available at the next general election?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I do. I am grateful to the authorities that are piloting voter ID this year. Their experience will help us to formulate the right policy to roll it out nationally.

Mr Speaker: Let me say to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) that the Cumbrian steak and kidney pie, the merits of which he commended to me, was of the highest quality.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Mr Speaker, I am incredibly grateful to you for those kind words and for coming along to Cumbria Day.

Is the Minister aware that voters in my constituency, the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales cannot vote at all on planning and housing issues that affect them? What steps will she take to bring in democracy for those parts of our country that are under the aegis of a national park, which are not directly elected?

Chloe Smith: I am somewhat familiar with the issue because of my proximity to the Broads Authority in my constituency, but I suspect this question may be for a colleague to answer and I will ask them to do so.

Topical Questions

T1. [909037] **Sir Mark Hendrick** (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Last week, I announced new measures, as part of the follow-up action to the Government's racial disparity audit, to improve outcomes for ethnic minority students in higher education; to ensure league tables reflect performance in addressing inequalities; and to encourage higher education providers to make their workforces more diverse.

Sir Mark Hendrick: Some 16% of the adult population of this country has some form of disability, yet when I look around this House, I see very few Members with a disability. When are we going to see an effective Access

to Elected Office Fund? We need a Parliament that is representative of the public it serves. When are we going to be like that?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):

I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman raises this issue. He is right to say that we need to raise that level of participation. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities is working on a fund that will help that to happen. Furthermore, a statutory instrument will be before the House next Monday that will help with this by addressing election expenses.

T7. [909043] **James Cleverly** (Braintree) (Con): Members discharge their duties in a variety of ways, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is not possible to discharge them properly from inside a prison cell? When will the hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) do the right thing, stand down and give the people of that part of the country the representation they deserve?

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend makes a fair point, and it comes down to what the people of Peterborough need: a hard-working and present local MP. Of course we have passed legislation in this place to enable recall. I suspect that may be used in this case, but I hope it will happen promptly, for the sake of the people of Peterborough.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Let us consider these figures: 25,342 and 21,900. Those were the number of voters who cast their votes for me and for the Minister to serve as elected parliamentarians, yet just 100-odd votes secured a win in the most recent hereditary peer by-election in the other place. The winner was eligible to stand because his great-grandad's cousin's dad's fourth cousin's dad's cousin's great-great-great grandad was made a Lord by Charles I in 1628. What progress is the Minister making on reform of the other place?

Chloe Smith: May I first welcome the hon. Lady back to the Dispatch Box? It is a pleasure to see her here again. Two points need to be made: first, the legislation she cites was that of her own party; and, secondly, reform of the House of Lords is not a priority for this Government. We have been clear on that matter and I can be so again today.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): What conversations is the Department having with local authorities in Scotland and the Scottish Government about relocating civil service jobs north of the border, specifically in areas such as international trade?

Mr Lidington: The Government have a policy of seeking to relocate Government offices and agencies outside London wherever possible. We are keen to work with Scottish local authorities, as well as local authorities from all around the United Kingdom, to secure that objective.

T2. [909038] **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy reported last year that it was concerned that

“the current complex arrangements for ministerial responsibility mean that day-to-day oversight of cross-government efforts is, in reality, led by officials, with Ministers only occasionally ‘checking in’.”

Do the Government have a grip on cyber-security?

Mr Lidington: Yes. It is right that different elements of cyber-security report in to different Departments. For example, where this relates to an offensive cyber-capability, as part of our defences, that is rightly part of the Ministry of Defence's responsibility. The relevant Ministers do co-operate regularly, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that this all reports back to the National Security Council where the relevant Cabinet Ministers take the decisions.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): On the inter-ministerial early years working group, which is an excellent initiative, is the Minister aware that the cost of child neglect is estimated at some £15 billion per year? So when negotiating with the Treasury, will he be mindful that funding for this is not only the best way of giving kids the best start in life, but a good way of saving money?

Mr Lidington: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will be very glad of my hon. Friend's support.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What with the £1 billion-plus of Northern Ireland contributions secured by the Democratic Unionist party, the knighthoods for the European Research Group, and now the cash-for-votes inducements that we hear are being offered to MPs, are the Government not a bit worried about sailing dangerously close to the wind of the Labour-introduced Bribery Act 2010? Will the Minister reaffirm that no votes in this place should be for sale? Especially not mine; I have not been offered anything.

Mr Lidington: I am deeply shocked that the hon. Lady has so little confidence in her own colleagues as to think that they would be capable of that.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Some of my most engaged constituents are expats who currently reside in France or Spain. Does the Minister agree that it is unfair and undemocratic to deny these British citizens the right to vote after an arbitrary 15 years?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I do, which is why we support the private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies), which will redress that injustice and deliver votes for life.

T4. [909040] **Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): Northern Ireland has required voter ID for 13 years. Why is it necessary to run a pilot programme when we have already evaluated it and found that it works effectively and has not affected voter turnout?

Chloe Smith: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support on this matter. We should see such support throughout the House for a set of measures that are reasonable, proportionate and already used in countries around the world and in our own country, the United Kingdom, to help to protect voters and ensure that their vote is theirs alone.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [909045] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 6 February.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington) *rose—*

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is a notable celebrity, not only in Aylesbury but here in this House.

Mr Lidington: I have been asked to reply, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in Northern Ireland outlining the Government's commitment to the people there and our plan to secure a Brexit deal that delivers on the result of the referendum.

I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in welcoming today's announcement that the next meeting of NATO Heads of State and Government will take place in London in December 2019. This is fitting, as 70 years ago this year, the United Kingdom, led by those Atlanticist champions Clement Attlee and Ernie Bevin, was one of the alliance's 12 founding members and London was home to the first NATO headquarters. We will continue to play a key role in NATO as it continues its mission of keeping nearly 1 billion people safe.

Andrew Bridgen: I have always considered the Leader of the Opposition to be just an unreconstructed Marxist. However, in the light of video footage that has emerged this week, I may well have to change that view. He clearly campaigned vigorously against repeated EU referendums in Ireland, and he declared forcefully that he did not wish to live under a

"European empire of the 21st century".

In the spirit of cross-party consensus, will my right hon. Friend join the Leader of the Opposition and dismiss once and for all any prospect of a second EU referendum and reaffirm that we are leaving on 29 March?

Mr Lidington: The Government's position is clear. We said to the British people in 2016 that we would accept their vote as decisive. The duty of politicians is to implement the result of the referendum and not to suggest that the public got it wrong and, I think, undermine trust in democracy.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) is a notable celebrity, not merely in Islington but here in this House.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am so glad to renew my acquaintance with the Minister for the Cabinet Office, or, as the newspapers always call him, "effectively the Deputy Prime Minister"—surely the only occasion these days when the words "Prime Minister" and "effective" are used in the same sentence.

Although there are many other important issues that I would like to discuss with the Minister for the Cabinet Office today, sadly none is more vital or urgent than Brexit, so I would like to use our time to have a sensible, grown-up discussion about what the actual plan is between now and 29 March. To that end, I ask him this: if the briefing is correct that there will not be a fresh meaningful vote on the withdrawal agreement next week, when will that vote take place?

Mr Lidington: I think that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was completely clear on that at this Dispatch Box last week. She said that the meaningful vote itself would be brought back as soon as possible, and if it were not possible to bring it back by the 13th, next Wednesday, the Government would then make a statement and table a motion for debate the next day.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Minister for his answer. I take from that and from other briefings that the time for a fresh vote will be after the Prime Minister has secured what she called last week

"a significant and legally binding change"—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 679.]

to the withdrawal agreement so that this House has something genuinely different on which to vote. If that is the case, will the Minister simply clarify what will happen if we start to approach 29 March and that significant and legally binding change has not been achieved?

Mr Lidington: The Prime Minister, as has been announced by No. 10, will be in Brussels tomorrow where she will be seeing President Juncker, President Tusk and the President of the European Parliament, Mr Tajani, to discuss the changes that she is seeking following the recent votes in this House both to reject the deal that was on the table and to support the amendment in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). I do think that the right hon. Lady needs not just, perfectly fairly, to question the Government, but to face up to the fact that if, as both she and I wish, we are to leave the EU in an orderly manner with a deal, it requires this House to vote in favour of a deal and not just to declare that it does not want a no-deal scenario.

Emily Thornberry: Again, I thank the Minister. Does the Prime Minister seriously think that she will get anything different from the responses that we have heard from the EU over recent days? None of them has given us any encouragement that the EU is willing to reopen the withdrawal agreement unless the Prime Minister is willing to reconsider the red lines on which the agreement is based. Does he not agree that the sensible, cautious thing to do at this late stage is to seek a temporary extension of article 50 so that we have time to see whether the negotiations succeed, or, if they do not, to pursue a different plan?

Mr Lidington: The problem with the right hon. Lady's proposition is that it would simply defer the need for this House, which includes the Opposition Front Bench team, to face up to some difficult decisions. She has criticised the approach that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has taken, but I have to put it to her

that, last week, the Leader of the Opposition, having met the Prime Minister, went out in front of the cameras and demanded changes to the backstop as part of the approach that he wanted to see for the future. The right hon. Lady has said that she would be comfortable with the backstop. Does she agree with her leader, or is she sticking to her guns on this?

Emily Thornberry: I hear what the Minister says, but he does not seem to give us any answers. I genuinely appreciate his attempts, but I hope that he will understand the concern that all of us have, not just in this House, but across the country, that we have a Government treading water in the Niagara River while the current is taking us over the falls. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order, be quiet. The Whip on duty, the right hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), has no useful contribution to make other than to nod and shake his head in the appropriate places. No chuntering from a sedentary position from him is required or will persist.

Emily Thornberry: Can we go back to the central issue: there is no way that we can avoid a border in Ireland after Brexit without a full customs union, or a permanent backstop, or some new technological solution. Will the Minister tell us which of those options the Government are currently working towards?

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Lady again makes this commitment, saying that the Labour party wants to see a permanent customs union, but most people who support a customs union say that they want to ensure that businesses can expect to export to the EU without tariffs, quotas or rules of origin checks. That is precisely what the Prime Minister's deal does, and it also allows this country to establish trade agreements with other nations around the world, so what part of that deal does the right hon. Lady actually object to?

Emily Thornberry: If the right hon. Gentleman would like me to answer questions, I would be quite happy to hold a seminar for him at another stage regarding what a proper Brexit ought to look like, but let me continue with my job, and perhaps he can continue with his and answer some questions. The technological solution is a non-starter. A permanent backstop will never be acceptable to the European Research Group or the Democratic Unionist party, and the only solution that will actually work is a full customs union. That is what I said at our first encounter here in 2016. It is the answer that is staring the Government in the face. If they backed it, it would command a majority in this House. It would avoid the mayhem and chaos of no deal, and protect the jobs at Nissan, Airbus and elsewhere that are currently at grave risk, so can the Minister explain why the Prime Minister is so dead against it?

Mr Lidington: Even if we did take the right hon. Lady's somewhat ill-defined description of a permanent customs union, it would not address issues in respect of Northern Ireland and Ireland regarding regulatory standards for industrial goods or phytosanitary checks for foodstuffs and livestock. Even in her own terms, her answer is inadequate. The right hon. Lady may well then go on to say that she also wants to be part of a

single market. Indeed, she has said that she would be happy with the same position as Norway, but that means the continuation of free movement and her party's manifesto explicitly said that free movement would stop, so is the right hon. Lady supporting a Norway model or is she supporting the Labour party's manifesto?

Emily Thornberry: Flattered though I am that the Minister feels it necessary to ask me questions, it is important to make it clear that the reason that I have asked these questions today is that the Minister for the Cabinet Office understands Europe, Northern Ireland and Brexit probably better than any of his Cabinet colleagues. If anyone from the Government could give us answers, it would be him. But the truth is that there are no answers. Plan A has been resoundingly rejected by Parliament, plan B was ruled out by the EU months ago, and the Government are in danger of sleepwalking the country towards leaving with no plan and no deal at all. With just over 50 days to go, may I give the Minister a final opportunity to tell us whether there is a better plan than this—or, for goodness' sake, will they let Parliament take charge instead?

Mr Lidington: As I said earlier, the Prime Minister will be reporting back to this House next week following her discussions in Brussels and elsewhere. I have to say to the right hon. Lady that the two-year deadline—the 29 March deadline—stems from European law and the wording of article 50, which lays down the two years. As I recall, the right hon. Lady voted in favour of triggering article 50; perhaps it was one of those votes where she was present but not involved. If she and her Front Bench are worried about no deal, they have to vote for a deal. Every time they vote against a deal, the risk of no deal becomes greater. It really is time for the Opposition Front Bench, for once, to put the national interest first, do the right thing and vote for a deal.

Q5. [909049] **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): Last Friday, the Health Secretary made a superb visit to Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow, where he met inspirational staff doing outstanding work for patients. However, our hospital is crumbling. Sewage is coming into the operating theatres and our infrastructure is failing. Will my right hon. Friend lobby the Treasury to ensure that we get capital funding so that Harlow can get the new hospital that we desperately need?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary was very impressed by what he saw on his visit to Harlow, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) will remain a very ardent champion of the need for renewal of those hospital facilities. He knows that as part of the Government's long-term plan for the NHS, NHS England will make decisions about its capital investments for the future, and I am sure that he will drive his case home with it.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to his place.

While the chaos of the UK Government's shambolic Brexit negotiations has dominated the headlines, this Government have sneaked through a cut in pension credit that will see some couples up to £7,000 a year

worse off. An estimated 300,000 more pensioners are now living in poverty than in 2012. Does the Minister agree that his Government need to change course and, instead of robbing pensioners, start supporting them?

Mr Lidington: I think that the right hon. Gentleman is talking about the situation of mixed-age couples with one person over pensionable age and receiving a pension and the other of working age. What the Government have done—indeed, what this House voted for some years ago—is perfectly logical and in line with the intention of the benefits system.

Ian Blackford: We certainly did not vote for that. What we have seen from this Government is that they continue to put their hands into the pockets of the poorest in our society. In fact, this Tory Government are allowing a proposal to take free TV licences from pensioners. It is this Conservative Government who are denying women born in the 1950s their full rights to state pensions. It is this Tory Government who preside over the lowest state pension in any developed country—quite shameful. Pensioner poverty is not a myth; it is a reality. With Scottish pensioners being short-changed by the UK Government, the Minister must agree that the only way to end pensioner poverty in Scotland is to put fairness back into our pension system and give older people the dignity that they deserve in retirement—for pension reform to be taken on by the Scottish Government in an independent Scotland, where we take our responsibilities seriously.

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Gentleman has some nerve here. He knows that it is in the power of the Scottish Government, under devolution legislation, to top up social security benefits if they choose to do so. He knows—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a lot of wild gesticulation and very animated expressions, and people looking at me pleadingly. It is very difficult to hear what is being said. I was trying to listen to the erudition of the Minister, but there is too much noise—let's hear the fella.

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Gentleman knows that he and his party have voted against this Government's Budgets even though those Budgets have reduced tax upon the lowest-paid in every part of the United Kingdom. He knows that the budget set by the SNP in the Scottish Parliament last week has led to Scots being more highly taxed than people in any other part of the United Kingdom—and that in a year when the Scottish Government's block grant as a result of the Chancellor's Budget decisions was increased by £950 million. The SNP has squandered that Union dividend. The message that we get is that if you have an SNP Government, Scottish people pay more and get less.

Q9. [909053] **Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): Citizens Advice in Solihull has been a cornerstone of my community for over four decades. Does my right hon. Friend share my dismay at the fact that the council procurement process has seen 60% of its funding wiped out overnight? Will he join me in calling on Solihull Council to do everything to ensure the survival of my brilliant local Citizens Advice?

Mr Lidington: I certainly understand, not least from my own constituency, the valuable service that Citizens Advice provides in many parts of the country. As my hon. Friend knows, the funding available through the local government settlement is largely not ring-fenced. These are decisions for elected local authorities to take at their discretion, but I am sure that the local authority in Solihull has heard clearly my hon. Friend's concerns.

Q2. [909046] **Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Rachel wrote to me saying:

"My husband can't live day to day without insulin. He's trying to build up a supply by putting in prescriptions early, but there are limits to how much he can order and keep and we have no idea how bad this could get. I'm also worrying about my son, who has serious food intolerances. I lie awake at night worrying about it."

As the Minister knows, 99.5% of insulin used in the UK is made in the EU, and that is the tip of the medicinal iceberg. The Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Leader of the House all say that we need extra time. When will the Government allow our constituents to sleep at night and announce a delay to article 50?

Mr Lidington: Obviously if there are concerns about a particular case, the relevant Health Minister will be happy to discuss it with the hon. Gentleman. On his more general point, as part of sensible contingency planning, my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary and his Department have been talking to the suppliers of insulin and other key medicines and treatments to ensure that supplies will remain available to patients who need them, whatever the outcome of the current Brexit negotiations.

Q11. [909055] **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Health and safety is strictly followed inside schools, but we expect our children to cross dangerous roads to get to the school gate. Will my right hon. Friend consider introducing new minimum requirements, a funding pot to provide for pedestrian crossings and signage, and reductions in speed limits to ensure that our children are looked after and do not have to cross such dangerous roads?

Mr Lidington: I completely understand the concerns about that issue of not only my hon. Friend but many parents. Of course, a lot depends upon the location of a school and the circumstances of the roads around it, but I am sure that a Minister from the Department for Transport will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss those ideas.

Q3. [909047] **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): This is Children's Mental Health Week. There has been a massive deterioration in children's mental health, with one in seven children now having a mental health disorder, much of which is linked to rising poverty. There is a chronic shortage of trained psychiatrists to treat those children, and we rely on the EU for one in seven trained psychiatrists and much of the primary research. What will the right hon. Gentleman do to avoid a further deterioration of the situation if we Brexit?

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister.

Geraint Davies: Does he agree that parents who voted to leave did not vote to leave their children in greater risk of mental disorder and deserve a final say to protect their future?

Mr Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman sought my advice, I would have provided it. He was doing extremely well, but he should have cut it off about 25 words earlier.

Mr Lidington: On the hon. Gentleman's point about EU health workers, with the end of freedom of movement, we will need to put new arrangements in place. The immigration Bill before the House provides the framework within which those more detailed arrangements can be made for the future. Of course, the health service in Wales is devolved and a matter for the Welsh Government and Assembly, but NHS England's long-term plan will see the largest expansion of mental health services in a generation.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I listened very carefully to the quiet and earnest exchange between my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), the shadow Foreign Secretary, on the subject of arrangements for Brexit. I have to say that I formed the impression they were trying to find detailed points on which they could disagree, and that if it was left to them, they would take about five minutes to agree a proposal that would take us smoothly through 29 March into proper negotiations. May I ask my right hon. Friend if he would arrange that, on 14 February, we can finally have some indicative votes in the House so that the sensible majority can express their opinion? We can leave smoothly and start proper negotiations, based on a customs arrangement and some regulatory alignment in the transition period, and stop being so dominated by Corbynistas and the European Research Group.

Mr Lidington: I have to say that, in the past couple of weeks, one of the things I have been spending my time doing is talking to right hon. and hon. Members from all parts of the House, including Labour Members, about their views regarding the way forward on Brexit. If the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) wanted to come and see me as well, I would be very happy to talk further to her. I just think it is a pity that the Leader of the Opposition waited a full fortnight before even opening discussions with the Government.

Q4. [909048] Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): The people watching expect MPs to be working together at this time in the national interest. While the Prime Minister is away chasing political fixes, the Minister knows that this Brexit crisis could be resolved right here in this House, because many Members would support a deal that was then put to the public for their approval. Why will he not offer this public final say when he knows that it would break the deadlock?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman has been a completely open and honourable champion of the second referendum, and I respect that fact. He knows the Government's concerns that that would lead to an erosion of public

trust in our political process, and that it would not actually settle the question because there would then be demands from whoever lost a second referendum to proceed to a third. I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that he needs to persuade his own Front Benchers, because I find that opposition to a second referendum is quite deep in both major parties in the House.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): I have just come from speaking at the launch of a draft EU-UK free trade agreement. It lays out 300 pages of what such an agreement would look like and invites the Government and businesses to engage, but it depends on our being outside a customs union with the EU. Notwithstanding the earlier exchanges on this very topic, will my right hon. Friend recommit himself today to our manifesto commitment to be outside a customs union with the EU in the future relationship?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend, perfectly properly, made reference to the 2017 Conservative manifesto, but I could also refer him to many, many statements made from this Dispatch Box and elsewhere by our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the same effect. I would say to him that, for the complex negotiations that would be needed to establish the detail of the future economic partnership between ourselves and the European Union, we need to have the implementation or transitional period that is specified in the withdrawal agreement. That is what businesses of all sizes in all sectors are asking us in this House to do, and that is why the House should come together and support a deal.

Q6. [909050] James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Will the Minister explain why councils such as Bury, with less availability of brownfield land, cannot use the most recent independent Office for National Statistics figures on household projections to determine local housing need, thus saving more of our precious green belt from development?

Mr Lidington: Of course, new tests of housing need have recently been introduced. They are designed to reflect the fact that under successive Governments of all political parties, we as a country have been building far fewer new homes than our country and particularly our younger generation now need. I can say to the hon. Gentleman that, representing one part of the country with some of the fastest housebuilding rates anywhere in England, I think this is a social justice challenge that we have to face up to, but the national planning policy contains within it very strong tests to protect against inappropriate development in the green belt, and the Government will stand by that approach.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Last week it was announced that emergency services and women and children's services are going to be moved out of borough from Telford's Princess Royal Hospital. I have asked the Health Secretary to call in that decision for review, because the needs and health outcomes of people in both Telford and Wrekin have not been considered. Will my right hon. Friend join me in urging the Health Secretary to review the decision and to listen to the concerns of people in Telford and Wrekin?

Mr Lidington: As I would expect, my hon. Friend is a very strong advocate for the health needs of her local area. I understand that she met the Secretary of State for Health yesterday, and I am sure that he will reflect carefully on the case that she put to him.

Q7. [909051] Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): With fuel poverty on the rise thanks to this Government, it is important that everyone who needs cold weather payments receives them. My constituents who live less than 10 miles from a certain weather station—the majority—receive those payments when temperatures fall below zero. However, the arrangements for my constituents in a neighbouring ward are based on a measurement from another weather station that is 20 miles away. Will the Minister act to end the postcode lottery for cold weather payments for the good people of Bellshill, Coatbridge and Chryston?

Mr Lidington: The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that the most vulnerable people get support when they need it most. It is important, obviously, that people are able to keep their homes warm during any cold snaps, and the cold weather payments and winter fuel payment enable them to do that. I will ensure that the relevant Minister looks into the particular constituency issue raised by the hon. Gentleman.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): On behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who has been in his constituency this morning, I want to thank Staffordshire fire and rescue and Staffordshire police for their efforts in the horrific fire that occurred in Stafford this week. I also want to thank the local schools for the support being given to children who know the family. Will my right hon. Friend join me in expressing our condolences to the family and friends involved?

Mr Lidington: I do not believe that there is any Member of this House whose reaction to that ghastly news yesterday was other than horror and the most deeply felt sense of sympathy with the family and friends of the children and parents involved. Thinking through what that family have had to live through, and must face living through in the future, it strikes one that it must be almost unendurable. On behalf of the whole House, I hope, I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the emergency services—let us not forget that, for those who were called out to the scene, this would have been a traumatic experience—and to the local schools. The fire and rescue service will lead an investigation into the causes of this tragedy, and obviously we will have to await the outcome of that before deciding whether any further lessons should be drawn.

Q8. [909052] Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) opened her heart to share the story of her son Martin and the pain that she went through when he died as a child. The Prime Minister committed to establishing Martin's fund, a children's funeral fund that would mean that parents would not have to bear the cost of burying their child, yet nine months on, 3,000 families have had to find the funding to bury their children because the Government have

not put the fund in place. When can we see the fund and, importantly, will the Government commit to backdating payments to the date on which that announcement was made?

Mr Lidington: As the Prime Minister has said, it is not right that grieving parents have to worry about how to meet the funeral costs for a child. We have confirmed that parents will no longer have to meet the costs of burials or cremations, and fees will be waived by all local authorities and paid for instead by Government. We have been working, as I think the hon. Gentleman acknowledged, on the most effective way to deliver the fund, because we need to make sure that we get this right, but I take his point about the need to step up the pace. We will provide an update to Parliament on implementation as soon as possible, and I will certainly draw his comments and the support that he has from other Members right across the House, on a cross-party basis, to the attention of the Ministers concerned.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am proud to represent Penzance, which is at the start of the rail link to London and elsewhere. Five years after the track was cut off by both coastal erosion and landslides, the planning application has finally gone in to create a resilient rail link for Devon and Cornwall. Will my right hon. Friend assure my constituents and the House that adequate funds will be made available to avoid any further delays?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the critical importance of this stretch of line not just to south Devon but to the whole south-west, in particular people living in Cornwall. I have been told by the Department for Transport that the first phase of work to protect the sea wall at Dawlish began in November last year, with essential repairs to breakwaters. That is part of a £15 million wider investment to make the railway at Dawlish and Teignmouth more resilient to extreme weather. Top-quality engineers have been carrying out detailed ground investigations to develop a long-term solution to protect the railway and to minimise disruption for passengers. We are now talking to Network Rail about the long-term plan.

Q10. [909054] Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Last year, my constituent with cerebral palsy was awarded £55 a week in personal independence payment. She was then diagnosed as having fibromyalgia, an incurable and often severely debilitating condition. She was summoned for reassessment and the private profit-driven company this Government choose to make such assessments decided that she is healthier with fibromyalgia than she was without and stopped her benefit in its entirety. That leaves her £2,900 per year worse off than she was before, literally punishing my constituent for being ill. How do the Government possibly hope to justify such a travesty of justice?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman raises a constituency case. I do not know the details other than those he has just relayed to the House, but I will ask the relevant Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions to talk to him and to look into the details of the case in greater depth.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I point out to my right hon. Friend that the House has already had some indicative votes? The House did not like the withdrawal agreement as it stands and would prefer not to leave without a withdrawal agreement at all, and the whole Government voted to replace the backstop. What progress is being made in the discussions led by a remarkable alliance of my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg)? They are promoting what is known as the Malthouse compromise, which would replace the backstop with a perfectly viable scheme to secure an open border in Northern Ireland under all circumstances. What is holding it up?

Mr Lidington: There is no attempt to hold anything up. The Government are very determined that we need to make progress, not least because of the two-year deadline under article 50 and the importance to our businesses of leaving the EU in an orderly manner with a withdrawal agreement. The group to which my hon. Friend refers has been meeting my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. Those talks continue.

Q12. [909056] **Mr Steve Reed** (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): ISS is a private contractor that employs some of my constituents as porters and cleaners at Kingston Hospital, but it will not pay them sick pay. One was refused sick pay after suffering a stroke, and coercing sick people to come into a hospital risks infecting vulnerable patients. ISS has now threatened to break off negotiations with the GMB trade union if there is any political campaigning on this issue, including contacting MPs. Will the right hon. Gentleman condemn ISS for undermining its workers' basic democratic right to contact their MP, and will he call on ISS to pay its workers fairly, including when they are sick?

Mr Lidington: Two issues were raised there. On the point about access to a Member of Parliament, there is no excuse for any organisation or individual to try to stop a constituent approaching their Member of Parliament. While this is ultimately a matter for you, Mr Speaker, there have been previous occasions when such attempts have been ruled as a contempt of Parliament, so I hope that message will go back. On the substantive point about the operation of the contracts, clearly the contract would have been let by the relevant part of the NHS, but the Health Secretary has indicated to me that he is very willing to sit down with the hon. Gentleman to talk through the details.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Following on from the excellent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), I remind the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster that the House passed the so-called Brady amendment on 29 January. Three hundred and seventeen Members were present and actively involved, as they all voted for it, including my right hon. Friend and the whole Government. The amendment said:

“and requires the Northern Ireland backstop to be replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border”.

As the Government voted for it, will he confirm that that is still their policy, and if not, which bit of “replaced” was not clear?

Mr Lidington: The motion also said, of course, that subject to those changes, those who voted for it would be willing to accept the withdrawal agreement. Talks are continuing with the so-called Malthouse group, but my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister spelled out in Belfast yesterday how she intends to take forward the work following the vote for the amendment in the name of our hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady).

Q13. [909057] **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The premise for the Oxford-to-Cambridge expressway has never been consulted on, yet this multibillion-pound, multi-lane highway is set to carve through the landscape between Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge and will affect millions of people. A consultation is due to start on the route options later this year, but will the Minister guarantee today that there will also be a formal consultation on whether the expressway is the right thing to do at all?

Mr Lidington: The expressway is part of a strategic plan for the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, which is probably the best opportunity for economic growth, innovation and job creation anywhere in Europe at the moment. Like the hon. Lady, I speak as somebody who has a constituency interest—not just a Government interest—in this. There will be a public consultation on route options later this year. There will then be a public consultation on the preferred route, and communities will be able to comment on all aspects of the expressway during those consultations.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): There can be no doubt that the people of Venezuela are really suffering: 40 of them were killed in recent protests, many more have been detained and many are simply voting with their feet and leaving—those who can. What more can we do as a Government to help these people, and does my right hon. Friend agree that sanctions are still a valuable tool?

Mr Lidington: What is happening in Venezuela is appalling. We have seen the suppression of democratic institutions and traditions, and we have seen 3 million people forced to leave their country and live as refugees. We and our EU partners have been clear that we need to put pressure on those around Maduro. We need to keep that pressure up, and we are looking at what further steps we can take to ensure peace and democracy, including through possible sanctions. It would be a help if, in this House, we spoke with a united voice, rather than having the Leader of the Opposition looking to Maduro's Venezuela as a role model for this country.

Q14. [909058] **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): The Prime Minister is on record as saying that she does not want a “business as usual” relationship with Russia. Will the Minister explain, then, why in the past year, the Conservative party has trousered £1 million in donations from individuals with strong links to the

Kremlin, including a former Russian Defence Minister and the wife of President Putin's former Finance Minister?

Mr Lidington: Party matters are not a subject of Government responsibility, but all donations to the Conservative party have been properly accounted for and declared to the Electoral Commission in accordance with the law. There are people of Russian origin who are United Kingdom citizens and as entitled as any other naturalised UK citizen to support and donate to the political party of their choice.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): For parents across East Renfrewshire, the safety of their children online is an absolute priority, so I very much welcome the announcements from the Government of more steps in relation to social media companies, but can my right hon. Friend confirm that the online harms White Paper remains on track to be out on time and that, whatever happens with Brexit, this workstream will be a priority for the Government?

Mr Lidington: Yes, and I actually talked to the Culture Secretary this week about the need to press ahead with urgency on this task. We have heard the calls for an internet regulator and a statutory duty of care, and we are seriously considering these options. Our White Paper will clearly set out how responsibilities should be met and what should happen if they are not.

Q15. [909059] **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): Falklands veteran Rory McCormick met his Russian spouse six years ago. She obtained a valid article 10 EU residence card in Ireland. Now he, his two children and his wife, who is lawfully resident in the UK under the Immigration Act 2014, are being refused private tenancy in Ipswich. Does the deputy Prime Minister believe that it is morally defensible for a British citizen and his family to be made homeless in their own country simply because the Home Office guidance wrongly rules out article 10 cards issued outside the UK as valid eligibility documents for letting agents?

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, I am not familiar, as he is, with the details of his constituency case, and I was not certain from how he posed his question whether the problem was with the documentation alone or whether there was a more substantive problem, but the Immigration Minister or another relevant Minister will happily talk to him to try to sort this out.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Brexit provides us with the opportunity to introduce a controlled and fair immigration system that no longer discriminates against the rest of the world outside the EU and that that system should be the least bureaucratic possible?

Mr Lidington: I agree with my hon. Friend on both those points. It is important that in the future we have a system that is fair, makes it easy for the brightest and best in the world to come and work and study here and judges people not by the country they come from but on the skills they bring to this country and their commitment to this country.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister will recall that my colleagues and I in the coalition introduced the naming and shaming of companies that fail to pay the minimum wage. This practice has ceased since last summer, apparently because civil servants are tied up on Brexit duties. What does this tell us about the Government's new-found enthusiasm for labour rights, and when will these lists be published?

Mr Lidington: I would have hoped that the right hon. Gentleman acknowledged that the Government have continued to take forward and strengthen further the policies on the national living wage, which we worked together on during the coalition days, but I will look into the point he has made, discuss it with my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary and perhaps a drop him a note to say what we have concluded.

Points of Order

12.48 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Prime Minister's questions, I raised the issue of the attack on pensions and pensioners, and I was surprised to hear the Minister for the Cabinet Office claim in response that the Scottish Government had responsibility, if we so chose, to deal with the problems created by the UK Government. He will know that pensions are reserved and that the Scottish Parliament cannot create any new pension or old-age benefit because of the restrictions in section 28 of the Scotland Act 2016, under which we cannot give pensions assistance or assistance for reasons of age. We find it intolerable that time after time the UK Government claim that the Scottish Parliament or Government have powers they patently do not have, and it must stop.

Mr Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair, but the right hon. Gentleman has made his point with force and clarity. If the Minister for the Cabinet Office wishes to respond, he can. He is not under an obligation to do so, but if he does not, I suspect, knowing the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who is a persistent blighter, that he will not go away. Quite understandably and justifiably, he will want to return to the issue over and over again, so it might be best if the Minister would deploy his considerable intellect and respond.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am very clear that the advice I have is that under the Scotland Act 2016 the Scottish Government have the power to top up reserved benefits. It is for the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) to defend the decision of a Scottish Government not to do so.

Ian Blackford: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think the idea of further debate is fermenting in the mind of the leader of the Scottish National party as we speak. I am not sure that there is any "further to", but I am in a generous mood—*[Interruption.]* I think that gesture means it will be short, so very well.

Ian Blackford: I have respect for the Minister, but he needs to reflect on the fact that pensions are reserved, period, under legislation from this Government.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is a bit like me; he likes to have the last word. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) is a precious delicacy in the House, and we should not squander him too early. I will come to him.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It has been widely reported that the Secretary of State for International Trade has advised industry representatives that he proposes to introduce measures in the event of a no-deal Brexit to reduce all import tariffs on goods to zero. The impact of that in job losses in our manufacturing and farming industries

would be enormous. It would also undermine the Government's much vaunted ambition to negotiate new trade deals by giving away what other countries would happily bargain access into their own markets to obtain. Have you, Mr Speaker, received any indication from the Government that a Minister is preparing to make a statement to this House on such a far-reaching and important matter?

Mr Speaker: No, not as yet, but who knows what is to follow. We live in hope. The hon. Gentleman's grinning countenance suggests that he is satisfied with his efforts for now.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sorry that I have not given you notice of this, but it was not possible. Since Prime Minister's questions began, the President of the European Council has said that there is a "special place in hell" reserved for Brexiteers. I do not recall any President insulting Members of this House, members of the Government and the British people in such a way. What means are open to the House or the Government to respond to such a completely outrageous insult?

Mr Speaker: I am not responsible for the statements of the President of the European Council, and I did not know—I was not hitherto conscious—that the hon. Gentleman was notably sensitive, that he was in any sense a delicate flower, and that he was capable of being a quickly and severely injured soul by virtue of the ad hominem remarks of others. If indeed he has been developing a sensitivity and he feels insulted—*[Interruption.]* Or even, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) chunters from a sedentary position, wounded.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Deeply.

Mr Speaker: Deeply wounded, apparently. Well, then I am sorry for the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). Whatever views he has and expresses, as far as I am concerned, as he knows, I hold him in the highest esteem because he takes Parliament seriously—he always has done and he always will do. It is not for the Speaker to arbitrate between different political opinions. What the Speaker likes to see and hear is the sight and sound of committed parliamentarians who take their responsibilities seriously. No one does so more obviously than the hon. Gentleman.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It seems to be very much a phone-carrying day. Very well.

Joanna Cherry: I shall keep this brief, Mr Speaker. I did not have the chance to advise you of my point order in advance, as it arises from that of the right hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). May I respectfully suggest to you that you respectfully suggest to the right hon. Gentleman that he might want to go beyond the headlines of the BBC in future? What the European Council President Donald Tusk actually said was that there is a "special place in hell" for "those who promoted Brexit without even a sketch of a plan of how to carry it out safely". So perhaps—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Well, Mr Speaker, sometimes the truth hurts, doesn't it?

Mr Speaker: To be frank, as Speaker I do not really mind what it is that the President of the European Council has said, because it is not a matter that concerns me. I hope that the hon. and learned Lady will forgive me if I note en passant that in the course of making a point that I know was very important to her, she inadvertently elevated the hon. Member for Wellingborough to membership of the Privy Council. Perhaps it is only a matter of time, but the Treasury Bench might wish to take that as a hint; alternatively, they might not. We will leave it there for now, but I am glad that the hon. and learned Lady is in a jocular spirit, and the same seems to be capable of being said of the hon. Gentleman, even if he is deeply wounded.

BILL PRESENTED

EUROPEAN UNION (REFERENDUM ON WITHDRAWAL AGREEMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tom Brake, supported by Sir Vince Cable, Jo Swinson, Wera Hobhouse, Mr Ben Bradshaw, Dr Sarah Wollaston, Stephen Gethins, Jonathan Edwards, Caroline Lucas, Stephen Doughty and Geraint Davies presented a Bill to require the holding of a referendum in which one option is to endorse the agreement between the United Kingdom Government and the European Union on the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union and the other option is for the United Kingdom to continue to be a member of the European Union; to require the Prime Minister to seek an extension of the period of two years specified in Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union to a period ending after that referendum; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 331).

Armed Forces Covenant (Duty of Public Authorities)

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

12.56 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require public authorities to deliver services in accordance with the armed forces covenant; and for connected purposes.

It is a great privilege to present this ten-minute rule Bill. I consider it a huge privilege to serve as Northern Ireland's only voice on the Defence Committee, following the service of my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). We recognise the enormous sacrifice given not only during the Northern Ireland troubles and through Operation Banner, which remains our country's longest continuous military deployment, but historically and to the present day, and we value the above average contribution that Northern Ireland makes to our country's overall strength. Collectively, as a nation, we honour that commitment. Collectively, as a Parliament, we progressed the armed forces covenant, which nobly states:

"To those who proudly protect our nation, who do so with honour, courage, and commitment, the Armed Forces Covenant is the nation's commitment to you.

It is a pledge that together we acknowledge and understand that those who serve or who have served in the armed forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society they serve with their lives."

I stand by those laudable and honourable words, but, regrettably, we cannot as parliamentarians say with confidence that the covenant runs smoothly and is always applied equally across the United Kingdom. That is the injustice that I hope my Bill will address. The statutory duty it proposes will extend throughout the United Kingdom. The covenant is intended to be a universal commitment, and the experience, care and compassion veterans receive should be the same, but their experience is far from universal.

For too long, the experience of Northern Ireland-based veterans has been substandard. Yes, we have devolution. Yes, we have particular issues that are alive in Northern Ireland that do not pervade other parts the country. But the covenant was not caveated in any way, and we should not caveat our resolve to ensure its full implementation.

I recall the first occasion when, during scrutiny of the covenant implementation report in the Defence Committee, I laid before the then Veterans Minister correspondence received from the Health Minister in Northern Ireland at the time, Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill. Responding to the needs of an individual veteran, she stated categorically that the armed forces covenant did not apply in Northern Ireland. In fact, she said that it did not apply "here", because she could not bring herself to say "Northern Ireland". She was wrong, but she was able to abuse her ministerial role to frustrate the honourable outworking of our nation's commitment.

Such sectarian intransigence exists, and, depending on the allocation of ministerial office in Northern Ireland, it has the potential to block implementation in all the key operational departments. The shame of that action

is matched only by the apparent unwillingness of this Parliament to meet it head-on. The sacrifice offered across our country is the same. The lives lost or injuries sustained do not confine themselves to respective parts of our nation, nor should we confine ourselves in our response.

For two years, successive covenant implementation reports have highlighted the fact that armed forces champions have been appointed in each of Northern Ireland's 11 local authorities. On the face of it that is great progress, but when we know that local authorities in Northern Ireland have no role or influence in housing, health—including mental health—or education, it amounts to nothing more than tokenism.

In the most recent covenant report, some space was given to the through-life support offered to our veterans community. I read with interest three pages about the great work being undertaken in England, a further page about the work undertaken in Scotland, and yet another about the work undertaken in Wales. There was not a single line about Northern Ireland. There was nothing: no encouraging progress, no hurdles to be overcome, no aspirations for the future.

When Border Force recruitment in Northern Ireland was suspended because one of the eligibility criteria was service in the armed forces, the tension between the covenant and equality legislation became all too apparent. There is a misguided belief that equality laws in Northern Ireland act as a barrier to providing for our veterans community. It would, of course, be hugely advantageous to amend section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to include veterans as a protected class, in line with the aims and aspirations of the covenant. More pronounced, however, is the embarrassing failure to mount any justification for the reasonable aims of the covenant, which is all that Border Force needed to do.

Rather than justifying the reasons why service in the armed forces was a sterling criterion, demonstrating key skills that would enhance an application from a veteran—which is what the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland sought—Border Force decided that it was better to remove veterans' opportunity to serve their country once again. How dishonourable that was. Rather than advancing the cause of those applicants, Border Force pulled the rug from under them. They were prepared to defend our country in their armed service careers, and they were prepared to defend it again through service in Border Force, yet we in this Parliament did not manage to defend their future career prospects.

Given all the constraints, and the seemingly intractable unwillingness to overcome them, I must especially praise the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Northern Ireland, which seeks valiantly to serve our veteran population. I also pay tribute to the Ulster Defence Regiment and Royal Irish Regiment benevolent funds, which continue to support veterans and their families, from Omagh to St Patrick's in Ballymena and from Thiepval to Palace Barracks in North Down at the edge of my constituency.

With its new veterans support officer, RFCA NI attempts to navigate the system in Northern Ireland and seeks to find subtle workarounds, but in doing so, it is unfolding the circumstances of scores of individuals who, unlike their mainland counterparts, have had no opportunity to avail themselves of the services that they require and expect and that we should provide. It is discovering a lack of resources and a lack of legislative support.

When I say that, I look at the Veterans Minister, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood). I know of his personal commitment, and I know how much he has engaged in matters that do not arise solely in Northern Ireland. The issues raised by the fact that the covenant is not running smoothly apply throughout the United Kingdom. In the Defence Committee, we are identifying distinct differences in mental health provision and other support services in Scotland, Wales and England.

I believe we must say that no longer should our veteran population in Northern Ireland—and in other parts of this United Kingdom—remain with one hand tied behind their back. We owe them more than that. I have focused my remarks on Northern Ireland, but I know only too well that the principle applies across our nation. We have the chance to change that. At the very least, let this parliamentary process—through my quest for a statutory duty to implement the covenant—honour those who so gallantly honoured us.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Gavin Robinson, Nigel Dodds, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, Emma Little Pengelly, Dr Julian Lewis, Mrs Madeleine Moon, John Spellar, Leo Docherty, Mr Kevan Jones, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, Ruth Smeeth and Jamie Stone present the Bill.

Gavin Robinson accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March and to be printed (Bill 332).

Social Security

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will debate motions 2 and 3 together.

1.7 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I beg to move,

That the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motion:

That the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

Sarah Newton: These two statutory instruments will increase the value of lump sum awards payable under the Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) Act 1979 and the diffuse mesothelioma scheme, which was set up by the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008. Those schemes stand apart from the main social security benefits uprating procedure, and there is no legislative requirement to review the level of payments each year. None the less, I am happy to increase the amounts payable from 1 April this year by September's consumer prices index of 2.4%.

The Government recognise the very great suffering of individuals and their families caused by the serious and often fatal diseases resulting from exposure to asbestos, coal dust and other forms of dust. The individuals affected may be unable to bring a successful claim for damages, often owing to the long latency period of their condition, but they can still claim compensation through these schemes.

I will briefly summarise the specific purpose of the two compensation schemes. The Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) Act 1979, which for simplicity I will refer to as the 1979 Act scheme, provides a lump sum compensation payment to those who have one of five dust-related respiratory diseases covered by the scheme, who are unable to claim damages from employers because they have gone out of business and who have not brought any action against others for damages. The five diseases covered by the 1979 Act scheme are diffuse mesothelioma, bilateral diffuse pleural thickening, pneumoconiosis and byssinosis, as well as primary carcinoma of the lung if accompanied by asbestosis or bilateral diffuse pleural thickening. The 2008 mesothelioma lump sum payment scheme widens the criteria for compensation to those who have contracted diffuse mesothelioma but who are unable to claim compensation for that disease under the 1979 Act scheme—for example, those people who were self-employed or whose exposure to asbestos was not due to work.

Payments under the 1979 Act scheme are based on the age of the person with the disease and their level of disablement at the time of their diagnosis. All payments for diffuse mesothelioma are made at the 100% rate. All payments under the 2008 scheme are also made at the 100% disablement rate and based on age, with the highest payments going to the youngest people with

the disease. In the last full year, from April 2017 to March 2018, 3,680 people received payments under both schemes, totalling £49.2 million.

I am aware that the prevalence of diffuse mesothelioma is a particular concern of Members, given the number of deaths from this disease in Great Britain. It is at a historically high level. The life expectancy of those diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma is poor, with many people dying within 12 months of diagnosis. The disease has a strong association with exposure to asbestos, and current evidence suggests that around 85% of all mesotheliomas diagnosed in men are attributable to asbestos exposures that occurred through work. Our latest available information suggests that there will continue to be around 2,500 diffuse mesothelioma deaths per year before the number of cases begins to fall during the next decade, reflecting a reduction in asbestos exposures after 1980.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The Minister will be aware that Barrow and Furness has the highest number of asbestos-related cancer deaths in the whole of England and Wales. Is she aware of how many sufferers who were previously compensated under the scheme covering pleural plaques are now falling victim to terminal asbestosis and finding themselves ineligible for any compensation under these schemes? Does she not feel that that is unjust? Will she meet me and representatives of my community to discuss that?

Sarah Newton: I am always happy to meet colleagues from across the House if they have particular constituency issues or if people who really need support are falling between the cracks. There are three different schemes available to support people, and we are talking about two of them today. I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to explore those issues and to discuss the three compensation programmes to see whether there is more that we can do. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that people get the support to which they are entitled.

We expect to see a decline in the number of people being diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma in the coming years, but many people will continue to develop the condition and the other respiratory diseases, based on their exposure, for some time to come. That is why the Government are committed to working in partnership with their arm's length bodies and agencies to improve the lives of those with respiratory diseases. I want to give the House an example of that commitment.

Last summer, I hosted a lung health summit, bringing together the Union of Democratic Mineworkers, my hon. Friends the Members for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) and for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and representatives from the British Lung Association and the NHS. This was an opportunity to discuss the important work that the Government and our partners are doing and to listen to the first-hand experiences and problems, brought to my attention by my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood, that miners are encountering today as they try to get an appropriate diagnosis and therefore the financial support that we want them to receive.

A huge amount of work has been done as a result of that lung health summit, and I was delighted—as I hope everyone will be—to see that the recently published NHS long-term plan recognises the objective of improving

outcomes for people with respiratory disease. The long-term plan sets out how the NHS will take action in a number of areas. This includes expanding programmes that support earlier diagnosis of respiratory diseases—including the pioneering lung health checks trialled in Manchester and Liverpool—and increasing access to proven treatments such as pulmonary rehabilitation. As part of the engagement process for the Government's long-term plan, an NHS England respiratory oversight group has been created, which includes membership of the British Lung Foundation. In addition, NHS England has been working closely with the taskforce for lung health, which has also recently published its own five-year plan to improve lung health.

I want to take a few moments to talk about the work of the Health and Safety Executive in this regard. It does excellent work, the length and breadth of the country, but we seldom have an opportunity to reflect on that in this House. As a nation, we should be really proud of our long history of trying to prevent illness and injury at work. The very first factory inspectors were appointed under the Factory Act 1833 to prevent injury and overworking among child textile workers, and we have come a long way since then. The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act came into force in October 1974 and the Health and Safety Executive was formed in January 1975. The HSE is now well established as a mature regulator with a mission to prevent work-related death, injury and ill health. This is borne out by the most recent published HSE statistics, which show a long-term downward trend in the rate of self-reported non-fatal accidents and fatal accidents to workers. Indeed, the UK consistently has one of the lowest standardised rates of fatal injury when compared with any other large economy.

Turning back to the importance of these regulations, I am sure we all agree that, while no amount of money can ever compensate individuals or their families for the suffering and loss caused by the diffuse mesothelioma and pneumoconiosis covered by the 1979 Act scheme, those who have those diseases rightly deserve some form of monetary compensation. Finally, I am required to confirm to the House that these provisions are compatible with the European convention on human rights, and I am happy so to do.

1.18 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008 made provisions for lump sum compensation payments to be made for those suffering from diffuse mesothelioma. It also made provisions for their dependants. The mesothelioma lump sum payments regulations laid before the House have uprated the lump sum payments for sufferers and their dependants by 2.4%. We welcome the fact that the Government have reviewed the rates in line with inflation, and we recognise that, as the Minister said, they are under no obligation to do so under the 2008 Act.

Mesothelioma is a type of cancer that covers the lining of the body's organs. It is also almost exclusively caused by asbestos, when fibres have entered the lungs of sufferers and caused damage over time. The greater the exposure to asbestos, the more likely it is that someone will be at risk of mesothelioma. It can also affect those who have been indirectly exposed to asbestos.

The victims of indirect asbestos exposure have been seeking justice through access to the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme for some time, and the Government must seriously consider that matter.

It can take up to 40 years after the original exposure for mesothelioma symptoms to develop, and it is likely that the increase in the numbers of mesothelioma sufferers' deaths in recent years is due to exposure that took place before the introduction of asbestos regulations in the 1970s. Mesothelioma has devastating effects on sufferers, as the Minister rightly said. For most victims, a diagnosis brings with it the inevitability of death, and one such death was that of my good friend, Brian Jamieson, who passed away in December. He was an active trade unionist who worked on Trafford Park, where he unfortunately acquired the disease. Tragically, only five in 100 people survive the cancer for more than five years after diagnosis.

The damage caused by asbestos is widely seen as one of the biggest public health crises in this country, ruining the lives not just of sufferers themselves, but of their families, friends and communities. The Department for Work and Pensions suggested that 53,000 people will die from mesothelioma between 2030 and 2037, and it is estimated that 2,500 people die every year as a result of the disease. The 2008 scheme provides a one-off payment to sufferers who have no occupational link to the disease or who are self-employed, including, for example, sufferers who live in close proximity to a workplace containing asbestos.

While Labour welcomes the regulations and the uprating of the lump sum payments, several serious issues remain. Alongside many campaigners, we are concerned about the disparity between lump sum payments made to dependants and those made to sufferers. It is unclear why dependants, who are themselves usually impacted by the effects of mesothelioma, receive so much less than sufferers. The difference in the amounts is stark. A mesothelioma sufferer aged 70 will receive £17,961 under the draft regulations. However, if the sufferer dies at aged 67 or over, their dependants receive just £8,000 as a lump sum payment. In 2010, the then Minister, Lord McKenzie of Luton, rightfully pledged to equalise payments, noting the unfair nature of the regulations. The Government have faced repeated calls to honour that commitment, but they have failed to do so. This is also an equality issue. The difference in payments is likely to affect mainly women whose husbands were directly exposed to asbestos at work. How can the Government continue to justify the difference between lump sum payments? Will the Minister tell us the most recent estimated cost of providing equal payments for sufferers and their dependants?

Communities are still being affected by asbestos exposure to this day, and exposure results in an estimated 5,000 deaths every year. The all-party group on occupational safety and health estimated that, shockingly, 75% of the 29,000 schools in Britain contain asbestos, so it is vital that we continue to raise awareness. What additional funding will be made available this year to ensure that we continue to make people aware of the dangers of exposure to asbestos? What campaigns are being run by the Health and Safety Executive about asbestos exposure?

As the Minister noted, the HSE plays a vital role in ending harmful exposure to asbestos, but this Government are responsible for a 40% cut to its budget. By this year,

[Mike Amesbury]

it is estimated that the HSE will receive £100 million less in Government funding than it did in 2009, and that comes despite estimates that 12,000 people are dying each year as a result of occupational cancers or lung diseases. Will the Minister conduct an impact assessment of the cuts to HSE funding on occupational health? Will she end the devastating cuts to the HSE? When will the HSE get the “austerity is over” cheque that the Prime Minister promised?

Labour also welcomes the regulations to increase lump sum payments to pneumoconiosis sufferers in line with inflation. We have further noted that the Government are under no statutory obligation to do so. The pneumoconiosis regulations refer to the Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) Act 1979, which provided lump sum payments to people disabled by dust-related diseases, including as a result of asbestos exposure and coal mining. Statistics show that there are an average of 140 deaths a year as a result of the disease. While we welcome the uprating under the regulations, the Government have failed to ensure that there is parity between the amounts offered to sufferers and to their dependants. Will the Minister finally act to ensure that there is parity between the two groups?

Sufferers of pneumoconiosis and their families have to go through onerous and often expensive hurdles in order to receive payments from the Department for Work and Pensions. A number of problems prevent people from receiving the support they deserve, including a lack of specialist knowledge about work-related diseases and issues with the DWP assessments. Will the Minister meet my colleagues and the National Union of Mine-workers to discuss changes to ensure that sufferers and their families are not prevented from receiving vital support for this incurable disease? Information about the disease is not widespread, and the disease is hard to diagnose because it does not show up on two-dimensional X-rays. Will the Minister tell us how much funding is going into promoting awareness of the disease?

The lump sum payment is a form of industrial injuries disablement benefit. Under universal credit, IIDB counts as unearned income, reducing the UC award. Under tax credits, the lump sum payment is disregarded completely. Sufferers and dependants on tax credits therefore stand to lose out if they naturally migrate on to universal credit. Will the Minister act immediately to ensure that no sufferer will lose out in this way? No impact assessment has been made of the effectiveness of either scheme, nor have the Government consulted trade unions about how best to compensate those who have lost out. Will the Minister act immediately to do so and provide an equality impact assessment on this most vital area of support?

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making some important points—I am sorry that more Members are not in the Chamber to hear them. There is real anger in former coal mining constituencies such as mine about the failure to pay out. People fought hard to get compensation in the first place—it took years and years of effort. Were it not for the previous Labour Government, we would have a lesser scheme than the present one. I support what my hon. Friend says, and we must give proper answers to the sufferers of pneumoconiosis and their families.

Mike Amesbury: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I have family members who were miners until they were put out of work, so I completely agree.

Labour welcomes the support available to sufferers and the uprating of the provisions, but it is clear that issues remain. I urge the Minister not only to ensure that equal treatment of sufferers and dependants is achieved, but to consider the implications of Government cuts and the introduction of universal credit for sufferers throughout the UK.

1.29 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I welcome the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2019 and the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2019. I understand that both schemes, which will ensure fair and timely payments to those with asbestos-related diseases, fall outside the general benefits uprating process and that, as such, no review mechanism is formally built into legislation to uprate the payments each year.

The Government's 2.4% increase in the payments is very welcome and rightly demonstrates an ongoing commitment to supporting those suffering from asbestos-related diseases, many of whom contracted the disease through no fault of their own, and their families. For reasons that will become apparent, I wonder whether a future statutory instrument will include a table of occupations or professions—the regulations include a helpful breakdown of the ages of those with mesothelioma at first diagnosis—as that would help to identify those at risk and could perhaps be cross-referenced with other areas of support for those suffering from mesothelioma, where necessary.

Five years and one month ago, our former colleague from Wythenshawe and Sale East, Paul Goggins, tragically and suddenly passed away. Paul and I had tabled several cross-party amendments to the Bill that became the Mesothelioma Act 2014, and colleagues on both sides of the House will agree that his expertise and compassion have been and continue to be a great loss. He was the driving force behind much of the work on mesothelioma, and the ongoing success of the scheme is testament to his commitment to the issue and a fitting legacy for him as a parliamentarian.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I was the Minister responsible for taking the Mesothelioma Act through Parliament and, despite the restrictions I was under, Paul was an enormously useful knowledge base. At times I went back to my civil servants and said, “No, I have facts from people who were involved in this.” That was very useful, and the House should recognise the work of Paul Goggins.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's intervention. I still have the Christmas card that Paul gave to me just before we rose for Christmas in 2013, in which he started, “Dear fellow meso warrior”. He was passionate about this, and it was a real privilege to have tabled amendments in his name—obviously, he was unable to be here to push them through.

We were successful during the passage of the Mesothelioma Act—with the support of colleagues on both sides of the House and in the other place, led by

Lord Alton of Liverpool—in aligning payments with the 100% average civil damages. I am therefore sure that, like me, Paul would have welcomed the Minister's written ministerial statement of 23 January on the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme which confirmed, thanks to the excellent work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), that the levy to be charged for 2018-19, payable by the insurance industry to fund the scheme, will be just short of £40 million.

Since the launch of the scheme in 2014, £130 million has been paid in compensation to almost 1,000 sufferers—that is £130 million that was not previously available to those suffering from mesothelioma who are not covered by the alternative schemes and unable to trace their employer's liability insurance. I am grateful for the efforts of everyone in the House, including the late Paul Goggins and my right hon. Friend, who was the Minister at the time, in helping to provide such compensation for those who would not have had it previously.

Having worked with long-suffering officials at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for three and a half years as a Minister, I will take a second to praise the oversight committee's annual report on the scheme. The report is well set out and tells us everything we need to know in a clear and transparent way, so I thank the officials who worked hard on it.

One amendment that Paul and I were sadly unsuccessful in adding to the legislation would have introduced an additional levy on the insurance industry to fund research into mesothelioma. It remains the case, as it has for decades, that mesothelioma is poorly understood and underfunded. We know it has a long latency period and is an incredibly aggressive form of lung cancer, and we also anticipate a future spike in diagnoses, with Medway a particular hotspot for the disease given its rich shipbuilding and industrial heritage. I am pleased that Medway clinical commissioning group is working with the local hospital to review its respiratory pathways, including the care of lung cancer patients, and the CCG is keen to be in the next round of lung health checks because of the higher incidence of mesothelioma in the area.

As the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) said, we urgently need better to understand the disease. We need to work towards a meaningful treatment, and perhaps even a cure. Although I accept that this does not fall wholly within the remit of the Department for Work and Pensions, it is notable that the annual review shows that the levy scheme had a £3.45 million surplus last year. Following agreement with the insurance industry, the surplus was divided equally into the levy for the next three years. It might have been better to put that money into research, as while £3 million is small change in the insurance world, it is a lottery win for research. Again, that might be worth considering for next year. I would be grateful if, on the back of this debate, the Minister would write to me to elaborate on what work her Department is undertaking to engage the Department of Health and Social Care in better understanding the disease and improving outcomes for sufferers.

Asbestos in schools is an important topic. Although, again, this does not fall wholly within the remit of the DWP, it does have important implications for the various schemes the DWP administers for sufferers. In a 2015 Adjournment debate on asbestos in schools, I mentioned that the issue needed a cross-departmental effort led by

the Department for Education through the Priority School Building programme. I would be grateful if the Minister could update us on any discussions she has had with DFE colleagues on the potential impact of asbestos in schools. For example, is any data shared on the profession of applicants to the asbestos-related schemes whose benefits are administered by her Department?

There is a huge amount to commend in the Government's ongoing commitment to supporting those who suffer from mesothelioma and asbestos-related diseases. I miss my meso partner in crime, Paul Goggins, enormously. Although he would agree that the progress should be celebrated, he would continue to say that there is always much more that can be done further to improve the outcomes for sufferers of this terrible disease.

1.36 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to be able to contribute to this debate. The Whips Office asked me whether I would like to contribute because my constituency historically had a strong mining tradition, and I am particularly pleased to take part because 3,000 or so people lose their life to mesothelioma each year.

In August 2008 one of those who lost their life to the disease was John MacDougall, then the Member of Parliament for the constituency I have the privilege to represent. John was only 60 years old, and he should have had years and years of active life ahead of him. He had given 26 years of service to the people as a councillor and as a Member of Parliament, and for many years before that he had been a trade unionist. It is a tragic irony that while John, through his trade union activities, was working for safer working conditions for his colleagues at the Rosyth dockyard and, later, at the Methil oil rig yard he was working in an environment that led to his tragic early death, denying him and his family the active retirement he had a right to expect.

The last time I remember seeing John—as far as I know, it was the last public activity he was able to carry out—was at an event organised by a stalwart of Fife Council, Willie Clarke, as part of a campaign to get proper recognition and proper compensation for former miners and others whose lives were blighted by pneumoconiosis. It seems appropriate to mark both John and Willie today. Willie gave 43 years' service as a councillor in Fife, and he retired in 2016.

I think the reason for these regulations today and for why there is a statutory compensation scheme for miners, plumbers and others who suffer from these terrible diseases, is the determination of people like Willie Clarke. As a councillor and as a National Union of Mineworkers official, he worked with other officials in the NUM and in other trade unions. Without them, I do not think we would have a statutory scheme today, so I pay tribute to Willie, the late John MacDougall and others who have gone before us. They deserve the credit for our having this scheme.

The scheme is not perfect, and it can be criticised, but it has to be better than what we had before. Until we had a statutory compensation scheme, people had to take their employer through the courts. As the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) mentioned, the compensation to a family for the loss of a loved one is often much, much less than the compensation paid to

[Peter Grant]

a patient who has to live with the consequences of their illness. That fact has been abused mercilessly by employers and others for decades. Often the reason for delays and so-called “complications” in compensation cases was purely down to the fact that the employer knew that if they could keep the case going until the claimant died, the size of any compensation payment would be significantly reduced. This was an insidious, vile and evil way to treat people, when they had often given years of service to companies, but that was what the business interests of employers often dictated. Again, I pay tribute to those who have helped to make sure that such a situation has been significantly improved. It has not been entirely sorted out, but things are better than they were in years gone by.

My grandad, Peter Quinn, whose name I am proud to bear, died when I was 10. I only remember him as an old man, one who was usually sick. He had to get a downstairs bathroom installed in his house and convert a front room into a bedroom because he could not get up and down the stairs. He could hardly walk the length of his garden—that is what I remember of him—but he was not much older than I am today. He had been a plumber all his days, which is clearly what caused the damage to his lungs and ended his life prematurely, as it ended the lives of tens of thousands, and possibly millions, of hard-working people the length and breadth of these islands. Those who are left behind and still have to live with the consequences of these appalling diseases deserve all the help we can give them, as do their families and loved ones.

I certainly support the proposal being put forward today. I was not surprised, because I already knew this, but it was disappointing that the Minister said there is not a statutory entitlement for these payments to be increased by the rate of inflation every year. Why is there not? Surely it is time to say to these people, “We think that the compensation that people like you will get in five years’ time should be worth the same in real terms as the money you are getting just now.” It should not need a decision of Parliament to accept—or, in theory, to reject—that increase. This is not money given to people to let them live in luxury. It is given to people as inadequate compensation for the loss of many years of their life and, very often, for the loss of quality life during the years they have left. We are talking about the people who made this collection of nations what it is. We would not have the economy we have today were it not for the shipyards in places such as Burntisland, which John MacDougall represented for so long, and for the mines, which produced massive wealth for so few, but which also destroyed the lives and livelihoods of so many. It is therefore appropriate that we continue to operate this compensation scheme and give, as an absolute minimum, an increase that allows people to keep pace with inflation.

However, I urge the Minister to give serious consideration to amending the legislation so that in future these increases in benefits can be made automatically. There should not be any option for this House to impose what would, in effect, be a reduction in real terms. I support the inflationary increase now, but I hope that by this time next year this increase, and perhaps a wee bit more, will be given automatically as a matter of right and not at the discretion of this House.

1.43 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I rise in support of both these statutory instruments, which are sensibly being taken together, not least because we can now talk about the need to compensate people because of two basic products: coal and coal dust; and asbestos. This country got its wealth from coal, as men went down the mines to bring the coal out. For centuries, the wealth it provided put this country where it was. Asbestos was the great invention post-war, the insulating product that saved many lives, not least in fire prevention and insulation. Subsequently, however, it has destroyed millions of lives in this country today.

I am supporting the Minister today. I sat on the Bench where she is, taking these original measures through. I will make some more arguments in a moment, but at that time I made exactly the argument that the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) just made: why is this increase not automatically put through? I do not think there is an answer to that; I think this is just about bureaucracy and red tape. When the Bill was introduced all those years ago it was not perfect, as Bills often are not. There was so much happiness that that compensation Bill was brought through by the Labour party that things were missed or, as was my experience when I brought through the Bill that became the Mesothelioma Act 2014, people said, “It is too difficult. We don’t have the information at the moment. It can’t quite be done in that way.” I will touch on that in a moment. Such a measure would need primary legislation, but it could be tagged on to the many, many social security Bills that this House sees regularly—if we get the long title right, that can be done.

I know that the Minister will be listening, not only to me, but to Members from across the House, as, rightly, that is how she is as a Minister. So, first, I ask her to say to her officials, “This should be the last time that this is done this way.” This House can find time, if it really wants to, to right a wrong. There is no way in the world this House will say no to the uprating, so let us be pragmatic and sensible about it. I know that the officials in the Box will be sitting there thinking, “That Penning is going on again, just like he did when he was a Minister”, but what I am saying is right.

I wish to touch on a trivial point that the shadow Minister made: it is not “fibres” that cause mesothelioma, but fibre; something so small it would sit on the end of my finger will, 40 years from now, almost certainly kill people if it develops. No one understands why, and I will address that in moment. The public need to understand that this could affect people working in a school, a shipyard or myriad other occupations, including my former occupation of fireman. We were completely unprotected when we were going in to pull ceilings down, and turn things over and damp things down so that they did not reignite. Often there would be asbestos there, and we knew that. But we were the lucky ones, I think, because we were protected by the Fire Brigades Union, the union I was a member and branch secretary of; I recall being thrown out of the Labour party for a few years because we were too militant at the time. For me, as a trade unionist, this issue was very important, as firemen have died from asbestos-related diseases.

We have talked about the mines. Miners, often generation after generation after generation, put their lives at risk to go down the mines. Should we have learnt from the dangers? I agree that in some cases we should have

done, but in other cases we did not really know. I used to live just down the road from a coal merchants, and as lads we often used to go to earn a bit of pocket money by filling the sacks. The coal dust there was not that much different from that in a mine, although the work was not as arduous as working down a mine. Did we realise, and did they realise, that this could seriously damage our lungs in the future? Of course not. So we need to learn from the past, and we have rightly done so.

I was enormously proud to bring through this House, as the Minister, the 2014 Act, which compensates people in cases where we cannot find their insurer and their employer, and where they were the missing few. I was lobbied heavily by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and by Paul Goggins and others to make it 100% rather than the 80% that was initially proposed, and to include third parties. Let us just think for a minute about what “third party” means. It often means the partner. It often means the wife of someone who worked in a shipyard and came home in his overalls covered in asbestos, which she then washed and hung out on the line. Is it right that we do not make sure that she has just as much, and that those families and those kids have just as much? The kids playing in the yard where those overalls were hanging could have been affected, but let us hope that has not happened. Could we, as was suggested in the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford, have written into the legislation that research should be part of the funding? I was told by my officials that we could not guarantee the money and we must not jeopardise the Bill, but that we could come back to that later. Well, here we are now, later. I stood at that Dispatch Box and said that if there was money there from the levy, that would be used for compensation. I said that on behalf of Her Majesty's Government, on the Treasury Bench, as the Minister, with full authority from the Government. That should now be happening. There was clearly enough for the 100% compensation based on the average for those who had found an employer or insurer, and we now have a golden opportunity to say that the money is there. The insurers will say, “We can't guarantee this,” but they said that before, and it is based on a levy.

We are not even talking about taxpayers' money; it is a fund, and we could use it to do two things. First, if possible, we could find a cure and work out exactly what is going to go on. In retrospect, that will save lives and stop people needing money from the levy fund in the first place. I am no longer confident—hindsight is a wonderful thing—about the figures that were put in front of me and that this will taper off in the way predicted. I am not convinced about that because it involves too many industries and professions that are completely different from what we thought in the first place. We were looking at shipyards and plumbing, where asbestos was used extensively as insulation, but, as the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) mentioned, there are currently teachers in schools who are not allowed to put a drawing pin into the wall for fear of moving the asbestos fibres. When it is in place, asbestos is perfectly safe; the issue is when it is moved. There are also hospitals to consider. There is one in Watford that looks after my constituency and dates back to before Victorian times. I am told that rather than build a new hospital, they are going to plough

loads of money into that one to regenerate and refurbish it. We know that the asbestos in that hospital is a major problem. Why are we treating people in hospitals where we know that asbestos and dilapidation are issues? We need to protect the public as much as possible and make sure that the compensation schemes are there.

Before I finish, let me touch on the Health and Safety Executive, for which I was responsible as a Minister back in 2014, and which does a remarkable job. At the time, we looked carefully at how it was funded, and almost all its funding came from the central departmental funding stream. It is relatively different now: the Health and Safety Executive is a world leader in health and safety and brings a huge amount of money into the country's economy, because we have freed it up to be able to do that. That does not mean that outside money should pay for everything. I am absolutely sure that the Health and Safety Executive needs to do the best possible job.

In 2005, my constituency was blown up by the Buncefield explosions—the largest fire and explosion in this country since the second world war. The Health and Safety Executive was absolutely brilliant. We were very lucky that no one died, and that meant that the Health and Safety Executive was responsible for the inquiry. As the constituency MP, I gave the Health and Safety Executive a pretty rough time, as everybody would expect me to have done, to get answers. In many ways, the Health and Safety Executive got those answers, and it was a privilege to be the Minister responsible for it some five years later.

1.53 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I want to tell the Minister and the House a little about the life of Jack Hordon, who was until recently one of my constituents. Sadly, Mr Hordon died in December last year after a life in which he had worked in Barrow shipyard and in the merchant navy on behalf of the New Zealand Shipping Company. He was similar to many thousands of my constituents over the years, and similar to many people in shipbuilding areas and coalmining towns who served their families and their communities. They provided for themselves and their families, but in Barrow shipyard they also did a service for the nation by building vessels that went to war and the submarine fleets that have kept our nation safe for many years. Sometimes because of a lack of knowledge and often because of employers' lack of care for their employees at the time, those people were exposed and unwittingly exposed their families—including their children, as the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) rightly described—to this deadly killer that sometimes lay quiet for decades until it struck and took away their lives in the most cruel and painful circumstances.

I raise Mr Hordon's case partly because his life is representative of so many, but also because of the particular gap and injustice exposed by his recent experience. I am very proud to be the successor of Lord Hutton of Furness. He now sits in the other place but was the previous Member of Parliament for Barrow and Furness. He was the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in the previous Labour Government, when I was privileged to serve as his special adviser, and he was determined to speed up access to justice for mesothelioma sufferers and to stop the terrible situation in which there were delays in many sufferers getting their compensation payments, as previous speakers have described.

[John Woodcock]

While Lord Hutton was serving in government, there was also a debate about pleural plaques. After he left the post, he privately lobbied his successor in the Department not to close the scheme and to remain alive to the potential pitfalls of the Government's approach to pleural plaques. The window for claiming pleural plaques compensation was closed in 2007, and there was a debate about that at the time. Mr Hordon fell ill in 2017 and was diagnosed in August that year as a sufferer of malignant mesothelioma. For 20 years, he had been the full-time carer of his wife of 65 years. Throughout their life—all the time that she suffered from severely debilitating disabilities—they had never claimed. He had always worked assiduously to provide for the family so that they could stand on their own feet. When he fell ill, there was severe distress in the family at his no longer being able to perform that role. Mrs Hordon was forced to go into emergency care, which became permanent, at great distress to her and to the family.

The financial burden and the uncertainty meant there was a real imperative to seek mesothelioma compensation. The initial contact with solicitors was positive. As was the experience of many Members' constituents, the solicitors said that the case could be taken forward at the greatest possible speed. However, they soon came back with the discovery that Mr Hordon had previously made a claim for pleural plaques, and it turned out that he had signed that, on the strong advice of his solicitors at the time, as a full and final settlement. The family were left unable to claim. They went back over their experience, and Mr Hordon could remember that the advice he was given was that there was only a 1% chance of the pleural plaques worsening into a terminal condition. The solicitors advised him, in the words of the family, "to bite off the hand" of those offering it.

I am grateful to the Minister for agreeing to a meeting because, clearly, this will not be an isolated case. Two issues arise from Mr Hordon's tragic death and the circumstances around it: one is the injustice of him being denied the compensation that he needed every bit as much as anyone else who falls victim to such a condition; and secondly, there is a case for an inquiry into the practices around pleural plaques at the time. Mr Hordon's family is clear that he cannot have been given proper advice by the solicitors and by those who were estimating the chances of his condition developing into something that was terminal. The fact is there was a financial incentive for some firms to use sharp practices: they wanted to seize the chance of cash without proper analysis of what the real risks were to people and what their circumstances might be in the future.

Mr Hordon and his family were clear that the risks were not properly spelled out to him. He cannot be alone in that. I speak on behalf of my own constituent and, as I said in my intervention on the Minister, of a constituency that has the highest number of asbestosis-related lung cancer deaths in the whole of England and Wales. I am sure that, potentially, the condition will affect many thousands more people across the country. Will the Government please agree to examine this issue so that there is the prospect of justice for people who find themselves in this situation?

2.2 pm

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): I never thought that I would be involved in this debate at such a late stage in my life. I remember making my maiden speech. I had worked down the pits. There were 700 pits and 700,000 miners at the time. Those miners were very much responsible for assisting the nation both during the second world war and after. Those were very hard days in the mines, yet I finished up in this place, mainly because they wanted me to stop another Labour candidate from getting the seat. *[Interruption.]* That is the truth. I finished up in the palace of varieties, and here we are, many years later, discussing the very thing that I spoke about way back in 1970. It is almost like the Common Market coming back all over again—which it is.

I want to say from the outset that I agree with the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) who talked about the yearly increase. We do that for a lot of things in Parliament; we increase things automatically. When I think about this subject, I can say that there is no better reason for having an uprate in September, or whenever it is, in accordance with the increases that have taken place in inflation, in pensions and in quite a lot of other things. It would be excellent if, in these 90 minutes, we were able to get that message across. If we get the right kind of people at the Dispatch Box later, perhaps they will be able to give a nod and a wink in this direction. I have seized on this issue today mainly because it was raised by the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead from the Tory party and the hon. Member for Glenrothes from the Scottish National party.

I remember the time when mesothelioma was first raised in the House; it was raised by Mick Clapham, one of my colleagues from Barnsley. Unlike Lord Hutton, he is not in the House of Lords. I suppose that he should be—in a way. He was the one who came here with this funny sounding word that is very difficult for people to remember—mesothelioma. I remember thinking, "How does he manage to get it out of his mouth?" I had to practise saying the word at night. Yes, it is very important to remember Mick Clapham and the fact that he seized on this very important subject.

Tracey Crouch: I remember Mick Clapham because for my sins—for which I have repented through my rebellions over the Mesothelioma Act 2014—I worked for the insurance industry. Mick was the bane of our lives, particularly around the subject of compensation not just for mesothelioma—for those who could not find their employers—but for pleural plaques. The hon. Gentleman is quite right to recognise the sterling work that he did to change hearts and minds among not just Labour Members but Conservative Members for the plight of those who suffer from asbestos-related diseases.

Mr Skinner: Yes, I will get on the phone to Mick and let him know about today's events. Seriously, if I can tell him that there will be an automatic yearly increase, it will be a token to him and to all those who took part in that exercise at the time. I am very pleased to be here, and very pleased to be taking—

Sir Mike Penning *rose*—

Mr Skinner: Yes, I will give way.

Sir Mike Penning: I just thought that it would be important to the House to put this on the record: I am sure that the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) never thought that he would agree with me.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): He has not said that he has yet.

Sir Mike Penning: Well, he has actually.

This is why this House is so important. We can come together and say what is right, what is wrong and what can be done. If we come together to put a little bit of pressure on the Minister—not so much at the Dispatch Box today because she will be dragged over the coals—the Secretary of State and the Treasury, we can simply say, “This must be easier for you as a Government, and rather than bringing this forward, we can unite on this.”

Mr Skinner: I could not agree more. The fact is that it would be a breath of fresh air away from Brexit. That is my selling point. This is something that the Government will be remembered for. I will tell Mick Clapham on the phone that it is on its way and all the rest of it. It is an exercise away from the torment of Brexit, which even I never thought would reach this stage of argument. I have been voting for about 10 or 15 years—almost on my own—against every treaty. When I used to walk into the Lobby, I would sometimes bump into our leader, and I would say, “What are you doing here?” I used to think that I should have been on my own. However, we are not arguing about that today, because we want to concentrate on this issue.

I want to commend my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on the Front Bench, who has put the case very well indeed. With all my experience of representing people in the pits, I know how difficult that can be. I want to ensure that we make something out of this, and that yearly increase would be marvellous.

I thank everybody who has taken part in this important mini debate. When we think about the problem of mesothelioma and asbestos, we realise just how lucky we are to escape from it. Many of us go through life never realising that we are so close to all these things. My father was the same; he worked for 50 years in the pit, and when he went for the pneumoconiosis tests, he was told that he had it but he did not qualify for the scheme because the level was less than 10%. I have found countless others who fell into the same trap. I ask the Minister to look at the question of pneumoconiosis, because although it would not make any difference to my father—he went a long time ago—the truth is that a lot of people need a helping hand in that regard. I was speaking to one today.

I thank everybody for taking part in this important debate. It means that people suffering from mesothelioma will be regarded in a different light than they were before. People will understand that they are not the forgotten few who have been left on the shelf. There are still thousands of people with pneumoconiosis, particularly in the mining areas and especially in Wales. I found out about the levels in Wales through my own experience working in the pits. It may have been because of the anthracite—I am not sure. It is pretty clear that miners in Wales mined a lot of anthracite, and pneumoconiosis levels there were sky-high compared with some other areas’ mining districts. That is something to remember.

I compliment everybody who has taken part in this debate. It is very important and it means a lot to the people who are suffering and hanging on, especially those with mesothelioma and those who have been affected by asbestos, with pleural plaques and everything else. Believe me, this condition is almost like a death sentence the moment that people get it. Pneumoconiosis is slightly different from a medical point of view.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way near the end of his speech. I just want to echo his thanks. It is 30 years and one month exactly to the day when my father died of mesothelioma, having served his apprenticeship at the docks in Glasgow and in Burma before then. He was not able to claim and my mother was not able to claim at the time because she did not know how to go about it, so I thank everybody for the work that has been done.

Mr Skinner: Well, the story goes on and if I can stay on my feet long enough, there will be some more. There is no doubt that mesothelioma has affected a lot of people, whereas pneumoconiosis was almost entirely connected to the mining districts. The truth is that this is a killer disease, and we have to keep our eye on the issue and assist in all the ways that we possibly can, today and in the future. We shall all be on the phone to tell our friends that we managed to get this issue discussed and debated in a way that means it is not a static thing—that a lot of us have decided it would be a good idea to always remember them.

2.14 pm

Sarah Newton: It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). He probably does not realise how much we have in common. It was wonderful to hear him talk about when he came into the House back in 1970, when the subject of his maiden speech was mining in his constituency. When I had the privilege of being elected to represent my home in Cornwall in 2010, the subject of my maiden speech was very much my community and my ancestors, who were Cornish miners. They were mining different things—minerals, tin in particular—but of course suffered the same risks of exposure to dust. In our case it is silica dust rather than coal dust. I have always had the passion, as the hon. Gentleman does, to speak up for those people in my constituency and for my ancestors. My grandfather worked in the docks in Falmouth and was exposed to the very risks that so many hon. Members have spoken about this afternoon.

The hon. Member for Bolsover and others have asked why we are not automatically uprating these particular compensation schemes. Well, let me gently say that this debate makes a powerful case for why it is important that we do have an annual debate. I will absolutely think about what has been said about automatic uprating, but if we had automatically uprated the schemes this year and the provisions had gone through on a motion along with every other social security payment, would we have had the benefit of this debate? We have had the benefit of the hon. Gentleman reminding the House of the huge contribution of Mick Clapham. As he said, it is really important that we do not forget these things and that we do not forget the hard work that has been undertaken by colleagues from all over the House over many years. These are hard-won successes, so it is important that we take these opportunities to remember.

Mike Amesbury: This really is about doing the right thing and working together. Obviously we have heard very powerful historical stories from Members right across the Chamber, but automatic uprating is the right thing to do.

Sarah Newton: Of course we want to do the right thing, which is why we are here today, uprating the scheme. However, we should pause to reflect on the fact that this debate has enabled us to look at this dynamic situation; the hon. Member for Bolsover was absolutely right to describe it as such. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said that he has doubts about some of the forecasts around the schemes. We have also heard from other Members who want us to look at research and at what more we can do. If we did not have the opportunity of this debate, how would hon. Members have been able to raise those matters? I will seriously look at the question of an automatic uprating, but today has also proved the importance of giving hope to so many constituents through such a debate.

Sir Mike Penning: The Minister is being very generous and the House is listening very carefully because this is such an important debate. This House is not going to turn down the uprating—never would. But we could actually have a proper debate on this subject through the Backbench Business Committee or in Government time. Actually, half the things that we have been talking about today are nothing to do with what is actually on the Order Paper, with all due respect, Mr Deputy Speaker; we have been having a more general discussion. That is probably the answer. I accept that the Minister has to take this question away, but this is a golden opportunity to say that this House accepts that the scheme should be automatically uprated. We should then have a general debate on the issues, but that should not be a reason not to uprate the schemes.

Sarah Newton: My right hon. Friend makes a really important point. I have already committed to taking this matter away, but this debate has been very valuable. As we have seen from the quality and range of contributions, this debate has allowed the time for Members to raise a lot of important matters. Quite rightly, we have roamed far and wide, but this was an important debate none the less.

Peter Grant: Following on from the comments of the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), with respect I do not think that the opportunity for us to talk to ourselves—and possibly to people watching—for an hour or so justifies the potential uncertainty for sufferers. Just now, they do not know how much they are going to get next year or the year after. I would quite happily forgo the chance to listen to my own voice for 10 minutes if I knew that my constituents could be certain for the rest of their lives that their payments would always keep up with inflation. This is the fourth time in three weeks that businesses has collapsed hours early, so there are plenty of other opportunities—through the Backbench Business Committee and elsewhere—to have these debates if Members so wish. I appreciate that the Minister cannot give a definite answer from the Dispatch Box just now, but I really hope that she will take this point back to her colleagues and come back with a positive answer at some point in the future.

Sarah Newton: I am happy to confirm what I have already confirmed to other hon. Members across the House—that I am absolutely happy to take that away and look at it.

I thank the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for his support for these upratings. He asked me a number of questions that I would of course very much like to answer. Before doing so, I join him in paying respect to his constituent Brian Jamieson. One of the things the hon. Gentleman asked me about was engaging with unions. Of course, trade unions play a really vital role in our society. I have already had a meeting with the National Union of Mineworkers, together with the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), where we talked about a range of issues that the hon. Gentleman raised today. I will continue that dialogue, as well as meeting the Union of Democratic Mineworkers too.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): This debate reminds me of my own grandfather, George Winter, who suffered from pneumoconiosis. I cannot remember the exact percentage he had, but it was high, as was true of many miners in Tredegar in south Wales, where I am from. He was crushed in a pit fall in the Ty Trist colliery in Tredegar in his thirties. He had a broken femur and a crushed ribcage, and he was hospitalised for nine months. He always taught me, as I am sure that many Labour Members have been taught, that the trade unions were the most important vehicle for promoting good health and safety to make sure that people were respected and looked after at work.

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing with us the tragic case of his grandfather. That reminds us, as so many colleagues have done today, of the sacrifices that people have made in these essential industries. So much of what we look around at has been created by people who made the sacrifice of working in these very, very physically demanding and dangerous industries. He is right to remind us of the sacrifices that the families have made.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) recognised—I join him in this—the work of Willie Clarke and John MacDougall, and other NUM officials, in creating the schemes that we have before us today. He also talked about Peter Quinn, his grandfather, and his premature death as a result of exposure to asbestos. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) about his father, who died 30 years ago. That really shows how the exposure to these dusts has had such a catastrophic effect on so many people's lives, not only in this House but across our country.

I am absolutely delighted that the former Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, was able to join us today and speak so passionately, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). I recognise the really important contributions that they both made, as well as the former Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, in bringing in the 2014 diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme. As was so rightly pointed out, that filled the gaps in the schemes we are talking about today, meaning that many, many more people are getting financial support.

I want to add my own tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford—our meso warrior. This really shows the difference that individual Members of Parliament can make in this House by banding together with other colleagues to make such important changes to people's lives. I take on board her very sensible suggestion that we look at the age of people when they are diagnosed as well as their occupation. We need to be constantly looking for new trends to make sure that we are aware of people working in new or different occupations who had hitherto been thought not to be so directly affected and who might benefit from these schemes. I know that she takes a particular interest in teachers and teaching.

Tracey Crouch: I perhaps ought to put it on the record that, because of my passionate speech on Second Reading of the Mesothelioma Bill, when it was quite clear that I wanted to make changes to the legislation, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), as the Minister at the time, made sure that I was not put on the Bill Committee. Newer Members of the House looking to make a difference in this place should perhaps make a more anodyne contribution on Second Reading and then do their bit in Committee.

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is a doughty parliamentary campaigner, and she shares a very interesting tip with newer Members of the House.

I am very happy to take away my hon. Friend's suggestion, which was powerfully backed up by the former Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, that we should look at the surplus within the scheme, which is funded by a levy on the industry. Those surpluses could well be used for further research. I will take that away and look at it. It was rightly pointed out that we need to be very mindful of future projections about the numbers of people who might be affected to make sure that the scheme has adequate funding to meet any future unanticipated needs. I will look at that again to determine whether there is more that we could do on that.

I want to reassure the House on the two points raised about what more the Health and Safety Executive is doing to raise awareness of the risks of asbestosis, especially in schools. The Department for Education and the HSE have been working for long periods on what more can be done to be raise awareness of the good management of asbestos, whether in hospitals or in schools. The Department for Education has taken a real interest in this. There is now a new assurance scheme that started last March, and funding is made available through the Department for the upgrading of school facilities. We are making a lot of progress in assessing the risk and skilling people up to manage asbestos when they find it and then ultimately replace it. The Health and Safety Executive is always informing all the different workplaces of the risks of asbestos and what can be done to reduce them.

It is absolutely fair to say that the Health and Safety Executive has had to make efficiency savings in its budgets over the past few years. However, in no way, shape or form can one say that that is leading it not to be able to do its job well. When I meet the chief executive and the chairman, as I do regularly, they tell

me that they have the resources that they need to keep people safe at work. We have only to look at the evidence of what is happening in workplaces to see that the HSE has been innovative and creative, working in partnership with others. As I said in my opening speech, there are far fewer people acquiring injuries, and having fatal injuries, at work. That is to the great credit of the Health and Safety Executive, as I think a lot of Members across the House have recognised.

Finally, there is the question of the equalisation of the sums that are paid out between the people who are directly affected by the conditions and their loved ones. The same issue is raised each time this debate is held. The Government's view is that it is most important that the funding is given to the people with the condition who would most benefit from it. Of course, I fully understand that families can be devastated and very badly affected, but there is still the recognition that they are able to get compensation, even if it is not at the same level. When we have to make decisions about how we use our precious resources—the taxpayers' money that is available—it is only right that we target that money by giving it to the people to whom it can make the biggest difference.

We have had a really excellent debate in which we have managed to raise a lot of issues around the health service, education, the Health and Safety Executive, and research. I am very grateful for Members' contributions and for the support across the House for these very important schemes that are having a very positive impact on people's lives. I look forward to working with Members who have asked to meet me on how we can work even more closely together and make an even more positive contribution.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

Resolved,

That the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.—(*Sarah Newton.*)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 4 to 8 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (PRIVATE INTERNATIONAL LAW)

That the draft Civil Jurisdiction and Judgments (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 12 December 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Financial Markets and Insolvency (Amendment and Transitional Provision) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (DIAMOND TRADING)

That the draft Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 20 December 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ROAD TRAFFIC)

That the draft Drivers' Hours and Tachographs (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 14 January, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Buckinghamshire (Structural Changes) (Modification of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 14 January, be approved.—(*Michelle Donelan.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

The future of maintained nursery schools

2.29 pm

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I am always proud to represent my constituency of Haslingden and Hyndburn, and I certainly am this evening, in presenting this petition for Fairfield Nursery in Accrington West. I visit Fairfield quite regularly. It is an outstanding nursery within a deprived community, and it provides high-quality provision to a very high standard. Like most Members who are presenting petitions on this issue, the nurseries in my constituency are excellent or outstanding and often cater for the most vulnerable children and children with needs—children who require the highest quality of support, which may be withdrawn from them. Fairfield faces numerous other problems. I want the Government to understand that this is about not just the unfair funding formula, but numerous other issues. I present this petition on behalf of the parents, careers, staff and governors of Fairfield maintained nursery school in Accrington, and there are 89 signatories to it.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the parents, careers, staff and governors of Fairfield maintained nursery school in Accrington]

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the government to take action to ensure nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002331]

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I rise to present this petition relating to the future secure funding of state-maintained nurseries on behalf of Great Coates Village Nursery School, which is one of two outstanding nurseries in my constituency. This is the second time in my two-year campaign to save those nurseries that I have presented a petition to Government. I have had meetings with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and Ministers to discuss funding for state-maintained nurseries. Children, former students, parents, staff and the local communities in Scartho and Great Coates place great

value in these welcoming and cherished early years providers, which are sometimes the only settings that will take physically and learning disabled children and provide them with a high level of education in a suitable environment, where all children play and learn together, regardless of their background, ability or disability. I urge the Government to recognise that there is no time to waste when it comes to the funding of state-maintained nurseries. I present this petition, to which there are 81 signatories, on behalf of parents, carers, staff and governors of Great Coates Village maintained nursery school in Grimsby.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Great Coates Village maintained nursery school in Grimsby.]

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by the Government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002399]

The delivery of Brexit

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I would like to present a petition on behalf of my constituents about delivering a

“Brexit which people voted for.”

The petition is so heavy and so many people—thousands—have signed it, that the Doorkeeper kindly brought it into the Chamber and took it out. It is the first time that a petition has had such a large number of signatures that I have had to do that.

The lead names on the petition are Andy Mercer, chairman of Wellingborough Conservative Association; Helen Harrison, chair of Corby and East Northamptonshire Conservative Association; and John Vickers, president of Wellingborough Conservative Association. They are all not only long-standing Conservatives but devoted to the local community. If I read the petition, Members will see why my residents are so enraged.

The petition, to the honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, states:

The Humble Petition of the residents of Wellingborough, Northamptonshire and the surrounding areas,
Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the Brexit that they voted for should be adhered to by Her Majesty's Government. This includes, ending the free-movement of people from the EU and control immigration, stop sending billions and billions of £s each year to Brussels, make our own laws in our own country, judges by our own judges.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Prime Minister to take in account the concerns of petitioners and deliver a Brexit which people voted for.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[P002401]

The future of maintained nursery schools

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): As the former long-standing chair of the Campaign for Real Nursery Education, I am pleased to present a petition on behalf of parents and staff at the Portman nursery in Church Street, which is one of the most deprived communities in the whole country, with a long history of providing superb and integrated nursery education for children. The Portman, the Mary Paterson and the Dorothy Gardner nurseries in my constituency were prototypes for the original model of children's centres, but they are now sadly again struggling with an undermining of their funding. That is doing so much to diminish the excellent quality of early years experience, which we should be cherishing, rather than diluting. I am pleased to support the parents, as I have done for a great many years, and to urge the Government to ensure that we cherish our centres of excellence and do not diminish the quality of education they provide.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The parents, carers, staff and governors of Portman Early Childhood Centre maintained nursery school in London

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by the Government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc]

[P002410]

Prostate Cancer

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

2.37 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I rise to open this five-hour Adjournment debate—that was a joke, Mr Deputy Speaker. This debate is certainly timely, given that on Monday this week we celebrated the 20th anniversary of World Cancer Day, and many Members will have attended the event held by Cancer Research UK in Portcullis House this morning. It is timely given the more than welcome announcement by the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care of record investment coming into the national health service. It is timely because we have the Government's welcome and focused cancer strategy. It is timely because at no other time in our history have Government and health campaigners and providers had a greater communication platform to reach out to members of the public and explain, inform and educate. Finally, this debate is also timely because this week, under the auspices of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who has considerable nursing experience, we have seen the launch of the all-party parliamentary group on male cancers, including prostate cancer.

We need to recognise that cancer is still feared in this country. Terms such as “battle”, “fight” and “lost the crusade” against cancer are used in countless obituaries, which testifies to that fear. I hope that we all take heart from the commitment in this important health area shown by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine). That should provide us with a reservoir of optimism about the seriousness and determination of the Department on these issues.

It may just be something to do with my sex—I am not sure—but all the statistics and all the anecdotes tell us that men appear to have a greater aversion to going to the doctor and asking questions about their health than our female counterparts, and certainly anything below the waist is to be avoided at all costs because it is going to be painful, embarrassing and undignified.

I pause for a moment to reflect on the absolute honesty that we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and indeed the clarity of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the Dispatch Box during a recent Prime Minister's questions, about cervical cancer testing—admitting some of the inhibitions, but, given the importance, exhorting people to take those tests. I do not think that I hear such exhortations and frank honesty from men about this health issue.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I commend the hon. Gentleman for his leadership and for securing this important debate. I have been along to the World Cancer Day event today, where I was told that more than a third of cancer cases can be prevented, and another third can be cured if detected early and treated properly. The message he is sending out today is really important for us to share across the whole country.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I will turn to diagnosis in a moment.

Let me return to the point I made a moment or so ago about fear. We will all have had family and close friends experience being given a diagnosis of prostate cancer or, indeed, other cancers, and the first thing is always to face that in a very black mood and think that there is absolutely no cure. However, we know that there are scientists—clever men and women—striving every day to find such cures. Indeed, life expectancy post an early diagnosis is of course getting better and better. Rightly, we place huge emphasis on breast and cervical cancers, but I suggest to the Minister that, in the shape of male cancers, we need to up the game in communication and education as well.

Some statistics on prostate cancer, provided by Prostate Cancer UK, may be of help to the House. Prostate cancer is the most common male cancer in our country: 47,000 men are diagnosed each year. One in eight men will get prostate cancer, and every 45 minutes one man dies of it in our country. Men over 50—I turned 50 this year, so I do not know whether—[HON. MEMBERS: “No.”] I know; it is almost impossible to believe. I am not sure whether I should therefore declare an interest, but men over 50 are more prone to it, particularly if they have a family history.

A statistic I have learned—I am yet to find any particular reason for it—is that black men are far more at risk of contracting prostate cancer: one in four will get it. Someone’s risk of prostate cancer is heightened—again, this was a new fact to me—if their mother or their sister has had breast cancer. I wonder how many people recognise that and see that, if a female in the family is diagnosed with breast cancer, that should act as a spur for them to go and have a test. In 2016, 11,631 men died of prostate cancer in the UK alone.

At our party conference last year, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said:

“The key to boosting your chance of surviving cancer is early diagnosis... Through our Cancer Strategy, we will increase the early detection rate... We will do it by...investing in the very latest scanners.”

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important Adjournment debate. As well as early diagnosis, this is about people’s awareness that they themselves may possibly have the symptoms. When my husband was diagnosed, he just thought he had a chill. Unfortunately, his is incurable, but he thought no more about it than that he had a chill. An even more important issue than having screening is that we should be aware of our bodies.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Lady makes an incredibly telling point, because unless people know what the full range of symptoms are, they do not really know what they should be thinking and whether one of those symptoms or a combination of them should actually trigger a visit to their doctor in the first instance. I think she is absolutely right that we need a better understanding.

This goes back to a point I made a moment or two ago. Because this is a below-the-waist issue and we men get frightfully embarrassed about those sorts of things, we are inclined to say that it might just be something else or that it will pass, and so on. However, for too

many people, it is left too late to have any meaningful, beneficial outcome as and when they eventually go to see their GP and then trigger the referral process.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we can concentrate on all the negatives, but we have to get across that people are surviving and, more than surviving, actually living well? We have to present that because, with some cancers, there is still the idea that if someone gets it, “Well, that’s it then”.

Simon Hoare *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I just read out the deferred Division result?

Simon Hoare: We wait with bated breath.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Absolutely.

I have now to announce the result of today’s deferred Division. In respect of the question relating to long-term investment funds, the Ayes were 302 and the Noes were 262, so the Ayes have it.

[*The Division list is published at the end of today’s debates.*]

I must inform the House that there were errors in calculating the number of votes of Members for English and Welsh constituencies and for English constituencies in Divisions yesterday on the police grant and the local government finance report. On the police grant, the figures for the England and Wales-only vote should not have been announced as 289 for the Ayes and 242 for the Noes; they should have been announced as—Ayes 289 and Noes 244. On the local government finance report, the figures for the England-only vote should not have been announced as 270 for the Ayes and 208 for the Noes; they should have been announced as—Ayes 270 and Noes 206. The results are unaffected.

Simon Hoare: A restless nation will sit easier in their armchairs knowing that, and we are grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your public service announcement.

To respond to the intervention from the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), I think he is absolutely right that we—not just Ministers, but health practitioners and all of us in our communities—need to stress again and again the widening range of treatments, the recovery rates and the extra lifespan one can have after early diagnosis and treatment. I suppose it is a perfectly legitimate historical response to have to such a diagnosis, but we need to end once and for all people saying, “Well, that’s it. I’ve had my chips.” To say, “You know, let’s see what we can do with the rest of it”, and in effect give up, is absolutely the worst thing that one could do.

May I raise the subject of diagnosis with the Minister? To pause there, I am not saying this to ingratiate myself with my hon. Friend, but the understanding and sensitivity that he brings to these issues and, indeed, to his wider portfolio commands respect across the House. I think we are very lucky to have him, and I am particularly pleased that my hon. Friend is the Minister replying to this debate.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On that point, I had the privilege of attending an event that the Minister addressed a couple of weeks ago, and I was struck by the passion with which he spoke about this subject. I entirely endorse what my hon. Friend has said about the Minister's commitment. In passing, I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important Adjournment debate, and may I assure him that, when it comes to fighting prostate cancer, this is something on which he and I see absolutely eye to eye?

Simon Hoare: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I think we both stand at roughly 5 feet 6 or 7 inches, although I might be slightly taller than him when he is in his stocking feet. I get his reference and it is delightful to see eye to eye with him.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I wonder what you two want out of the Minister, given that you are giving him so much praise. Having said that, I am sure the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) will agree that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has sometimes been slow in making progress on treatments, as we have seen with other health problems. I echo his words that, simply put, men just do not like to tell anybody when they are not well. When people tell me that they have an illness like prostate cancer, they often say, "But don't tell anybody." The big problem is getting men to realise that they have to do something early, and the person who finds the answer to that very difficult issue will have done a great service.

Simon Hoare: I agree. In answer to the first part of the hon. Gentleman's intervention, which I presume was rhetorical, I just want the Minister to carry on with the excellent work he is doing. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we need to blow away the cloak of secrecy and, sometimes, shame and embarrassment. No family represented in this House will not have heard an aunt or an uncle say, in slightly hushed tones and that silent mouthed way, best exemplified by Les Dawson, that they have the big C. It is as though they cannot quite bring themselves to announce the word, in case it brings a plague upon their house. We have to brush all that away.

I am absolutely determined to get on to the issue that I want the Minister to address, which is what I was trying to do about 16 interventions ago. I urge him to grasp the opportunity—provided not least by the additional funding—for efficient, cost-effective and easier diagnosis. I appreciate that there is a whole range of things in the marketplace, but during my research I have been particularly struck by the opportunities presented by the pre-biopsy multiparametric MRI scan. We have a problem, because while demand for MRI scans rose by 30% between 2013 and 2016, this country still has fewer MRI scanners per head of the population than other countries with comparable populations. The additional moneys available provide a golden opportunity to do something about that.

Of course, it is never just a question of cash and kit, so allied with that are the people who can use the kit. The workforce are key. In addressing the issue of money and the benefits it can provide, we should note that we will not realise its full potential if we are short on

workforce. The 10% vacancy rate in the national health service cannot be allowed to become the norm. Prostate cancer patients need and would like more clinical nurse specialists, who have the empathy and expertise to provide comfort, hope and a guiding hand. It is difficult to recruit in any specialist nurse area, but that should not put us off the endeavour.

Likewise, we need a recruitment drive for more radiologists. Prostate Cancer UK estimates that an additional 23 to 31 radiologists are needed in the UK. The Royal College of Radiologists estimates that in the financial year 2016-17, a whopping £116 million was spent on the outsourcing and insourcing of radiological skills additional to core contracted hours. To put that in perspective, £116 million would buy about 1,300 full-time consultant radiologists.

As I have said, raising public awareness of prostate cancer—its signs, symptoms, diagnosis and treatment—is pivotal, but so too is the reinforcement of messages from the Department, NHS England and others to our general practitioners. We all know that there is a growing problem of finding people who are interested in and prepared to enter general practice. The myriad drugs that come on to market and myriad other conditions make the already demanding life of a GP ever more so.

I recently met Jim Davis, the chairman of the Dorset branch of the Prostate Cancer Support Organisation, a charity that covers Hampshire, Dorset and Sussex. It is run for men diagnosed with prostate cancer, by patients with prostate cancer. Last year, they held 23 free prostate-specific antigen testing events, which delivered those tests for 4,813 men. They have found that people are more inclined to go into that sort of environment than to their GP surgery. Their work involves—as a Hampshire Member of Parliament, the Minister may already know this—raising money, advertising the tests and hiring village halls and other places. Men then come and have the test, which is sent—in effect, the work is subcontracted—to the local hospital, which analyses it and sends back the results. I will not detain the Minister, but I could read out a whole legion of extracts from letters from grateful men who availed themselves of that opportunity and found their life chances and health much improved.

Although the national health service says that any man over 50 is entitled to a free PSA test, evidence suggests that some GPs—I stress the word "some", but one is too many—are either unaware of that entitlement or express and demonstrate an unwillingness to refer. Last May, David Radbourne, the director of commissioning operations at NHS England South East, wrote in response to a letter from Jim, who had produced a list of affected patients:

"If there are individuals who feel they are being refused legitimate access to this test...please ask them to file a complaint through the appropriate NHS complaints process."

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that in those circumstances, people should not be forced to go through an NHS complaints process. Like other campaigners, I see a lacuna, or an information gap—call it what you will—among certain GPs, and I urge the Department to consider ways in which to plug it. That issue needs to be addressed quickly. The official in the Box is waving a piece of paper and the Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), is up on her feet with alacrity, as always.

[Simon Hoare]

The Public Health England advisory note, “Advising well men aged 50 and over about the PSA test for prostate cancer”, needs to be reviewed and updated. It states:

“GPs should use their clinical judgement”.

That is a pejorative term—it is an open term—so perhaps that language should be revisited. The approach needs to be a little more robust.

Nick Smith: The hon. Gentleman is making a really important point. I am over 50, but I did not know about the test. Does he know how many men over 50 as a proportion of the population have had the test?

Simon Hoare: I am sure that I have come across that figure in my research, but I do not have it to hand. However, as I mentioned in my introductory remarks, the platforms to inform, encourage and educate us all as health citizens, for want of a better phrase, that we seem to avail ourselves of very much relate to—this is not a criticism; it is perfectly correct—cervical cancer, breast cancer and other cancers. The opportunity presented by additional funding and by the very welcome cancer strategy should now allow us all to give—I do not know whether this is quite the right phrase—parity of esteem between male and female cancers. Cancer has a devastating effect on family irrespective of which member has it. I am afraid I cannot answer that query, but the Minister may have that figure. As it is an entitlement, I urge as many men over 50 as possible to see it as routine and regular as going to the optician or the dentist.

In conclusion, with the cancer strategy, fantastic levels of funding and the active commitment, energy and understanding shown by Ministers in the Department, now is the time to make positive progress.

3.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. Here we are again and for once we are not in a rush. It will be dark outside before we finish. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) on securing today’s important debate. He entertained us and educated us, and he set out his stall very well.

Let us start with a positive: cancer survival in this country has never been better. Survival rates are at their best ever, having improved every year since 2010. That is a hard-fought success, and we should celebrate it. Among men, prostate cancer is the most common cancer in the UK and the second most common cause of cancer deaths. However, prostate cancer survival has tripled in the past 40 years, with 85% of men surviving for five or more years.

It is worth stating at the outset—some people who are watching may not be familiar with this subject—that the prostate is found only in men. It produces some of the fluid in semen and is found below the bladder. It is about the size of a walnut and surrounds the urethra, the tube that carries urine from the bladder. The causes of prostate cancer are not that well known. The strongest risk factor is age, but about 5% to 10% of prostate cancer is thought to be due to family history. Black men,

whether of black African or black Caribbean origin, are more likely to develop prostate cancer than white men. One in four will get the disease, as opposed to one in eight of all men. Asian and oriental men have the lowest chance of developing prostate cancer, which is interesting—we should always look at this sort of data when looking at prevention. I will come on to that point.

The way that prostate cancer develops is not fully understood. It is not a single disease, but a spectrum of diseases ranging from slow-growing tumours that may not cause any symptoms and may not shorten life at all to very aggressive tumours that can kill. We should remember that. As I said, the strongest risk factor is age, but younger people get it, too. I have a school friend who has recently contracted and beaten—I will come on to the use of language in a moment—prostate cancer. He may even be watching today’s debate; he may be mowing the lawn, who knows? We wish him well.

My hon. Friend raised some very good points in his speech, and I should be able to touch on them all. This is a timely debate for all the reasons he set out, but also because it was World Cancer Day on Monday. It was great to see Cancer Research UK light up the Palace of Westminster in pink and blue.

My hon. Friend’s point about language was very interesting. He may have seen a poll by Macmillan that came out last month. It showed how many people with cancer are fed up with the language of war. We often say “cancer stricken” or “victim”. We often call a person’s cancer diagnosis a “war” or a “battle”. We say that they “lost their battle” or “lost their fight” when they pass away. It is no surprise that articles in the media and posts on social networks were found to be the worst offenders. My advice is to be real and honest. Macmillan has launched the “Right there with you” campaign to highlight the challenges posed by a cancer diagnosis and the support that is available. As we all know, Macmillan does fantastic work, including in this House. I urge people to take a look at its campaign.

My hon. Friend also touched on the all-party group on male cancers, formed by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) who is a former nurse. It had one of its first gatherings this week. Orchid, the male cancer charity, will provide the secretariat for the group. It is not that well known as a charity, but it is growing fast. I met the charity at Britain against Cancer a couple of years ago, and it is now part of my cancer roundtable work here in the House every quarter. I pay tribute to its works and to the all-party group. I had a good conversation in the Lobby with my hon. Friend last night. We are going to do an awful lot together. The group is very important. If it did not exist, it would need to be invented, and I congratulate her on inventing it.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset raised early diagnosis, so let us deal with that. The biggest weapon we have in successfully treating cancer is early diagnosis. I have said many times, as did the former chair of the all-party group on cancer, that it is the magic key or magic bullet. That is true, but there are many cancers where early diagnosis is all but impossible. We do not see presentation of symptoms until it is very late and then it becomes incredibly difficult. They will be a big challenge for the cancer ambition that I will come on to talk about in a moment.

As my hon. Friend and others said, we men are notorious for not visiting the doctor at the first sign of a concerning symptom. I think that that is changing, but anything that can raise awareness of prostate cancer, where early diagnosis is indeed the magic key, is to be welcomed. I pay tribute to public figures such as Stephen Fry and Bill Turnbull from “BBC News” for speaking out so honestly about their own prostate cancer diagnosis. They provided an invaluable public service in raising the profile and awareness of the disease, giving some men the vital nudge they need to see their GP if they think something is not right. For some men, it can be a quick burst of symptoms that come on very quickly. They can go to a doctor, are seen and treated and have surgery in a very short space of time. For others, it can be a very slow burn.

I hope that the work that Stephen Fry, Bill Turnbull and others have done will have an impact similar to 10 years ago when the TV personality Jade Goody, following her cervical cancer diagnosis from which tragically she died, spoke out about how vital it was for women to attend their smear tests. We had an excellent debate in Westminster Hall last week on Natasha’s Army—there is that word again. Natasha was a 31-year-old mother from Newton Abbott who died of cervical cancer, leaving four young children just before Christmas. Natasha’s Army are her friends and family who campaign on awareness and smear tests. That is so important. The work Jade Goody did led to a huge uptake in screening, enabling the NHS to detect and treat more cancers early. I hope that, as more people talk about prostate cancer, something similar can happen.

Nick Smith: I join the Minister in congratulating people like Stephen Fry and the grassroots movements on doing such a good job in talking about the importance of early diagnosis. The hon. Member for North Dorset talked about the important PSA test. The Minister may not have the figures available, but if he does could he let us know the proportion of men over 50 who have had the test? That would be an interesting indicator as to what is going on.

Steve Brine: I do not have that figure with me today, but I will write to Members attending the debate and I will tweet it @BrineMinister—but enough of the advert.

Early diagnosis and the NHS long-term plan is where I want to turn next. Straight after the Christmas recess, we launched the NHS long-term plan, which is a seismic piece of work. I would be the first to say, along with many other people working clinically in the field, that we cannot rely solely on the celebrity cases that I mentioned to improve early diagnosis. The long-term plan included a comprehensive package of measures that will be rolled out across the country, with the aim of securing the Prime Minister’s promise, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset spoke about, from party conference back in the autumn: that three quarters of all cancers will be detected at an early stage—stage 1 and stage 2, when they are most beatable—by 2028. The plan will provide new investment in state-of-the-art technology to transform the process of diagnosis and boost research and innovation, with the aim of ensuring that 55,000 more people are surviving cancer for five years in England every year from 2028.

That ambition refers to all cancers, including prostate. When we came out with that ambition, a number of people, in the breast cancer community, for instance, said, “But what about us? We are already above 75%”, and some said, in relation to the rarer and less survivable cancers, “What about us?” It is very important for me to restate at the Dispatch Box that this ambition does refer to all cancers—not just those that afflict men or women, old or young, or that are easily treatable or more difficult and less survivable. We are clear that to achieve the five-year survival ambition, we have to improve outcomes for all cancers, and we will.

As I said, early diagnosis is key. Early diagnosis of prostate cancer is challenging, in truth, because the symptoms are similar to those of an enlarged prostate and very often, there can be no symptoms at all. As has been said, the most common method of identifying an increased risk of localised prostate cancer is the prostate specific antigen test. However, that is not perfect. The House will have seen press reports a year or so ago stating that a raised PSA level is not necessarily a sign of prostate cancer, and that a low PSA level is not necessarily a sign of it not being there either. That is not entirely helpful, but we must always remember in these debates—and I am not a doctor, as is clear—that medicine is not an exact science. I thought that story was a good example of that.

A raised PSA level can indicate prostate cancer, but in some cases it can miss indicating a cancer. It can also suggest a cancer when there is not one, or identify slow-growing tumours that may never cause any symptoms for a man or shorten his natural lifespan. This can all be very difficult in primary care. My hon. Friend talked about GPs, and there is a clue in the name. I sometimes get a lot of flak for saying this, but general practitioners are so called for a reason—they are general practitioners—and we should remember the devilish job that general practitioners have, given the huge variety in what comes through their door.

The prostate cancer risk management programme—the PCRMP; we love our acronyms in the health service—was established so that men considering a PSA test are given information about the benefits, limitations, which I have touched on, and associated risks. It supports GPs in giving and discussing information with their male patients. A pack of materials is available for primary care to help men to make an informed choice about the PSA test, which includes a leaflet that they can take away to discuss with partners. There is also an evidence booklet and summary sheet for GPs. These are all widely available online.

As I said, there are pros and cons of having a PSA test, but it is so important that men arm themselves with as much information as they can and speak to their GP or practice nurse, including when they go for their NHS health checks—I will be going for one of those at the end of this month. I know that it is hard to believe that I am old enough to be called for one, but they phoned me yesterday, so I have been booked in.

As has been said, men over 50 have the right to be given a PSA test free on the NHS once they have discussed the advantages and disadvantages with their GP. The PCRMP makes that very clear to GPs, and, having discussed the pros and cons, no one over 50 should be told “No”, as we have heard today. I will find those figures—I agree that they will be very interesting.

Simon Hoare: I am very grateful that the Minister is setting this out in his customary detail. In a circumstance in which all those conversations have taken place, if the patient says, “Thank you doctor, I hear what you say, but I am entitled to have this test, and I want to have this test done,” will the Minister confirm that GPs are obliged to make the referral, rather than saying, “Well, I’ve heard what you said, but I am your doctor and I am not going to let you have it done”?

Steve Brine: We do not often use the term, “No decision about me, without me” any more, but I always remember the former Health Secretary—now Lord Lansley—using that a lot, and that is still very true. A patient over that age has every right to request a PSA test, and certainly even more so if they believe that they have symptoms. I would be very concerned about a GP refusing it—I think it would be extremely unlikely for one to do so in such instances—but any patient has the right of travel. Every patient has the right to change GP if they are not satisfied with the relationship that they have. If my hon. Friend did know of an instance of that, I would be very interested to hear about it—as, I suspect, would the Royal College of General Practitioners—but I would be very surprised.

I want to touch on screening, which we talk about a lot at the moment, and I will come on to why. Because of the limitations of the PSA test, there is currently no national screening programme for prostate cancer. In 2016, Prostate Cancer UK, which has been rightly lauded this afternoon, began work to help to develop tests that could form part of a national screening programme. This would potentially involve better blood tests, which are currently in development, combined with more advanced scanning. It is hoping to make that happen in the next five years—nothing happens quickly in this space unfortunately—and I am sure that we all welcome their efforts.

Members will be aware—I have spoken about this quite a lot in the House recently; we have had a number of cancer debates since Christmas—that Sir Mike Richards is leading a review for the Secretary of State of our current screening programmes. As part of that—I met Sir Mike last month—we will consider how we can make screening smarter, targeting those most at risk. We expect that Sir Mike’s work will have positive implications for future programmes. He is an incredibly experienced and respected figure in this space, and I hope that his work will enable us to roll screening out faster when the evidence base is there to support it. I am very hopeful and ambitious about that work, as I know Sir Mike is.

Let us talk about public awareness campaigns, which my hon. Friend mentioned in opening the debate. The Government have to do all that they can to raise awareness of prostate cancer and target high-risk groups, while recognising that there are limitations on how much the public will listen to public health messages from Ministers at the Dispatch Box—I know that it is hard to believe that people do not take this all to heart, but they do not, so we work with our partners.

In 2014, along with Public Health England, we worked on the phenomenally successful “Be Clear on Cancer” campaign, which has had a number of iterations, on prostate cancer in black men. The campaign messaging included:

“1 in 4 black men will get prostate cancer”,

which was one of its tag lines. It urged black men over 45 who were concerned about their risk of prostate cancer to visit their GPs. The campaign evaluation showed that it had stimulated new conversations about prostate cancer among families and the black community. Public Health England has made all the materials developed for the campaign available online, so that groups and other organisations can use them locally if they wish. They are very striking and powerful, and we believe that they were very successful.

We also welcome the work that Prostate Cancer UK is doing with the Football Association to raise awareness through their “relegate prostate cancer” campaign. It is fronted by high-profile celebrity football figures, including the England football manager, Gareth Southgate, and includes the slogan:

“One man dies every 45 minutes of prostate cancer”.

Anyone who can stay awake for “Match of the Day” on a Saturday night—thank goodness for the repeat on a Sunday morning—will see very many people, including the pundits and the managers interviewed afterwards, wearing the badge that I am wearing today. Members will be very familiar with that badge, which demonstrates the widespread support that Prostate Cancer UK has in continuing to raise awareness of this disease.

Let me turn to research, as I come to a conclusion. Research has played a crucial part in the advances that we have made in cancer survival over the past four decades. More than 15 years ago, the Department identified the need for further research into prostate cancer, and we have since worked closely with Cancer Research UK—it was here this morning; I was pleased to pop into its drop-in—Prostate Cancer UK, the Medical Research Council and others, through the National Cancer Research Institute, which is a strategic partnership of the major UK funders of cancer research. NCRI spend specifically on prostate cancer research increased from £17.1 million in 2011-12 to £26.5 million in 2015-16.

Mary Glendon: On research, does the Minister think that those who are diagnosed with cancer should be encouraged to take part in clinical trials that aid research and help us to find ways to halt or even cure these horrendous diseases? I think this is underplayed and that we should encourage as many people as possible to help with research by themselves getting involved in trials.

Steve Brine: I am happy to agree with the hon. Lady. In her work on brain cancer, the late Baroness Jowell made the point about stimulating new research projects, and that work has been incredibly successful, including subsequent to her death. She also spoke a lot about clinical trials. Anybody diagnosed with a cancer for which there is no significant treatment would want to load the gun with the trial bullet, but there are challenges there. There is only so much that one can do, and there is a toxicity issue with moving from trial to trial that patients do not always fully appreciate, but in consultation with one’s oncologist and physician absolutely it has a critical role to play. Without trials, we would not have any of the treatments we have today, so I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset said that women’s cancers, such as breast cancer and the gynaecological cancers, perhaps get more Government

attention. I have to disagree. Last April, the Prime Minister pledged £75 million towards clinical trials for prostate cancer, which will focus on improving early diagnosis and survival rates as well as exploring options for different treatments for men affected by the disease. We expect 40,000 men to be recruited to new research projects with this cash boost. I hope this demonstrates our ongoing commitment to male cancers as well as female cancers.

I am the first guy to hold the post of Public Health Minister in a long time, possibly ever, and it is true that there is a lot of focus on female cancers, but I am determined to raise the bar for men's health generally, but for male cancers in particular, which is why I was pleased to mention the all-party group earlier.

Alongside the £75 million for research, in 2016-17 the NIHR clinical research network recruited patients to over 90 trials—the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) raised the point about trials—and other studies on prostate cancer, so there are a lot of trials in this area. The NIHR biomedical research centre at The Royal Marsden here in London and the Institute of Cancer Research also have a five-year £3.1 million prostate cancer research theme.

I started by saying that we do not know everything about prostate cancer. We hope to see these projects deliver more personalised diagnosis, treatment and care of men with prostate cancer through better understanding of the molecular and genetic pathways that determine the non-uniform nature of prostate cancer. The prostate testing for cancer and treatment—ProtecT—trial was the largest publicly funded clinical trial ever to take place in the UK. NIHR funding to date is £40million, which is quite a significant sum.

I agree with what my hon. Friend said about the workforce. The NHS is nothing without the 1.3 million staff on whom patients depend day and night, and for no group is that more true than for cancer patients. We will not achieve our cancer ambitions without an increased cancer workforce, which is why the Secretary of State has commissioned Baroness Dido Harding, working closely with Sir David Behan, who used to lead the Care

Quality Commission, to lead a number of programmes to engage with key NHS stakeholders to develop a detailed workforce implementation plan. Baroness Harding and Sir David will present initial recommendations to the Department in March, and these will consider detailed proposals for growing the workforce rapidly alongside the implementation of the NHS long-term plan, including that early diagnosis of cancer target I mentioned.

In connection with that, my hon. Friend mentioned cancer nurse specialists. Health Education England is working to expand the number of cancer nurse specialists and to develop their competencies and routes into training. This will mean every cancer patient having access to a CNS or other support worker by 2021, which I think he will agree is a very good thing.

I have covered today just some of the many initiatives the Government are undertaking in our significant efforts to tackle prostate cancer for many of our constituents, including my friend. I hope I have given the House some information today and a promise of some more. The Government remain totally committed to maintaining and improving cancer survival rates. Prostate cancer is the second-biggest cancer killer among men and is right at the top of our list of priorities.

Finally, I could not close without paying tribute to Prostate Cancer UK, led by Angela Culhane, and the work it does on research and early diagnosis and in supporting men with prostate cancer and reassuring them that they are not alone and that there is often a way out. As cancer Minister, I have been told many times by cancer patients that the cliff edge of an all clear is every bit as bad as the original diagnosis. Owing to our successes, people are living much longer and perfectly normal and full lives after cancer, but we need to support them better, so I pay tribute to the work of Prostate Cancer UK. Its work is invaluable, as is that of all those members of staff who make the NHS what it is. I thank everybody for taking part in today's debate.

Question put and agreed to.

3.27 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Long-term Investment Funds (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 17 December 2018, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 262.

Division No. 323]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conon
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen

Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic

Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick

McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain

Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom

Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Karen
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mark Tami)

MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stuart C.

McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Siddiq, Tulip (*Proxy vote cast*
by Vicky Foxcroft)
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Swinson, Jo

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Austin, Ian
 Bardell, Hannah
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berger, Luciana
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Cable, rh Sir Vince
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crausby, Sir David

Crawley, Angela
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Nic
 Davey, rh Sir Edward
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 De Piero, Gloria
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Drew, Dr David
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Dame Louise
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter

Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl

Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan

Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil

Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 6 February 2019

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

UK as a Financial Services Hub

9.30 am

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK as a financial services hub.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I started my professional career in financial services, as did the Exchequer Secretary, as a corporate lawyer in the City of London. I worked at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer for three years, before working at an American firm called Simpson Thacher & Bartlett for three years. After that, I underwent a bit of a switch, and moved from being a lawyer advising on transactions to working in banking in strategy and restructuring at HSBC. I moved from being an adviser to a principal, or manager.

When I was at HSBC, I started to learn about financial services in their broader sense. As a senior executive, I was deeply involved with several high-profile aspects of the bank's restructuring, notably on splitting the retail bank from the investment bank, which was necessitated by ring-fencing legislation. I also spent time working across the global bank on the implementation of MiFID II—the markets in financial instruments directive—which required huge changes to how the markets desk operated. I also worked on custody systems, payment systems and business design. That took me up to June 2017, when I was elected to this House as Member of Parliament for Hitchin and Harpenden.

Obviously, financial services matter a huge amount to me, but they also matter a lot to my constituents. An analysis of the latest census data leads me to estimate that my constituency is in the top 50 in the country for those who work in financial or professional services. One cannot move in Hitchin or Harpenden without bumping into a lawyer, a banker or an investor.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): You are really selling it!

Bim Afolami: I am really selling it. In fact, when I was canvassing at the last election, a voter told me that after they had looked me up, they said, "Oh, well this is probably the only seat in which being a lawyer and a banker is an advantage rather than a disadvantage."

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): My hon. Friend makes some important points about banking. Does he agree that the insurance sector has a massive role to play? It brings in £29.5 billion to the UK economy, including, as I am sure the Minister will appreciate, £12 billion in taxes. The critical point about the insurance industry is that it employs 300,000 people, two-thirds of whom live outside London, so the industry has an impact on all our constituencies.

Bim Afolami: My hon. Friend is completely right. Later in my remarks, I will talk about the regional aspects of our financial services sector. Suffice it to say, I called this debate because I believe that our world-leading position in financial services is at risk. That will have an impact not only on London, but on regions outside London, and on industries such as the insurance industry in my hon. Friend's constituency and across the country.

We must remember that despite the appalling financial crisis of 10 years ago, in which many institutions and firms were culpable of incompetence and wrongdoing—if not outright illegality—the British financial services sector is a national asset and a public good. It is our most successful sector and export. I will try my hardest not to get trapped in a Brexit rabbit hole during the debate, but I will make this point: in post-Brexit Britain, we will have to adapt our financial services sector to ensure that in the next 20 years, the UK remains the world's global financial services hub, facilitating business and creating growth from Bangor to Bangalore and from Hitchin to Helsinki.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am a former partner in Ernst & Young, so mine is a completely different perspective on the sector. Yesterday, I chaired a breakfast meeting to look at the future of digital currencies. Among those present, there was an overwhelming desire to see better regulations in place globally. We have an opportunity to take the lead on that. Does my hon. Friend see that as an opportunity for the UK?

Bim Afolami: I defer to my hon. Friend's experience as a very senior partner at a major accounting practice. The regulation of financial services has moved from a national to a regional level and now to a global level, for instance through Basel and Solvency II. Let us consider the reasons that Solvency II was brought in for the insurance industry. Britain—not just the Treasury but also the Bank of England—needs to make sure that as we leave the European Union, we do not lose our voice at the global level. If we do, we will have to implement regulations that we will not have taken part in shaping. I will address that further on in my remarks.

John Howell: The Bank of England was not only present at yesterday's breakfast meeting, but spoke. It took a strong role in looking at whether the digital currency sector needs future regulation.

Bim Afolami: I thank my hon. Friend; I will address that aspect directly in my remarks.

Before I come to that, I think it is worth defining, for people who might read or watch the debate, what financial services actually do. To many, it looks like it is just about shuffling paper around or playing with spreadsheets. Put simply, financial services are partners of business. In 2017, UK banks lent £14 billion per quarter. Almost 1,500 equity finance deals, with an investment value of almost £6 billion, helped smaller businesses grow in 2017.

Another thing to assess and to remember is that financial services create business demand for other goods and services. The financial services industry is the largest buyer of tech services in the UK, for example. A business contributing to what we might call "the real economy" needs financial services to be available, cheap and effective.

[*Bim Afolami*]

In Britain, companies from around the world have access to those services through our financial services sector.

What impact do financial services have on the Treasury's balance sheet? The Minister will be keenly aware of this—I know that the Chancellor is. The financial services sector contributed over £72 billion in taxes last year. To give people a sense of scale, that is half of the NHS budget and about 11% of total UK Government revenue. In addition, the sector provides 1.1 million jobs to the UK-wide workforce. If one includes related professional services in an advisory capacity, such as accounting or legal services, that number rises to 2 million.

We are global leaders. The UK is the leading destination country for foreign direct investment projects in financial services from the United States, Sweden and China. The UK attracts 15% of the US's global projects of that nature, 47% of Sweden's and 15% of China's. I come back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey); those who believe that financial services affect the City of London only should think again. Two-thirds of financial services jobs in the UK are based outside London. In fact, with regards to the foreign direct investment that I just described, between 2013 and 2017, regions outside London accounted for 49% of the jobs created, 48% of the gross value added in financial services, 36% of the estimated capital investment in the UK and 37% of the total number of jobs. All that went to regions outside London.

Highly paid bankers and insurance brokers or traders who earn millions of pounds do not reflect the reality of 99% of financial services. A major reason that they matter is the cluster effect of the jobs that major financial institutions create around them. Let us take self-employed freelance workers, who often work as consultants for major firms in the industry. The number of self-employed workers in the UK has gone up by roughly 50% since 2001. According to statistics from IPSE, the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed—I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—22% of the self-employed work in financial services, and 40% of those freelancers had at least one project based in the EU in the past 12 months. A good Brexit deal really matters to them, and those statistics show the ancillary losses that a poor deal for financial services will bring.

Numerous challenges and changes are on the horizon, which will require our Government to change and develop their approach to the sector. I will focus on three principal areas: first, the digitisation of the economy and the rise of FinTech; secondly, the challenges and tough choices we face as we leave the European Union; and thirdly, the need to increase the penetration of financial services into our most deprived areas. That will deepen and improve the relationship between the financial services sector and our most deprived people, to ensure that everyone benefits from the sector, not just the affluent.

On digitisation, we are in a new economy: the internet and social media, as all Members of Parliament know, have completely changed not only how politics operates but how goods and services are produced and sold throughout the world. Anyone who has read Stian Westlake and Jonathan Haskel's book, "Capitalism without Capital: The Rise of the Intangible Economy", will be

in no doubt about the profound economic change that we are seeing. These days, anyone can produce almost anything anywhere using 3D printing; anyone can advertise a product worldwide at the click of a mouse; and, as I saw last week, a film producer based in Hitchin in my constituency can work with clients in China in minutes.

Such changes are exciting from a technological perspective, but present a real challenge to the way in which we do things. For the past 15 years or so, companies have invested more in intangibles, such as branding, design and technology, than they have in machinery, hardware or property. Businesses such as Uber do not own cars; they own software and data. Coffee bars and gyms rely on branding to help them stand out from the crowd, and they often lease their premises and physical goods, rather than owning them. That is capitalism without capital.

What does that mean for financial services and, in particular, for banking? The normal model for bank lending is this: when lending to a business, the assessment of the company's balance sheet—the assets and liabilities—is a critical aspect of assessing credit-worthiness. In the new economy, banks struggle to understand how to value and monitor intangible property. In the old days, if a company went bust, a bank could recover its money by selling physical assets—it would have a mortgage over the buildings and could sell capital assets such as machinery. If a company with intangible assets folds, those assets cannot be sold off easily—in effect, their value will have sunk with the company.

A lot of smaller businesses in the new economy therefore do not have the same access to bank loans. They are much more reliant on venture capital and angel investors, and that is a very different model of financing from traditional bank lending. My first question to the Minister is this: how will our regulatory system have to change in order to catch up with the new economy, which is changing at both a domestic and a global level? Without changing the rules on bank lending, we will be unable to finance small entrepreneurial businesses properly over the longer term.

FinTech is another success story for Britain in financial services. Indeed, we are the world's FinTech hub. Of the European Union's \$26 billion of FinTech investment, the UK attracted \$16 billion, which is a huge chunk of that European market. In the first half of 2018, that helped the UK to overtake US FinTech investment for the first time. If we consider the size of the United Kingdom, for us to overtake the US in terms of total investment is really something.

Those numbers look impressive, and they are, but there are clouds ahead. I suggest that the money is still being raised easily because the successful companies that attract a lot of the equity investment are based in Britain—they were set up here. However, there is much evidence across the FinTech sector that new start-ups increasingly are created in competitor countries, in cities such as Berlin and Paris. Much of the money raised by companies—the money I was just describing—still comes to Britain, but it is spent abroad. The companies are expanding their footprints elsewhere due to worries about the short and medium-term outlook for FinTech in Britain. We need to face up to that.

The fundamental point that we need to be honest about is that Brexit has put huge uncertainty at the centre of Britain's short and medium-term economic

outlook, which affects financial services and FinTech in particular. There are many reasons for the success of FinTech over the past few years, but the key factor is that London has become the principal magnet for the best software engineers, the best inventors, and the best and most successful investors from all over the world. How will we maintain that while dealing with the challenge of Brexit?

I suggest a twofold approach. First, we need to ensure that we remain one of the best places to raise equity finance, and enable the employees of FinTech start-ups to take equity in the businesses in which they work. Will the Minister undertake to ensure that the Treasury will not seek to change the enterprise investment scheme or entrepreneurs' relief? Will he also consider eliminating stamp duty on shares? That idea was floated recently by Xavier Rolet, the former head of the London stock exchange. Oxera Consulting calculates that the abolition of stamp duty on shares would cut the cost of raising capital for small and medium-sized enterprises by between 7% and 8.5%. KMPG estimates that that could rise to 13% for some technology companies. Cutting the cost of capital for SMEs would lead to increased growth, profitability and employment, and higher salaries for workers, all of which make revenue for Her Majesty's Treasury while creating a more dynamic business environment.

The second approach is simple: it is about people. In recent conversations—some took place earlier this week—with major FinTech investors, they were extremely clear that the ability to hire high-quality people, and to keep them in this country away from the clutches of Paris or Berlin, is very important. The £30,000 earnings threshold proposed in the immigration White Paper should not be a huge problem for the sector, because the vast majority of the people brought in by our FinTech companies earn more than that. One consideration, however, might not have been fully appreciated: 42% of our founders in FinTech are from abroad, and when they start their business, they often do not earn much, because they are ploughing what they earn back into their businesses, so they might fall beneath the £30,000 cap.

What are the Government's plans to ensure that founders—the talented people who are the brains behind FinTech businesses—can move easily to the UK to start their firms? If they cannot, they will go somewhere else, and that innovation and wealth, and those jobs, will go to other countries.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a most powerful speech, and I agree with everything that he is saying. Does he agree that it is important to look at the means of retaining those bright graduates who come here and train? They are precisely the people who might wish to start their businesses in the UK. We need a scheme that makes it possible for them to remain in the UK, without having to leave and come back, so that they can move from graduate employment into the sector, using their skills. We would then get the brightest and best from day one.

Bim Afolami: I completely agree that we need to make it easier for graduates to stay. My understanding is that the Home Secretary has extended the time in which graduates may search for a job in Britain—I think up to 12 months. I would like to see that go up

further, and I think the Home Secretary is quite amenable to that. We have to be honest: if we are thinking about immigration caps and the like, we should not turn away graduates, who will often be the brains of new businesses. We should help as many of them as possible to stay here; I agree with my hon. Friend on that point.

Brexit obviously dominates Parliament and Whitehall at the moment. We are in fast-moving times, so I will offer no predictions, largely because by the time anyone sees this debate, they would be completely out of date. As things stand, the political declaration that sits alongside the withdrawal agreement explains that the UK will have access to the EU market, and vice versa, under an equivalence regime. That means that the usual equivalence assessment will need to be undertaken for UK firms in the EU market, and the UK will have a similar equivalence process for the EU. Let me explain the notion of equivalence for those who are not familiar with it, with reference to the European Union. Essentially, the EU may look at a set of regulations that govern a certain area of financial services, such as bank lending, and deem another country's regulations equivalent to its own, thereby allowing firms based in that other country to sell products to customers—individuals and firms—in the European Union.

Our reliance on an equivalence regime leaves me with three questions. First, to what extent do the Government wish to align themselves with EU regulations at a time when the European Union is pushing ahead in a much more restrictive and onerous direction, in regulatory terms? In recent years we have seen the alternative investment fund managers directive, the cap on bankers' bonuses, MiFID II and other regulations, which were often well intentioned but have tended to increase costs, reduce Europe's competitiveness and increase complexity. That has made accessing financial services more expensive, more complicated and not necessarily any safer for the consumer. I believe that onslaught of complicated regulation has led in part to the poor productivity of financial services since 2008. Productivity has slowed by just over 2% in the past 10 years.

Craig Tracey: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. His point about regulation is critical to ensuring our future success, which will be underpinned by proportional regulation. Does he agree that we need to give the regulator a function as a promoter of the industry? If it had to promote the industry across the world, it would have to understand better what it regulates. The rules that apply to insurance do not necessarily apply to banking; those industries are regulated very differently across the world. The promotion aspect is critical.

Bim Afolami: That is a very interesting and important point. My hon. Friend will correct me if I am wrong, but my understanding is that when the Financial Services Act 2012 came in, there was significant debate about whether it should have included a duty on the regulator to promote financial services, both in the UK and abroad. The decision was taken not to put that in statute at that time. The Government should revisit that decision. Giving the regulator such a duty would not be inimical to ensuring that we regulate the industry properly; it would just ensure a balance, and that the regulator considered the impact on consumers—firms and individuals—as much as other impacts.

[Bim Afolami]

Recently, the EU has made many changes to the way it treats all non-EU firms that seek to offer financial services to European customers. Changes to MiFID II and large clearing houses are being considered, and I believe the proposals being discussed include setting the bar higher for granting equivalence for firms classed as systemic. It is proposed that the European Securities and Markets Authority—let us just call it ESMA to avoid getting tied up—be given greater powers to oversee the activity of those firms, including powers to open investigations, conduct on-site inspections and the like. It is also proposed that ESMA be able temporarily to restrict or prohibit those firms' activities in the EU.

In recent months, the EU has shown that it wants to be able to give its supervisory agencies, such as ESMA, greater extraterritorial reach, so they behave a bit more like American financial services regulators often do. The EU wants to ensure that ESMA plays a greater role in overseeing when national regulators can allow EU-based asset managers to outsource or delegate portfolio and risk-management activities to entities outside the EU. At the moment, as the Minister will appreciate, many asset management funds based in Luxembourg and Ireland delegate those activities to London. Some fear that the initial review that is under way is the precursor to the EU seeking to ban those outsourcing and delegation models altogether, although I gather that in recent days an agreement has been reached between British and European regulators—that is what it said in the *Financial Times*, at least. Perhaps the Minister can enlighten us about that.

Those rather technical points matter, because they show that the equivalence regime—the regime that we are going to rely on under the Brexit deal—is being considerably narrowed. In my judgment, that may make it harder for UK-based firms to sell services directly into the EU in future than it is for, say, Japanese and American firms to do so today. If the Minister's answer is that the UK will seek in large part to copy the EU's regulation, does that not make us highly vulnerable to aggressive regulatory behaviour from the EU27, who have already shown that they are very capable of designing regulations that are deliberately inimical to UK interests? Just as importantly, as we look further afield to the huge growth in opportunities for financial services in places such as Asia, how will we be competitive with the centres of Hong Kong, Singapore and New York and ensure that the UK is best placed to attract that business?

On the other hand, if the Minister's answer is that the UK will seek to diverge from EU regulations where we can—obviously, that is a perfectly legitimate outcome—do the Government have a strategy setting out the areas in which we will seek to diverge, how we might do that and what the benefit will be, bearing in mind that the consequence will be reduced access to the European market in the areas in which we seek to diverge? In my view, we can take that path only if we shift to a regulatory model that significantly increases our relationships with and footprint in emerging markets in Asia and elsewhere. In those circumstances, we would shift more decisively to being a global financial centre, accepting that a certain chunk of European business will move away to the European Union. How do the Government envisage managing that shift and balancing those two approaches?

The Asian powerhouse countries have increasing financing needs, which include servicing \$26 trillion of infrastructure spend, providing the backing for the Chinese-led belt and road initiative, and the internationalisation of the renminbi. Over the past 25 years, emerging economies' share of global activity has risen from 40% to 60%, and their share of global trade has grown from a fifth to a third, yet their financial assets make up only 10% of the global financial system. Things will not stay that way for long, especially as savings rates keep increasing and the Asian economies concurrently get richer and richer. Growth in those countries far outstrips growth in Europe and the United States, and London is not necessarily the automatic choice for Asian financing. Singapore and Hong Kong are redoubling their efforts to ensure that they are the financial services centres that finance that Asian growth. How will we ensure that the UK is the global hub for that work?

I have spoken mostly about regulation—hon. Members are all still awake; I thank them for bearing with me—but tax policy is also a major part of this. The sad truth is that we are no longer internationally competitive on taxes for financial services. A report by UK Finance and PwC published in December 2018 states:

“On an overall basis, over half the profits (50.4%) from participant banks are paid in taxes”

in the UK. Some 43% of the taxes borne are not dependent on profit. In effect, they represent a fixed cost; the profitability of the bank is irrelevant. If we compare London with our major competitors—Frankfurt, New York, Singapore and Dubai—the overall tax burden for a model bank is highest in the UK, at just over 50% of commercial profit. In Frankfurt, that figure is 43%, in New York it is 34%, and in Singapore and Dubai it is 23%.

Putting all that together, given the regulatory challenges I outlined and the tax challenges I have just set out, are we still sure that the UK is in a position to dominate international financial services for the next 30 years, as it has for the past 30 years? Our financial services sector helps productivity and growth in our real economy across the country. Financial services is one of the most productive sectors in British cities, and while the average output per worker in a British city was £59,000 a year in 2016, that figure was almost twice as much in financial services. It would be foolish, however, to suggest that our financial services sector fully penetrates into some of our poorest regions, or that it is used by some of the poorest people in our country. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, because I am a commissioner for the Financial Inclusion Commission, and we have been working on this issue since our landmark report on financial inclusion in 2015. Since then, the Treasury and the Government have taken on board most of the commission's recommendations, and I commend them for that.

What does financial inclusion actually mean? In simple terms, it means belonging to a modern, mainstream financial system that is fit for purpose for everybody, regardless of their income. It is essential for anyone wanting to participate fairly and fully in everyday life. Without access to appropriate mainstream financial services, people end up paying more for goods and services, and have less choice. The payday lending market grew from £330 million in 2006 to £3.7 billion in 2012, and it is probably now worth more than £4 billion. We

are a country of about 65 million people, and 13 million people in the UK do not have enough savings to support themselves for one month were they to experience a 25% cut in income—one month! We save less as a percentage of our income than any other country in the European Union.

I have talked about banking, insurance, Asia, and the belt and road initiative, but for the UK to be an effective financial services hub internationally, we must ensure that we are No. 1 in the world for financial inclusion. All our people need the chance to create and develop wealth and savings. There is no excuse for us not to use the talent of the world's finest firms and individuals involved in financial and professional services in the UK, and for us not making true financial inclusion a reality for all our people.

Craig Tracey: I am really interested in this area, and I chair the all-party parliamentary group for insurance and financial services, which is considering that very point. Does my hon. Friend agree that although the internet and digital technology bring a lot of positives, they disproportionately disadvantage vulnerable people, who do not always have access to the face-to-face advice that they used to get on the high street, and who, as people are being driven online, do not always get the best deals?

Bim Afolami: Without wanting to out-APPG my hon. Friend, I am chair of the all-party group on credit unions, and one of the main purposes of credit unions is to provide that face-to-face advice. Credit unions are often active in places that banks left long ago. Providing that personal information that helps people to build up their savings is important.

Credit unions in the 10 most deprived communities in Britain are lending heavily, and they consider loans that few other lenders would consider because of the applicants' credit scores, while also charging considerably less than any other type of financial service. Credit unions in the UK currently have £860 million out on loan, and that lending is predominantly focused on those at the bottom end of the income scale. Evidence shows that once people in deprived communities are given a chance to access credit on affordable terms, they start to see patterns of improvement in their credit profiles. Over time, those people will no longer necessarily need specialist financial advice from credit unions, because they will be able to bank with and access the mainstream financial services sector. Will the Minister agree to work with me on two aspects of credit unions? First, will he consider amending secondary legislation to broaden credit union lending powers, so that they are able to service more people from that vulnerable group? Secondly, will he work with the Bank of England to review capital requirements for credit unions, so that the sector can serve more people more effectively?

In conclusion, I would like the Minister to respond to the following points. First, what is the Government's approach to adapting bank lending rules to enable more investment in the new economy with more intangible assets? Secondly, what is the Government's blueprint for improving Britain's attractiveness to people and firms in FinTech? Thirdly, what is the Government's current thinking about their regulatory approach as we embark on our negotiations on a future trade agreement with the European Union, bearing in mind our need to

be the No. 1 financial services hub for financing Asian investments and investments from the emerging world? Fourthly, how will the Government seek to bring down the tax burden on our financial services sector, given that we need to be more competitive on tax policy in coming years to counteract the uncertainty and destabilisation in the market? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, how will the Government seek to improve the penetration of financial services into our most disadvantaged communities, especially by helping credit unions to professionalise and expand?

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the Opposition Front-Bench speakers at 10.30 am; hon. Members who wish to speak can do the arithmetic themselves.

10.5 am

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on securing this debate on an important topic. I am sorry that more hon. Members are not present, but I hope that the quality makes up for the quantity.

I am particularly keen to speak in this debate because I have a personal and constituency interest in this matter, and because it is critical to our country. About 36% of the working population of my constituency is employed in the financial or professional services sector, and that is about the 15th highest proportion in the country. Most of those people commute to London, although the European headquarters of Direct Line insurance—one of our principal insurance companies—is based in Bromley, and is the largest private sector employer in the borough. This issue matters for the prosperity of my communities, as well as impacting on the national picture.

This debate is important, but perhaps the reason why there are not more people here is that we have come to take it for granted that we are world leaders in financial services and the allied professional services that underpin them—of which more shortly. We take it for granted that the City will always be all right. I use the City as a shorthand for the broader financial services sector because, as my hon. Friend pointed out, only about half that sector's output is generated in London, and many of the jobs are in fact based outside.

The idea that “the City will be okay” is something that we have to challenge a little. It will be okay, provided that it continues to have the right regulatory tax, fiscal and political environment to support it. It will be okay if we leave the European Union on sensible terms with a deal that protects the interests of our market access, but it will not necessarily be okay in the event of a catastrophic exit from the EU. Although larger firms will be able to manage come what may, smaller firms, which are often the innovators in this sector, will be more at risk. That makes it all the more important that we get it right for the City and the financial services sector as we leave the EU.

My hon. Friend properly referred to the contribution made by the financial services sector to the UK economy, and it is worth mentioning the report “Total tax contribution of UK financial services”, which was issued by the City

[Robert Neill]

of London Corporation, to which I pay the highest respect for its work to promote the sector nationally and internationally. The report, which was published in December 2018, highlighted the fact that the industry's contribution to the Exchequer increased over the past year to £75 billion. That is 10.9%—nearly 11%—of the Government's total tax receipts from all sources. It is 6.6% of the UK's economic output. The number of jobs has already been referred to. This is a critical national economic and strategic asset, and Government policy must treat it as such.

It is worth saying that access to the European markets remains important, as it should do. My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden is right to recognise that there are opportunities to be had from growing our contacts and trade with emerging economies. I was in Hong Kong in September at a legal conference looking at the opportunities for British law firms and their financial services clients, in relation to the belt and road initiative. No doubt there is much that can be done there, but at the moment, often, trade with China—particularly in the service sector—comes with strings attached, and perhaps a lack of transparency about access to the relevant sectors that would frankly not be acceptable in UK terms. The same applies with India, where there are great opportunities, but where there has so far been a marked reluctance about liberalisation in the service sector. As to my profession, as a lawyer, there is marked difficulty with India in getting liberalisation in the legal services sector. I hope that the Government will give more attention to that.

I was the sort of lawyer who became involved in the matters in question if regulatory procedures had not always been properly followed, whereas my hon. Friend was someone who made sure they were. What I have pointed out makes good, robust and internationally recognised regulatory frameworks all the more important. I previously had a spell working for Scottish Widows insurance, and as a trainee jobber, when such things existed, with Ackroyd and Smithers, who were then the leading gilts jobbers. It is an area of law in which I have always taken an interest, aside from its constituency importance for me.

The benign regulatory environment is something we need to watch, as we leave the EU. My hon. Friend is right to say that sometimes EU regulators have been difficult to deal with, from our perspective. Equally, however, dealing outside the EU, with a proper free trade agreement with third countries, to include financial services, will not be without challenges. I am secretary of the all-party parliamentary group on financial markets and services and have just come from a breakfast meeting with the group to discuss the prospects of a free trade agreement in services with the United States. There are real regulatory obstacles—not least having to deal with not one regulator but, in relation to the insurance sector, for example, 50 state insurance regulators as well as a national regulator. With banks, would one be dealing with the federal regulator, the regulator in New York or the state regulator in Chicago?

There is a multiplicity of issues to be addressed, which is why it is critical that we leave the EU with a deal, and with a transition period in which we could maintain all the good aspects of market access to the

EU and have time to sort out arrangements and opportunities with non-EU countries. Let us be honest and not kid ourselves—those complexities will not be sorted out overnight. It will take time, and to benefit we must be patient about how we go about things.

Craig Tracey: My hon. Friend is right that we need to get regulation that works, but an issue put to me by the insurance industry is that a Norway-plus model would not work for the insurance market as a whole, as we would not all be working to the same rules. The insurance rules are set at EU level, rather than on a global scale, so we need to look at the different facets of financial services, to ensure that they work for the whole market.

Robert Neill: That is perfectly true, and the need for the deal and for a time to thrash out our future relationships is all the more important because of it. There is not a simple scenario in which the sector works on a one-size-fits-all basis. The same thing applies to the legal services sector, which is a critical underpinning. It is worth remembering that with respect to financial flows, EU financial services trade with the UK between 2016-17 and the current time increased from £29 billion to £33 billion. That dwarfs the figure for trade with our next largest partner, the United States; it is only half, at £16 billion. The seven largest financial services markets added together—the US, Japan, Switzerland, Canada, China, India and Australia—come to only £26 billion, which is less than our financial services trade with the EU. That is why, at the same time as we look at the opportunities for opening out elsewhere, it is critical to maintain EU access, which has also been important to foreign inward investment into UK financial services as a gateway into EU markets.

It is worth bearing in mind that across measures of competitiveness London ranks as the top city and has the highest volume of financial services foreign direct investment globally. However, that is because of our current advantageous position, which we need to maintain. An important part of that advantageous position is the underpinning that legal services and the legal system give to the financial sector. I am concerned that although the Government have uttered warm words and issued advice to practitioners in the sector, real uncertainties would remain, should we leave the EU without a proper deal.

Some of the areas in question are similar to areas of concern in direct financial services, such as the loss of passporting rights, and the need to operate with a form of equivalence. However, the situation for legal services is even more stark, in some respects, because the establishment directive would go, as would mutual recognition of professional qualifications. That would not enable us to use the fly in, fly out arrangements that are so critical to enabling international law firms to advise their clients in real time while deals are going through. That needs to be dealt with, which is why, again, a transitional arrangement is critical.

The other critical point in that context is that unless we have a deal—if we leave without one—we will lose the existing arrangements for the mutual recognition and enforcement of UK court judgments in EU countries and vice versa. That is vital for contractual certainty and continuity. A contract is worthless if it cannot be enforced, and if it cannot be enforced through the judgment of a court there are no other means to do so. It is vital to

find means to maintain that. TheCityUK has pointed out that losing it would mean profound difficulties in relation, for example, to insurance contracts—which would not be of value if we were to leave without the ability to enforce them in the event of default—and, significantly, uncleared derivatives. The derivatives market is particularly important to the UK. It is an area of expertise where, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said, financial services are not just about figures, but are relevant to real business. Most business work is now underpinned in one way or another by a form of financial instrument being traded, particularly in any significant commercial deal. That has been described as the plumbing of the business system, so anything that threatens the derivatives trade operating out of the City, and what relies on it, would be extremely dangerous.

There have been some areas of progress. I was pleased when the European Securities and Markets Authority agreed a memorandum of understanding with the Bank of England in relation to central counterparties and the central securities depository, which enables that issue of central clearing to continue. However, that is one part of a much more complex structure. There are other areas on which I hope for assurances that the Government are determined to see the issue as central to our negotiations. Those things are largely part of the future state negotiations, but we have to have a deal to get into those future state negotiations to begin with. That cannot be emphasised too strongly.

I also want to emphasise the fact that financial services and many aspects of legal services depend on the free flow of data to underpin them. At the moment that is available to us, in relation to our EU counterparties. However, unless—at least until a future state agreement is achieved—there is regulatory alignment on data sharing, we risk disruption to those data flows. That will severely disrupt the circumstances in which we could guarantee that trades could be carried out and completed. Again, insurance and uncleared derivatives are particularly vulnerable to disruption of data flows.

The City believes that an EU-level solution is the optimal one, and I hope the Government will reassure us that it is their intention to press for that, for the same reason as we spoke of before—the complexities of dealing with the 27 on bilateral agreements would be daunting to say the least, and would cause more delay, which would deter people from writing contracts while that period of uncertainty persisted. I know that a temporary solution to protect data flows is currently under discussion, relating to a non-enforcement period between regulators under what is known as a “safe harbour” precedent, but that is not guaranteed. I hope the Minister will be able to update us on progress and assure us that this, too, remains a very high priority for the UK Government.

Getting global regulation right and making it business-friendly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said, is critical. Of course, the City of London Corporation provides the secretariat for the International Regulatory Strategy Group, which is a practitioner-led body comprising the leading UK financial and professional services figures. The key test of global regulation is not necessarily its quantity, but its quality and effectiveness. Thus far, the UK has been a world leader in that, and it is important that we continue to make that central to our policy.

My hon. Friend mentioned FinTech, and I am very pleased that he did, because I have constituents, including one of my councillors, working in the FinTech sector and there are real opportunities there. The ability to retain young talent in the UK is critical here; that applies also to young lawyers and to young professionals right across the board, so it is vital that we have a regime for immigration that not only does that in practice, but sets the right tone.

That is why I am pleased that we have scrapped the £65 fee for the settled status scheme; I rather regret that we ever had it to start with. I have in my constituency many EU-national professionals, working in the City of London, the west end and other sectors. They have been settled with their families in places such as Chislehurst and Bromley—commuter land—for many years, and the suggestion that they were going to have to pay to remain somewhere where they had already put down their roots and that they regarded as home sent the wrong signals. I am pleased that the Government thought twice about that, and I hope that can be reflected in the tone of our approach to our EU friends and neighbours hereafter.

However, we must bear in mind that it goes beyond that. International workers make up 40% of the City's workforce and 35% of London's finance and insurance jobs. Many of those are EU nationals; others will come from elsewhere, but having that welcoming and open approach is critical. Successful market economies are only successful if they have that open and broadminded approach, and it is important that we as the UK Parliament recognise and articulate that as strongly as we can.

Finally, sometimes people think that financial services are purely about profit; they see the City purely in terms of big financial institutions. The City of London does a great deal to encourage responsible business practice as well, and the two do not need to be separate. The financial services sector is one of the most active and engaged in corporate community investment across the country, as I see in some of the firms based in my constituency or where constituents of mine work.

New research that the City of London Corporation has published indicates that financial and professional services firms gave £535 million in cash and in-kind donations to various forms of community investment in 2017. It is worth saying that although a flourishing financial services sector is important to the economy, its leaders and the practitioners I know from my constituency also want to ensure that they pay their fair share not only to the Exchequer, but in kind to the communities that they serve. That is not separate from the day-to-day workings of our economy and our lives, but central to it, and I hope that this debate helps to bring that home.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Just before I call Lee Rowley, I will say that I intend to call the Scottish National party spokesperson at 10.30 am.

10.24 am

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on securing this debate; in my view, we do not talk enough about financial services in this place.

[*Lee Rowley*]

Although financial services are unfashionable and often a thing of derision, the blunt reality, as we have heard today, is that even 10 years after the financial crisis, the industry contributes a staggering £70 billion to our Exchequer. Whether or not we like banks, insurance companies and asset managers, the ultimate point is that they pay for a lot of our public services, and we should focus more on what they are doing and how we can ensure that they do more in this country.

This is important for me on a personal level, because before I came to this place, I worked in financial services, both in London and across the country, for the best part of 10 years. I was glad to see the regional nature and significance of financial services brought home in this debate. For most of the past 15 years, I was technically based about 30 minutes north of here, near Euston station, but I spent probably 60% of my time with my teams in Sheffield, Leeds, Bootle, Manchester, Leicester and elsewhere. I was on the road all the time. In places such as Bootle, which are not necessarily associated with financial services, we find a substantial number of people employed in these kinds of industries, which are major anchor employers for many of those communities.

We Brits like to be very cynical about things such as financial services. We like to say that they are not working for us, that they do not deliver for us and that there are huge problems—and to some extent there are. I am absolutely apoplectic with rage about what the Royal Bank of Scotland has done in closing down a bank branch in my major town, Dronfield, a few weeks ago. I understand the economic challenges of a retail network, but people have a right to be angry about the way that RBS did it; there was a lack of conversation and real engagement with constituents.

When we put aside all that, the reality is that the industry has been highly successful, and highly important to our country—though I do not dispute its controversial nature—and we must ensure that it remains so. Those are not just words. This industry gives people in North East Derbyshire the opportunity to set up their own business by giving them access to the financing that my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden talked about. It allows people to own their home—the new houses that are being bought in North East Derbyshire—and ensures that small and medium-sized enterprises in my constituency have the opportunity to grow.

I will touch briefly on Brexit. I come from a different position from my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on this. I want a deal, too, but I want a good deal. It is incumbent on us to accept that there are circumstances in which we may have to go to a no-deal position. We cannot accept just any deal, or we might as well have not bothered with the last two years and simply accepted what the EU gave us the day after 2016.

I am the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on alternative lending and vice-chair of the APPG for challenger banks and building societies. More importantly, I am doing a fellowship with a fantastic institution, the Industry and Parliament Trust, going around a number of banks and talking about the future of banking. Although there will be issues, and we do not want to create problems with business models unless

we have to, I believe that the level of preparation in this industry is high, and the understanding of what needs to be done is good. We may have to accept no deal in certain circumstances, although I hope we will not; it will be down to EU intransigence if we do.

My point, in the brief time I have left, is that Brexit is not the big thing for this industry. We in this place are obsessed with Brexit in a way that I think is incredibly unhealthy and that will only get worse in the next few weeks. The actual challenges for this industry are much broader than Brexit. They are about FinTech, and how we ensure that we increase the number of people operating in FinTech here and that this remains a fantastic place to work. They are about artificial intelligence and how we incorporate it into financial services in the long term. They are about regulation. I have a particular interest in capital regulation, having worked in risk for the last two years before I came here, and I simply do not understand some of the directions we are going in on capital regulation. I cannot explain all that in 45 seconds, but I am sure there will be another time to discuss that.

There are key challenges around disintermediation and how we ensure that banking as a whole gets closer to customers. We will have a huge problem with insurance in the coming decade; insurance is based on a model in which we pool risk, on the basis that we do not fully understand the customer base we are serving. As we get more and more knowledgeable, from a data perspective, about individuals, the pooling of risk becomes a conceptual challenge that we will have to get through. We have a huge problem with customer services. Often in banking and financial services, people feel done to, rather than done with. We have to work with the industry to understand why that is.

I am conscious that my time is short, but ultimately I agree with my hon. Friends that this is an important area that needs more debate. We need to ensure that we develop our country, so that more banks, insurance companies and asset managers are investing here, and staying here longer, to create the wealth that we all know is vital for our public services.

10.30 am

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Congratulations to the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) for bringing the debate. It is important that we talk about the UK as a financial services hub, the contribution to the economy, and the number of jobs in this area.

A lot of the statistics have already been discussed, and as time is relatively short, I will not go over them. I would like to mention Edinburgh, which is the largest financial services centre in the UK after London. It is also a major European centre for asset management and asset servicing. It has been at the forefront of the life assurance market for more than 200 years, which is pretty impressive. Think about the depth of knowledge that companies have developed over 200 years of providing services to people in the asset management space. In 2017, around 33,000 people were working in Edinburgh's financial services and insurance sector, which is a significant proportion of the population of not only Edinburgh, but Scotland.

Within Scotland, the financial services sector is not confined to Edinburgh. Large banks have technology hubs in Glasgow, and Aberdeen has financial and

professional services jobs, for example in major accounting firms that are servicing the oil and gas industry. As the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said, this is not exclusively a London thing. When reading the stats, I was surprised to find that 50% of jobs in financial services are outside London. I had expected the sector to be more London-centric, so it was interesting to read that, and to think about the vast numbers of people in the sector; we know how many people in London work in financial services, but there are a significant number of people doing so outside the City as well.

I will focus on Brexit, as Members would expect, given that the Scottish National party is the party in this place that has consistently and vociferously opposed any Brexit. We have said that if we are to have any Brexit, we need full single market and customs union membership, which would protect our right to access some of the services that we would be able to have post EU exit.

Financial services firms and their money are leaving the UK because of Brexit; they are genuinely voting with their wallets. Since the 2016 referendum, \$1 trillion-worth of assets have been moved from the UK to the rest of Europe according to Ernst & Young, which is a significant amount of money. According to Bloomberg, Deutsche Bank AG is repatriating at least €400 billion to Frankfurt; JP Morgan is taking €200 billion there, Goldman Sachs €60 billion, Citigroup €50 billion and Morgan Stanley €40 billion. Those are significant amounts of money.

Bloomberg has said that London could lose 10,000 banking jobs and 20,000 jobs in wider financial services. To put that in context, professional services represent 12% of the contribution to the British economy. Losing those jobs in financial and professional services, losing that investment, and losing the centres of large financial services organisations as they move would be a significant hit to the Treasury.

When we have discussed Brexit in this place, we have not had enough discussion of services. We have had in-depth discussion about tariffs, for example, but if we think about the contribution made to the economy by services, compared with the export or import of goods, services are a huge part of the economy. It surprised me that when the UK Government set out on the path of trying to work out which Brexit would suit, they did not say, "We are going to bat for services. Services are the key thing that we will put front and centre, and we will fight for access to services markets." That would have been a far more sensible option for the Government than saying, "The most important thing is clamping down on freedom of movement. We are happy to ditch our access to services markets, simply so that we can get rid of our citizens' right to freedom of movement." That was an incredibly poor decision, and we will all pay the price.

On the impacts on the single market and our options—I am aware that there is not a huge amount of time, so I will whizz through this—one of the biggest concerns raised is data transfer post Brexit, whether there is a deal or a no-deal Brexit. There are issues to do with compliance with the general data protection regulation. For example, if a motorist crashes their car in Europe and they are insured by a UK firm, it is important that the data can be transferred, so that the claim can be

paid. If there are barriers in place because we are outside the single market, or because we are outside the GDPR regime as it is set up in Europe, that is a major issue for ensuring that those claims are paid.

I have tackled the Government about the lack of reciprocity in some of the secondary legislation that has been brought in. They had immediately assumed that we would not have reciprocal arrangements with the EU in a no-deal scenario, whereas I come from the point of view that we should always have reciprocal arrangements with the EU. Once there was regulatory divergence, a further statutory instrument could be laid before Parliament to change the position around reciprocity. It concerns me that the Government have refused to do that.

I will focus briefly on people, as the issue was brought up a lot in the debate. In some sectors of the capital markets, EU27 citizens account for as much as a quarter of all staff in the UK. That is a significant stat. If the UK Government's settled status scheme makes people feel unwelcome, and they therefore choose to go back to the EU country where they were born, that is a major concern. There is another issue around short-term visas. A lot of large companies have bases in other countries and require people to come over for a short period. The UK Government have suggested that the visa scheme will allow for 12-month visas; somebody might only be here for three months, and then the company might want somebody else for three months. That causes a real problem for companies, with regard to ensuring flexibility in their workforce.

To sum up, everything relating to Brexit that the Government have decided on has been disadvantageous to financial services. Anybody who talks about a low tax, low regulation system causes me major problems; I have real issues with that. For 20 years of my life, Scotland had a Conservative Government for which we did not vote. Conservative Back Benchers are talking about a low tax, low regulation system that we have not voted for. I wonder why people—and the Government—cannot understand why Scotland wants to be an equal partner in the EU, rather than a member of the UK, where we are having these things done to us against our will.

10.37 am

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on securing it. It has been an interesting debate, particularly when it comes to hearing about how Members' professional experience has informed their approach to these matters in Parliament.

As many Members have said, financial and related professional services are an important area of the UK economy, and they contribute just over a twentieth of the UK's overall economic output. There are interesting developments in the sector, which has traditionally not reflected the diversity of UK society. With the Women in Finance charter, changes are being made to reduce the pay gap. In relation to other characteristics, action is being taken to increase the number of people in the sector who have disabilities or are from black and minority ethnic or working class backgrounds.

[Anneliese Dodds]

We have discussed the fact that many people in the sector are not based in London or the south-east. I will add one statistic: there are more than 100,000 people employed in banking and finance in the north-west, which makes it the area with the third-largest number of people working in the sector, outside London and the south-east.

We have had an interesting discussion this morning about the sector's tax contribution. Reference has been made to research undertaken by PwC that suggested that about 1p in every 10p of Government revenue comes from the sector. Let us be clear that that is counting the tax contributions of everybody who works in the sector, so it is not just looking at corporate taxation. As we all know, the corporation tax rate has been reduced. That has meant that the amount of corporation tax, in relative terms, has reduced. In absolute terms, it has gone up, but that is because these banks and so on have returned to profitability after the financial crash, so actually the burden has gone down in that area. Of course, it has also gone down when it comes to the bank levy, which has been scaled back. A surcharge has been applied as well, but when we look at both of them over time, we see that that burden is also going down.

Reference was made to stamp duty on shares. That stamp duty brings in about £3 billion of Government revenue a year. It is one of the most efficient and least avoided taxes, and for that reason Labour is considering extending it as part of a financial transactions tax. I would be very happy to talk to the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden about how that would work.

As many hon. Members have said, financial services contribute significantly to Britain's exports. In 2016, they were worth about £61 billion, with a surplus of £51 billion over imports of—yes, obviously—£11 billion. Of course, that is very significant in a situation in which other areas that traditionally were important for Britain's export strength face tremendous headwinds, not least in relation to manufacturing, given the current uncertainty about Brexit.

As the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden rightly mentioned, the UK is increasingly integrated into global markets. I would argue that the UK is already a very important hub when it comes to the Chinese financial markets, for example. About two thirds of renminbi payments outside mainland China and Hong Kong flow through London, so we are already catching quite a lot of that business. In addition, a number of Chinese firms have established themselves here. However, we need to be clear: yes, that activity is increasing, but, as others have said, we have to be sanguine about its current size. TheCityUK, in its report entitled "Key Facts about the UK as an international financial centre", says that only about 0.4% of UK financial services exports currently go to China. That may of course increase in the future, but if we compare that with the 44% of our exports that go to the EU, there is a massive difference. As my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer has intimated many times, it must continue to be possible for our financial services companies to win business across Europe and, reciprocally, for European companies to win business here.

As I have said many times during delegated legislation Committees on no-deal legislation, the UK Government have failed to prioritise sufficiently our financial services. I absolutely agree with the comments in that regard by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). We appear to have accepted an outcome whereby equivalence, rather than passporting, is the likely eventuating circumstance, and of course that equivalence will operate on virtually exactly the same basis as it currently does for nations such as the US and Japan, which are far less dependent on access to the EU27's markets than the UK is. On the question of how equivalence would work in the future, the point is that it would work the same for all third countries. If there were to be a stricter regime generally, that would apply to us in just the same way as it would to Japan and the US—the point is that it can also be removed at any point, from the perspective of the EU Commission—rather than there somehow being a more onerous regime for the UK, which I think would not be the case.

I very much associate myself with the remarks by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) concerning the current legal services conundrums and how they can have some kind of certainty on many regulatory issues.

Only very late in the day did our Government start to stress the shared interest of the UK and the EU27 in maintaining access to UK financial services. That was an enormous shame, because we have a mutual interest both in financial stability and resilience and in ensuring that the EU27 can continue to access the deep pool of capital that is available via our financial services. That recognition came only after a much longer period, sadly, in which a very damaging zero-sum narrative had developed, with the cut in corporation tax suggesting an intention to race to the bottom on tax and regulatory standards. That was immensely frustrating. What the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) described in relation to the insurance industry is actually what I am finding right across the financial services sector. There is no appetite anywhere, from what I can see, for a bonfire of regulations. Actually, the concern is to try to prevent regulatory turbulence and ensure that there is co-ordination into the future, and yet a picture has developed of a zero-sum approach whereby the UK would seek to reduce those regulations. I think that that has been very damaging.

On that issue, although I agreed with much that the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said, I did not agree with his comments about EU regulation. Actually, one root of the financial crisis was the misalignment of risk with reward. That was targeted by the cap on bankers' bonuses, and rightly so. A second root of the financial crisis was the lack of transparency in financial markets—dark pool trading and so on. That was targeted by MiFID, which encouraged many other countries to adopt the kind of transparency standards that existed in the UK before. I therefore think that we need to be very careful about mounting any kind of wholesale assault on those regulatory systems. When it comes to having robust regulation of systemic providers of market infrastructure, I think that that is a very sensible approach and, indeed, it is one that has been supported a lot of the time by UK actors.

Co-ordination of regulation will become ever more important with more innovation in delivery models of financial services. I strongly agree with the comments

by the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who is no longer in his place, about the need for regulations to keep in step with new developments—for example, in relation to digital currencies. I also agree with the comments made about the workforce, who are incredibly important. We need to ensure that we still have access to people from other countries who can contribute so much to our financial services.

I am a little surprised that we have not talked much in this debate about the contribution of financial services to investment, particularly in business. We need to be clear about what has happened over time. In 1988, almost a third of banks' UK lending went to businesses. It is now less than a tenth, so there has been an incredible change over time. The Labour party thinks that we need to do something to deal with that. We need to learn from what other countries have done in relation to national investment banks—KfW in Germany, in particular. We need to look at the RBS branch network. I share the anger of the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) about the closure of some of that network.

Of course, we need to focus on vulnerable consumers as well. Although we have seen many positive innovations in that space, that often has not been the case for consumers on low incomes. I will add one statistic to this debate, which is that about one in three families in the UK do not have the financial wherewithal to pay for a new cooker if their current one stops working. That quite extreme lack of financial resilience is now very present in our communities. Consumer credit debt is still far too high, not least for people with overdrafts, credit card debt and/or hire purchase debt. We need to see much more strenuous activity on that. I was very pleased to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden about credit unions in that regard. Yet again, I urge the Government to focus on better integrating credit unions into the Help to Save programme. I also ask the Government to look again at having a proper tribunal process for the businesses that were dealt with so badly during the RBS Global Restructuring Group scandal, so that there is some redress for small firms that may have been impacted on by banks' practices.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): May I request that the Minister leaves a small space of time at the end of the debate for the mover of the motion to wind up?

10.48 am

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I thank all hon. Friends who have spoken in the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) for raising this important issue. We both enjoyed careers in the City before coming to this place, and it sounds as though those late nights were worth it after all—he has been able to use his experience in this place. I have always thought that there are some similarities between working as a City lawyer and coming here: late nights, with difficult people, spent negotiating the finer details of agreements. We did usually get them over the line, so I hope that that turns out to be true here.

As my hon. Friend said—there has been wide agreement on this across the Chamber today—the UK's financial services sector is an engine for the economy: it brings

prosperity and creates jobs and growth for citizens across the country. My hon. Friend said that it is a national asset. Actually, the argument that we have been making in our negotiations with our EU partners is that it is a European and international asset, which we all want to succeed. In the European context, a loss for London and the UK—with jobs and investment going to the United States, Singapore, Hong Kong or some of the emerging markets that hon. Members have mentioned—is as likely to be a loss for Europe as it is to be a loss merely for the UK.

We do not believe that our strength is ours by right, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) made clear. We are operating in an unprecedentedly competitive global market and we have to ensure the future of the financial services sector. That will require a successful outcome in the EU negotiations. It will also require us to look to the future by embracing new technology and the opportunities that brings, and by embracing new markets.

The incredible contribution of the financial services sector to the economy has been mentioned. It contributed £131 billion in 2017, including £77 billion in exports, and there is room for more on that front. A number of colleagues have made the point well that the tax take was £75 billion last year, which helped fund public services. The sector employs more than 1 million people in all parts of the United Kingdom, two-thirds of whom are outside London—a point made strongly by the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and others.

London has long been the global capital of finance. We want that to continue. Its strengths are multifaceted. They come from the depth and breadth of experience and talent in the ecosystem here. That stretches, as we have heard, beyond pure financial services to the law, where a number of us worked, and to accountancy, shipping and insurance, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) mentioned. We have to view that ecosystem as something special that needs to be preserved.

London is also an attractive destination culturally, socially and in terms of diversity, all of which need to be preserved. I am married to a New Yorker who moved to London and would never leave the UK now, because she thinks that it is such a special country and that London is the world's greatest capital city. None of those factors should be underplayed and we should not be complacent about how we can keep them going in the future.

We have had a good debate about the importance of financial services in other parts of the country. My own city of Nottingham has a significant financial services presence. For example, it is home to Experian, the credit rating company, which employs thousands of people. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) mentioned the importance of Edinburgh, for example for asset management firms.

We also heard about banking in Birmingham, back office processes in Bournemouth, the insurance industry in cities such as Cardiff and Norwich, and many other examples that we must preserve and give due consideration to in the debates we are having in Parliament at the moment. I agree with hon. Members that this House and the Government need to give more consideration to the fact that our economy is 80% services-based, and

[Robert Jenrick]

that there need to be more debates about professional services and the contribution they make to the whole economy.

It is important that the UK remains a tax-competitive jurisdiction in many respects, but particularly for financial services. We are committed to the reliefs that my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden spoke about, such as the seed investment enterprise scheme, the enterprise investment scheme and entrepreneurs' relief, as well as the continued reduction in corporation tax, which we have just legislated for in the Finance Bill, to 17%. Together, those measures are critical to the future success of the UK in paying our way in the world and attracting investors here as an important place to live, work and form businesses.

The hon. Member for Oxford East also alluded to the importance of the financial services sector to the wider economy. Having strong capital markets in the UK is important for our venture capital industry, which is the European leader and is maturing, but there is more that it needs to do to create thriving sectors such as FinTech, the technology sector more generally and life sciences, for example in Oxford. There is also more to do in infrastructure investment, which the hon. Lady also referred to. We will shortly publish a review of how we can continue to be a strong player in financing major infrastructure projects. That will include the proposition of a national infrastructure investment bank, which has been suggested by a number of individuals, as well as by the Labour party.

It is important that the UK's financial services sector is inclusive. The hon. Lady made an important point about diversity. Most recently, we commissioned Alison Rose to report on how we can improve the level of finance that is available to female entrepreneurs across the country, building on the charter alluded to by the hon. Lady. The Government are also committed to credit unions. The number of individuals who are members of credit unions is rising—it is now over 2 million. There has been some consolidation in the number of credit unions, but the number of members benefiting from them is increasing. I think that they now have assets of £3.3 billion. We are making a number of interventions in that respect, including a FinTech challenge fund to see how FinTech can help with some of the social problems that we have discussed in terms of access to capital.

Given that there is little time available, I am happy to write to my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden and any other hon. Members who are interested about the measures that we have taken and are interested in taking to ensure that credit unions become more widely available, including, of course, by increasing their scope from 2 million to 3 million members and their geographical reach, which helps them to have a larger presence in big cities and different regions of the country.

Brexit has clearly been a major factor in this debate. Like my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), I do not believe it would be responsible to rule out a no-deal scenario, as it is important to maintain that leverage in the negotiations, but we have to accept that this is a sector of the economy that would be

significantly harmed by a no-deal exit. It would be problematic for a range of reasons, which we have discussed.

First, if we can secure a deal, it will provide an implementation period, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, would smooth out those cliff edges and enable firms to prepare as we transition to the future relationship. There is no escaping the fact that while we can take a generous approach to the European Union, there is no obligation on it to reciprocate, and we cannot prepare for that in advance.

Secondly, if we leave with a deal, it will ensure that we have the political declaration and, within it, the enhanced equivalence regime that we want, to ensure that we have a continued close relationship with the European financial system. It is critical for all of us to work together in the weeks ahead to secure a deal that we can support. Of course, it must not be just any deal, but a good deal that we can support for this sector. Ultimately, that is the only way we can give the sector the assurances it needs to continue to invest and protect jobs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden spoke about FinTech, to which I have alluded. There are now 80,000 people working in the FinTech sector in the United Kingdom. None of those jobs existed 10 years ago. We are a world leader. We have published a FinTech strategy. Of course, there is more that we might be able to do in the future. The next great opportunity is in SureTech. We are working with Lloyds of London and other parts of that industry to ensure that the same principles of open data that were taken forward by the Financial Conduct Authority can help to drive a revolution in products in the insurance industry. That is of interest both globally and to consumers in the UK, to ensure that they are protected.

We have heard about the importance of access to capital, on which the industry is reliant. We have taken a number of steps, from the patient capital review to increasing the amount of money available to the venture capital sector in the UK. There is more that we can and will do, such as working with pension funds in the UK so that they back these sorts of investments.

As we have heard, this is an industry that relies on attracting the best and brightest talent to the United Kingdom. We need to ensure that that continues. In March, we will be launching the start-up visa, which was announced last June by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. That will answer the question my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden asked about how talented entrepreneurs in a sector such as FinTech can come to the UK. There will be no limit on the number of individuals who can benefit from that and it should be a major step forward.

We have also accepted the Migration Advisory Committee's recommendations with respect to students. Those changes will be made in due course, which will make it easier for individuals to stay on in the UK after studying, to make a life here and to join businesses in financial services and elsewhere.

With respect to data sharing, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst raised, we are pursuing a comprehensive relationship with the European Union, but we will be able to deliver that only if we can secure a deal and get on to those negotiations in due course.

I hope that I have answered many of the questions that have been raised today. There were many others, and I will write to the hon. Members who raised them. We are committed to financial services sector, which is a foundation stone of the United Kingdom's economy and is of benefit to people across the country. The critical step in the days ahead is to secure a deal that gives the sector the assurance that it needs to move forward.

10.59 am

Bim Afolami: I thank the Minister for his response. I would like him to write to me about credit unions, in particular, which he mentioned.

In the remaining 20 seconds, I will take on some points raised by the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). The issue with regulation is not whether we should have a bonfire of regulations. Nobody on the Government Benches, myself included, wants to see a bonfire of regulations. It is about having the most effective regulations that we can, rather than just accepting everything that has happened before.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation: Telford

11 am

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the progress on the independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Telford.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. Almost a year ago, local campaigners in Telford finally succeeded in persuading the local council to hold a Rotherham-style inquiry into child sexual exploitation in the town. The survivor-led campaign began in 2016. The issue was raised in questions and debates in Parliament, but the local authority rejected all requests. Together with all local safeguarding partners, it told the Home Secretary and the Home Office, who sent officials to Telford to see what was going on, that no inquiry was necessary. Ten men in positions of power in safeguarding signed a letter to say that there was nothing to see here.

The campaign for an inquiry was eventually successful, because courageous victims were willing to speak out and come forward. I salute their bravery. They spoke to a determined female journalist, Geraldine McKelvie, who carried out a tireless 18-month investigation. In February 2018, she finally put the shocking scale of the problem in Telford into the public domain.

The purpose of the inquiry was to hold those in authority to account, to give answers to survivors and their families, and to give our community reassurance that lessons have been learned and that everything possible is being done to ensure that our young people are not at risk. Victims and families wanted to understand what had happened and to know that their experiences would not be brushed aside and forgotten. The inquiry was supposed to restore trust in the system, to reassure people that it would be on the side of the victim, to acknowledge the fears and anxieties of our community, and to restore confidence that the authorities would protect vulnerable young people. It is hard to understand how that could not be a matter of urgency.

Child sexual exploitation is not just any crime. It has a lifelong impact on victims and their families and it affects the whole community. It is about control, manipulation and fear, and it creates long-term psychological trauma for victims and families, from which survivors struggle to recover. It is also about the failure of those in authority to act and to recognise what was happening. Let us be clear: the victims in Telford were predominantly young vulnerable women, and those in power, who had responsibility but who so often looked the other way, were predominantly men.

When the media attention moved to other towns with similar problems, I did not want victims to feel let down because, after all their courage in speaking out, nothing had really changed. I have worked with survivors, more recent victims and their families, and I want my community to know that I have an absolute sense of duty to ensure that the inquiry happens and that it delivers accountability and change.

Once the council had agreed that such an inquiry would be held, everyone expected a chair to be appointed to lead it. One senior councillor said that the appointment was to take place before the end of summer 2018. The

[Lucy Allan]

council would then step back and let the chairman get on with it, because of course the council's actions would be subject to scrutiny by the inquiry, hence the need for independence.

I kept a close eye on that to make sure that matters were progressing, but when I looked, I found a shocking lack of urgency. A PR executive has been appointed to position the council more favourably, along with a top firm of solicitors who are experts in dispute resolution. As to the inquiry, however, there is not even a job specification for the chair yet, no advert has been placed and no terms of reference have been drafted.

The experts in dispute resolution say that they are “designing a recruitment process” and “looking to share their thoughts on this at future meetings with the council.”

They also say that they are,

“mindful to build in sufficient time for each of the steps involved in the recruitment process, and may add in additional steps at a later stage.”

Once the recruitment process has been completed, they will begin “designing terms of reference”.

We are one year on from when the council finally agreed that it would commission an inquiry—one year—and that battle had been fought since 2016. What progress has there been? A partner in that top firm of solicitors can now share a logo for the inquiry and is concerning themselves with typeface and colour. In that year, they have also come up with an inquiry name. I mean no disrespect to the solicitors involved, but we have to ask who is taking responsibility for this extraordinary situation.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. She has been almost uniquely at the sharp end of holding those responsible for overseeing the appalling state of affairs in Telford to account. She was quite right to call this debate to highlight the complete lack of action that she has just illustrated from those who were due to appoint the chair and get the inquiry under way. I sincerely hope that when the Minister responds, he will reassure her that he will take as keen an interest as she does in ensuring that people are held to account for the failures of local authority supervision as soon as possible.

Lucy Allan: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his kind words, and for his support on this issue and many others that I deal with as the Member of Parliament for Telford.

The inquiry was meant to be for the survivors and our community. It was meant to provide assurances to our young people, and to heal and restore. It was also about accountability for those in authority. Instead, we see a slow-motion gravy train for solicitors—expensive people fussing over logos and letterheads—which sends the message that getting to the bottom of what happened in Telford is not a matter of urgency.

That is set against a history of the men in authority not taking the issue seriously. The chief inspector claimed that the female journalist sensationalised the number of victims. The chair of the safeguarding board stated that the number of victims was made up on the back of a fag packet. A male cabinet member for children's services attacked the journalist on social media and described

her and her sources as “despicable”. Others said that those who raised the issue were doing it for political gain or were responsible for Britain First and the English Defence League protesting in the town.

Those men resisted and struggled and came up with multiple reasons why no inquiry could be held. They used their positions of power to shut it down. “It will cost millions and millions,” they threatened. Well, they seem to be working hard to make that happen. Rather than getting to the bottom of the history of child sexual exploitation in the town, they are creating a tangled bureaucracy that benefits no one. People want fresh air, daylight and transparency on the issue; they do not want the inquiry to be tied up in knots for five years and to cost millions of pounds of taxpayers' money.

When it has been gently suggested—by far more subtle means than a debate in this place—that the delays must stop, the authority's reaction has been furious. “This is what survivors want,” it claims, which shows how completely out of touch it is. The survivors do not want multimillion-pound bureaucracy with logos and letterheads that stretches out potentially for five years. They want access to counselling; they want help to rebuild their lives; they want their experience to be acknowledged; they want answers; and they want to know that lessons have been learned, processes are in place and attitudes have changed. Why would any responsible council claim that a long, expensive, bureaucratic inquiry must be better than an efficient inquiry that delivers results?

The council could have copied the style of the Rotherham inquiry. That was what survivors asked for. The inquiry took three months to set up, it took nine months to deliver and it cost £120,000, but most importantly of all from the survivors' perspective, it delivered real accountability. Those in authority who had failed young people were held to account. The chief executive, the director of children's services, and the police and crime commissioner all resigned. That is not going to happen in Telford—this inquiry makes quite sure of that.

In the end, this is about accountability. Those in authority are accountable to local people, and it is the job of MPs to ensure that they hold those in power to account. It is now time for the authorities in Telford to be open with the public about the cost of this inquiry, the envisaged timescale, the objectives and the possible outcomes, and then we can let local people be the judge. It is time to see this issue from the outside looking in, and I am grateful to the media for doing just that. Can those in authority really not see how the situation looks from the outside? Can they really not see how it appears to the hundreds of survivors and to our wider community?

Child sexual exploitation is a horrendous crime and of course blame lies with the perpetrators, but we cannot and must not ignore the fact that attitudes towards vulnerable young women in communities up and down the country played their part in allowing this crime to continue unchecked. In every case of child sexual exploitation, there is a sense that the system was just not on the victims' side; that their experience was minimised; that somehow they were to blame; and that the authorities and those in positions of power just did not work for them.

Although much has changed and we see great improvements in Telford and elsewhere, I urge the Minister, who I hold in the highest regard, to do all he can to

ensure that this inquiry does not become one more example of the way in which authorities so often fail the very people they are meant to serve.

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Stringer.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing this important debate. I know how much she has campaigned for the victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation in her constituency, and she absolutely must be credited for keeping this important issue front and centre, both in Telford and here in Westminster. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) for being with us today, because of his interest in a neighbouring constituency.

It goes without saying that child sexual exploitation is a heinous crime. It is one of the most difficult things that we as a society have to deal with. As this issue is not my day-to-day policy responsibility, just preparing for this debate and reading through some of the material about it was difficult for me to do. It is therefore right that, at all levels of Government, we work together to provide a strong response to this crime. Together we can ensure that victims find justice, and collectively we can better understand the failings of the past, ensuring that we not only help victims but protect future generations of children.

I will start by setting out what the Government are doing, and have been doing, on this issue. I am pleased to say that the Government's ambitious "Tackling child sexual exploitation" work has created a step change in the national response to sexual exploitation and violence against children and young people. The Home Office has established a new investigative team in the National Crime Agency. We have invested in new frontline response for victims and services, for example by recruiting an extra 100 specialist rape and child sexual abuse prosecutors.

The Department for Education has funded an independent response unit to boost capacity and expertise in local areas, which has supported over 20,000 professionals. The Home Office has also provided significant extra investment to the law enforcement response, through the police transformation fund. This has led to an increasing number of cases being prosecuted in the courts and heavy sentences being handed down.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary also recognises the grooming threats that our children face online. In September, he announced a £21 million investment to improve how law enforcement agencies reduce the volume of offending and pursue the most prolific offenders. There is much more to be done to help to combat this global threat, including by the digital industry, but I believe that the Home Office continues to galvanise global action, and it presses for a co-ordinated industry-wide response.

The Government want victims to have the confidence to report crimes, knowing that they will get the support they need, and that everything will be done to bring offenders to justice. That why in each of the last three

years the Ministry of Justice has provided £7 million of funding for non-statutory organisations that support victims and survivors of sexual abuse, including child sexual abuse.

Finally, inquiries are an important way of shedding light on the causes and circumstances of events that have given rise to public concern. That is why in 2015 the Home Office launched the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse to get to the truth, expose what has gone wrong and learn lessons for the future.

I turn to Telford specifically. First of all, I am glad that both Telford and Wrekin Council and West Mercia police are committed to tackling child sexual exploitation in their area. Of course, that must be their priority. I have seen that over the last decade they have forged a model of partnership working, established a taskforce to tackle this issue together, and have been noted by Ofsted for their work. In 2012, they brought seven perpetrators to justice, making their area the second place in the country to do so.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Telford mentioned, counselling and support are of course of paramount importance for survivors—in her words, they need such support to help them to rebuild their lives—so I was glad to see that the council is focused on that. It is responsible for commissioning services. I understand that very soon, a new support contract will start. It has the approval of the Telford Survivors Committee and was rightly conceived by a partnership of the local council, the police and the clinical commissioning group. I hope that all involved focus on what my hon. Friend has said and work together constructively to help all victims and survivors to rebuild their lives.

I am also glad that the council finally agreed to hold an independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation, which many people, including my hon. Friend, had called for. Ultimately, that was the council's decision; it is the council's inquiry. I welcome its openness to additional scrutiny through this process.

It is in the interests of all concerned in Telford that the inquiry be set up in a transparent manner that meets the needs of survivors. The council has rightly commissioned an independent body to oversee this process. Appointing the right chair will be key to the inquiry's success; I agree with my hon. Friend that that should now be prioritised. I also understand her concern that costs associated with the inquiry appear to be rising, and the council should be held to account for that, as is appropriate. The final thing to say is that the council has committed to this independent inquiry, so it must deliver on it, properly and expeditiously, to provide answers and justice for the survivors.

In conclusion, as I said at the outset, we must all learn from mistakes. I again thank my hon. Friend for her tireless commitment to this cause. Only by learning from and tackling the failings of the past, both locally and nationally, can we ensure that we not only help victims and survivors in a better way but, vitally, protect future generations of children from this insidious crime.

Question put and agreed to.

11.19 am

Sitting suspended.

Offshore Helicopter Safety

[SIR HENRY BELLINGHAM *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered offshore helicopter safety.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. As many of us are aware, the oil and gas industry remains very significant to our economy. Tens of millions of barrels are produced every year and hundreds of billions of pounds have found their way to the public purse in taxes over the years. The industry employs huge numbers of people, and I think we can be proud of what has been achieved, although many of us would have preferred to see Governments through the '80s create some form of sovereign wealth fund to support our country in the leaner years, rather than squandering much of that money on tax cuts for the rich.

I am here to make the case for an independent public inquiry into the discredited offshore helicopter system and for much-needed reforms to the regulatory framework. Helicopter transport is the lifeblood of the offshore oil and gas industry, transporting some 50,000 workers to their workplace. The remoteness and number of North sea installations make helicopters the only viable mode of transport. Some of the issues I will raise about the maximising economic recovery policy and about commerciality might have been more appropriately addressed to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but I trust that if the Minister cannot address them today, he will work with fellow Ministers to do so in writing.

It is important to recall the tragic statistics of recent times. Thirty-three offshore workers and helicopter crew have died as a result of accidents across the North sea in the past 10 years, and 65 workers and crew have been rescued in that time. In the UK sector, there have been five helicopter accidents, two of which were fatal, taking the lives of 20 workers and crew. All the incidents have involved the Super Puma models H225 or AS332L2.

Three of the incidents, including the one that killed 16 workers and crew on 1 April 2009, were attributable to technical failures of the main rotor gearbox. The Super Puma fleet was grounded in October 2012 and had just returned to UK continental shelf operations when an AS332L2 ditched in the sea off Sumburgh on 23 August 2013, with the loss of four lives. A month after the August 2013 incident, the Civil Aviation Authority launched a strategic review of offshore helicopter operations, resulting in the publication of CAP 1145 on 20 February 2014. That is the regulator's sole official response to date to the series of tragic incidents and close calls involving Super Pumas between 2009 and 2013.

Super Pumas returned in the North sea in 2015, but have been grounded since May 2016, following a fatal accident in Norway on 29 April 2016 that caused the deaths of all 13 crew and passengers on board. The helicopter involved was an H225 Super Puma. The final Accident Investigation Board Norway report in July could not establish the cause of the fatigue fracture in the gearbox-operated rotor that led to catastrophic

mechanical failure, but it still managed to publish 12 recommendations. They included criticism of Airbus and the European Aviation Safety Agency for failures to act effectively on recommendations on fault detection systems from the April 2009 incident in the UK sector.

The overall impression for the North sea workforce was that once again the Super Puma had failed, with deadly consequences. The trade unions, particularly the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and Unite, sit on the committees and bodies established to promote higher safety standards in the industry, including helicopter operations. They share my concerns about this area of aviation regulation and are fully supportive of an independent public inquiry. That is not only a priority for those offshore workers on oil and gas installations that are still in production. The emergence of offshore wind as a growing element of the energy mix and the decommissioning of 1970s and 1980s-era infrastructure will require helicopter transport to deliver the workforce safely to the job and back home again for the next 10 years or more. Those workers are very much affected, too.

As an aside, I am told by the Prospect union that the withdrawal of helicopters has other impacts, with pilots and engineers losing out on personal licence payments when a helicopter is withdrawn for safety reasons. Will the Minister tell me how the pay of those workers can be protected?

We know that the manufacturer of the Super Puma, Airbus, has ceased production of the AS332L2. The Super Puma family, however, contributed to Airbus's successful sales in 2018, with orders received for 17 Super Pumas, including the H225. Once known as the workhorse of the North sea, there is next to no prospect of it returning in either the UK or Norwegian sectors, yet that extraordinary collapse in confidence in one section of the offshore industry has merited little if any comment from the Government.

I met the Civil Aviation Authority last September and outlined my concerns regarding the Super Puma and the need for the CAA to be much clearer on its position. Due to the requirements it says it has in place, it told me that no one can see the Super Pumas re-entering service in the foreseeable future, even though the CAA had cleared them for use. What model will replace the Super Pumas and the S-92s in the long run? The Bell 525 is thought to be the only heavy model capable of operating in the North sea. Industry figures are being invited to Texas to view the new model, but it is still to be licensed for commercial sale by the Federal Aviation Agency in the United States. No other heavy model is at such an advanced stage of development. The RMT estimates that it will take nearly two years to complete, so there is no prospect of new helicopters in the North sea until late 2020.

What assessment have the Government made of the new helicopter models for the North sea market? Is there sufficient capacity in the market? Is the existing fleet in the North sea being stretched to the limit, resulting in more and more downtime, as appears to be the case? We know from worker testimonials that there are problems with resource and downtime. One group gave an example. They checked in at 6.45 am, but due to technical issues, the workers ended up spending 12 hours in the heliport. The following day, that happened again. Workers had been there for a total of 22 hours. There is

a long way to go before we can reasonably expect workers to be confident in the equipment—in this case, the helicopters—that is provided for them to be able to carry out their work.

While the CAA's CAP 1145 document improved breathing apparatus, seating configuration and window design—I believe the windows are made bigger so that people can escape more easily—the perception among many offshore workers is that CAP 1145 is too heavily weighted towards survivability in a crash, rather than crash prevention.

In correspondence with the Government on the matter, I have received a series of broad-brush replies that have done nothing to address my core concerns or those of offshore workers in my Stockton North constituency—many people in my constituency work in the North sea—and elsewhere. The Minister said in an answer to my written question on commercial pressures:

“Offshore helicopter services provide a vital link to ensure the viability of the UK's oil and gas industry. High standards of air safety are a fundamental concern in ensuring these services are commercially viable.”

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. I am interested that he has referred to the large number of oil and gas rig workers across the country. I imagine that in practically every constituency, someone will work in this line of work. Their safety is paramount.

Alex Cunningham: That is most certainly so. I bid for this debate because of the importance of this issue to people across the entire country who are involved in the industry.

In answer to my written question, the Minister went on to say:

“Through the Aviation Strategy, the Government will look at its role in supporting the commercial success of operators whilst balancing this against environmental and safety concerns.”

That is all very laudable, but it should be noted that the Government's aviation strategy, like their maritime strategy, is for the next 30 years, yet the latest consultation document, which was published just in December, makes no mention whatever of offshore helicopter transport. Can the Minister explain that omission? If he cannot, offshore workers could be forgiven for thinking that their concerns are being brushed under the carpet.

The Transport Committee's 2014 report found that the CAA review, which led to CAP 1145, said that the Government

“did not consider the evidence that commercial pressure impacts on helicopter safety in sufficient depth.”

The Government must convene a full independent public inquiry to investigate commercial pressures on helicopter safety in the North sea operating environment. That inquiry must examine the role and effectiveness of the CAA.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for leading the debate, and furnishing us with his knowledge about helicopters. A recent International Civil Aviation Organisation report talked about the potential ban on single-engine helicopters for commercial flights, despite engine failure being responsible for only one of 19 fatal incidents in the last 10 years. Constituents have written to me saying that 49 of the 62 deaths caused by helicopter crashes were caused by pilot error. Does he agree that we should look at that evidence presented by the ICAO?

Alex Cunningham: We should look at all the evidence relating to helicopters. That is why I am seeking a public inquiry to examine all the issues, to ensure that we come to the right conclusions and can plan a way forward. I have flown in offshore helicopters—I was not an offshore worker; I worked in public relations for the gas industry. I admire anybody and everybody who steps on to a helicopter, because it can be an uncomfortable time.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The detail of the hon. Gentleman's speech is fascinating and very important. Does he agree that any worker going offshore must have confidence in their colleagues and their company that the helicopter in which they are travelling will keep them safe, and that they should not be put in a position where their health and safety is put below company profits?

Alex Cunningham: There is no doubt that that must be the case. As I said, I have flown on these machines myself. I wanted to be assured that everything was good. When I went, there was a group of us, and because we were inexperienced—we had never been offshore before—we had a safety man sitting next to each and every one of us to reassure us and to help us through the journey. It is critical that people have that confidence. However, people are turning up time and again to fly offshore only to be told, “Sorry, you can't go now. There are technical issues.” Four hours later, they are given a lunch voucher, and told, “Sorry, there are still technical issues.” That does not build confidence among those who have to work offshore.

The Government rejected the Select Committee's recommendation, and claimed that there was no evidence to support the assertions about commercial pressure and offshore helicopter safety that had persuaded the Committee to make the recommendation. Yet trade unions on the offshore helicopter safety leadership group tell me that discussion of the CAP 1145 recommendation has gone nowhere because the contractors will not jeopardise their commercial relationship with the oil and gas companies.

I am told that the CAA sits on the offshore helicopter safety leadership group—quite a mouthful—but does not take a proactive role in trying to move that issue along and to tackle the core confidence issues affecting the workforce. To my knowledge, the OHSLG has yet to take concrete action to rein the oil companies in, although I am advised that the industry is looking at a draft principle in Oil & Gas UK's supply chain code of practice that would state:

“Contract cancellations should not be without good reason or cause. If an operator or contractor must have the ability to terminate a contract then the circumstance or risk should be outlined, explained and understood—not hidden.”

To me, that smacks of self-regulation, and is simply not good enough in such an unbalanced customer-contractor relationship. The helicopter operators are not even signatories to the existing supply chain code of practice, so they are not even within scope of the industry's self-regulatory framework. I would be grateful for the Minister's response to that problem, and to know what he plans to do to give teeth to some parts of the regulatory chain.

Successive surveys of offshore workers have found helicopter safety to be their No. 1 concern. Even an Airbus survey in 2017 found that 63% of offshore

[Alex Cunningham]

workers would not travel in a Super Puma again if they had the choice. That fundamental lack of choice is all the more reason for the UK Government to commission an independent inquiry into offshore helicopter safety, covering the up-to-date safety record of all offshore helicopter models; international comparisons; workforce engagement; the overall North sea helicopter market; contractual relationships, including commercial pressures; and the regulatory framework.

What is happening to bolster confidence among the workforce? Step Change in Safety has relaunched its helicopter safety awareness courses for offshore workers to attend, but they are via webinars with helicopter pilots from the main operators. Helpful though that is, it is a relaunch of existing courses and does not chime with the industry and regulatory mantra of “safety is our No. 1 priority”. In fact, it suggests a hierarchy of safety issues, with helicopter safety a secondary concern that is best dealt with by communications between pilots and their passengers.

Such an approach to passenger safety could never be contemplated in any other area of the aviation industry, and for good reason. The RMT, Unite, GMB, the British Airline Pilots Association and Nautilus formed the offshore co-ordinating group in 2015 to streamline demands and activities in the offshore oil and gas industry and the associated supply chain to work for positive change. We have to welcome that sort of work.

The ongoing financial viability of the UK continental shelf’s remaining 10 billion to 20 billion barrels of oil reserves—a core aim of Government policy—is intrinsically linked to the commercial fortunes and safety of helicopter operations in the North sea. Yet there is little evidence to suggest that that link is included in the high-level discussions in industry to set standards for commercial contracts in the sector, especially in helicopter transport. I remain very concerned about workers’ lack of confidence in the CAA and others who are responsible for their safety. In fact, workers’ confidence in offshore safety has been declining over the last decade, demonstrating that the measures of the regulator and the Government have not been successful in allaying workers’ fears and concerns.

After the Turøy tragedy—I hope I pronounced that correctly—the CAA, along with its Norwegian counterpart, grounded the aircraft type, in a move that was supported by the European Aviation Safety Agency and trade unions across the North sea. The Accident Investigation Board Norway began its investigation shortly afterwards, but before it could produce a detailed report, the EASA summarily lifted the restrictions on the Super Pumas in October 2016, with next to no explanation to the workforce or their trade unions. The UK and Norway’s respective civil aviation authorities did the right thing and opted to keep the restrictions in place, despite the EASA’s incredibly hasty decision.

By 2017, there were threats of lawsuits in the US against Airbus by helicopter companies because of the differing regulatory approach to the Super Pumas in the North sea. In July 2017, an extraordinary meeting of the OHSLG was announced, albeit at short notice. That was quickly followed by a briefing note explaining that the meeting was being called to discuss a decision on the Super Puma and a CAA-embargoed press release

announcing that restrictions on the H225 and the AS332L2 aircraft were being lifted. That action was taken despite the fact that the AIBN was still conducting its investigations and would not produce its final report for another year.

Some suspect that commercial pressures affected the decision to reissue airworthiness certificates. Whether such pressures took the form of the Super Puma manufacturer Airbus lobbying at European level or the threat of legal action from the European Free Trade Association against the UK and Norwegian Governments, I cannot say, but the Minister must look into the matter because it is bringing the regulatory framework into disrepute.

Airbus appears to have completely washed its hands of the North sea Super Puma issue. In February 2018, it told a meeting of the British offshore oil and gas industry all-party parliamentary group that it was preparing to hold town hall-style meetings with offshore workers in spring and summer 2018 to address the core confidence issues. Those meetings with the workforce did not take place.

After many years of working on this policy area—during which time the oil and gas industry, the Government and the regulators have all repeatedly testified to their commitment to high safety standards for offshore workers and offshore helicopter fleet crew—I can see limited effective work going on to tackle the core confidence issues. I hope that the Minister will reassure us that he will take action and seriously consider a public inquiry, so that the confidence of the people who do the jobs that drive a large slice of our nation’s wealth will be restored.

2.50 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing such an important debate.

Oil and gas is of enormous importance to Gordon, to the constituencies of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), and to several other constituencies in the north-east of Scotland. Aberdeen International airport is the transit hub of the UK continental shelf oil and gas industry, with the busiest heliport in the Western world, if not the entire world, and I am very proud to say that it is in my constituency.

As the hon. Member for Stockton North recognises, the oil and gas industry supports 280,000 jobs in the UK. Along with the Norwegian sector, the UK continental shelf is considered the most safety-conscious offshore industry in the world. Industry and regulators recognise that helicopters are the only practical means of transporting the workforce to and from the rigs; as he well knows, it takes up to an hour and a half in a helicopter to get to the rigs, let alone to the operations in Orkney and Shetland.

There are many areas that we can agree on. I have visited dozens of oil and gas businesses and all the helicopter operators, and as the hon. Gentleman says, they all live by the same motto: “The safety of our workforce comes first. If there are safety concerns, helicopters do not fly.” We all recognise that the North sea is a hostile environment and that hydrocarbons pose serious hazards, but what is important is how we manage the risks. Helicopters are essential to the North sea—

without them there would be no industry—so we all want a safe means of transport to and from the rigs. It is important that public confidence be maintained, particularly among those who work offshore, many of whom live in the north-east.

There is excellent workforce engagement. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, Step Change in Safety has various safety initiatives that have brought the various parties on board. Workforce engagement has come a long way in the past 20 or 30 years: operators, oil and gas producers, the supply sector, the trade unions and offshore workers meet regularly, and Step Change has been instrumental in giving everyone an equal voice. It is worth mentioning that trade unions represent only 10% of the North sea offshore workforce.

The industry has an excellent track record of engaging with the entire workforce. It has very high salaries, is technologically very advanced, is important to the economy of Scotland and the entire UK, and has inclusive umbrella representation. The Oil and Gas Authority, which looks after deals in the sector, tries to encourage organisations to work together—that is a big part of the extension of oil and gas in the North sea well into the middle of this century. There is a new national decommissioning centre in Newburgh, which is also in my constituency, and a planned national subsea centre. Oil and gas is an industry in which the companies and the workforce are encouraged to co-operate; it may be unusual among sectors, but commercially it is very co-operative. It is also progressive and driven by technology—one might say that it is the space industry of the United Kingdom economy. It has made enormous leaps.

Obviously there are commercial pressures, because the price of oil and gas goes up and down, but the main thing I get from people I visit in the industry is that nobody is complacent about safety. No one can visit the headquarters of an oil and gas company without being forced to hang on to a railing. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Aberdeen North and my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan, my colleagues from the north-east, are both nodding at that. We would quite literally have a stop order served on us if we went into the headquarters of BP or Shell and did not use the railing. I do not know what anyone there would make of health and safety in the Houses of Parliament—I imagine that they would have cleared us all out a long time ago.

As I said, oil and gas is a progressive industry. Some may suggest that the slump in oil prices has led to safety being downplayed, but that is simply not borne out by the evidence from everyone I have spoken to in the industry, in Step Change in Safety and in Oil & Gas UK. None of them has suggested to me that there has been a deterioration in health and safety.

The Sikorsky S-92 is now the main heavy lift helicopter; 20 Leonardo AW139s also operate in the North sea, and the Airbus H175 is the new medium lift. The number of people who fly in helicopters is reducing, because there are more trips but with fewer crew on board. The Super Puma 225 no longer moves offshore workers in the North sea—it is to the industry's credit that it has recognised the unwillingness to use that helicopter.

Alex Cunningham: As I understand it, the Super Pumas are no longer in use because the CAA has put such stringent conditions on them that they are not commercially viable to run. Does the hon. Gentleman

agree that although the industry as a whole may continue to consult, the consultation activity directly related to helicopter safety has reduced? Airbus did not bother holding the town hall meetings that it promised, while meetings of the OHSLG have been few and far between.

Colin Clark: I recognise what the hon. Gentleman says, but I think Airbus did not hold the town hall meetings because it realised that that approach was not constructive. The workforce have told the commercial part of the organisation that they no longer want to board the Super Puma. The industry has well and truly recognised that, and has not tried to force the Super Pumas back in.

Let me move on to resilience. There are three main airframes that operate in the North sea. The other day I had a meeting with Oil & Gas UK, which is doing a review of resilience. There is no pressure to bring the 225 back in, because if there is a fault and one of the three helicopters ends up grounded for a week or two, there will still be absolute resilience in the system—obviously at any one time there are crews on the rigs, but they can be operated with fewer crew. I understand that if one of the main helicopters has to be grounded, the Super Puma 225 will not have to be brought in, because it will be easier to bring in helicopters from elsewhere.

I am trying not to discuss Brexit at every opportunity, but the plan is for us to have associate membership of EASA, and the CAA has a contingency arrangement of recognising EASA licences. People I have met in the helicopter companies are reasonably comfortable that there are contingency arrangements that will not jeopardise resilience with respect to the crew or helicopters that are operating, or other helicopters being brought in.

As the hon. Gentleman says, aviation in the oil and gas industry is regulated independently of other organisations. Following research projects and learning from tragedies, the Civil Aviation Authority has drawn up a list of improvements, including prohibiting flights in severe weather in case of ditching, ensuring that there are emergency breathing systems, and managing the largest passengers in case of escape—it is a fact of modern society that passengers are getting bigger, so escape hatches have had to be made bigger.

The air accidents investigation branch is well respected. The Transport Committee's 2014 report, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, included a request that the AAIB stay in far closer contact with victims' families. We recognise that those families' experiences are enormously traumatic, so it is important that the AAIB stay much more closely in touch with them while it goes through its process. The Committee's thorough findings highlighted several issues that have been acted on—it is all in the public domain. What I am trying to say is that oil and gas is not an industry that is in hiding; it is a very public industry with several very effective regulators. It is being open and is working closely with its workforce—not just the 10% in the trade unions, but the rest of the offshore workforce. As I said, there is also a clear plan for when we leave the EU.

In summary, oil and gas is an industry with a safety-driven culture. It would be fair to say that no industry in the United Kingdom is quite as safety-driven as oil and gas, apart from perhaps the nuclear industry. We all recognise that an accident in oil and gas can be cataclysmic, and the industry does everything it can to control that.

[Colin Clark]

It is a very open industry. It is open to regulators and to public scrutiny. It is not trying to hide anything, and is questioned and held to account by legislators and regulators. Despite all that, there is no complacency. The industry is driven by the recognition that it has to be constantly on its guard, because that is so important, not just for the helicopters, but for the whole offshore and onshore industry.

Suggestions of a public inquiry are not necessarily constructive at this point, because of the work and the workforce engagement that has gone on. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), who said that we all expect to go to work in a safe environment, although she might reflect on the fact that we work in a building that is probably not safe, and we should perhaps be having a word with the authorities of this building.

There is one anomaly in the 2014 report that I am not comfortable with. We still have not seen a fatal accident inquiry on the 2013 Shetland accident, which would be heard by a sheriff court in Scotland. That inquiry may have a view on a public inquiry, and I would respect that, when the fatal accident inquiry eventually happens, which I hope it does.

The hon. Member for Stockton North mentioned Step Change in Safety, which is running awareness courses on helicopters. That is very positive. This is a safety-culture industry, which is working with the trade unions and the rest of the workforce. No one is complacent about safety in the oil and gas industry.

I have written to the Department and discussed an independent review that would bring together stakeholders and engage all parties in looking at resilience on the commercial and the contractual side, and would be an open forum. It would be industry and workforce engagement, rather than a room full of lawyers, discussing evidence that we believe is already 100% out there. A public inquiry could undermine a lot of the hard work that has been done to date.

The public bodies and industry groups are all still working in the same direction. This is not an industry that is delivering its swan song, or that is going backwards. It is an industry driven by safety and, equally, by the commercial realities of modern business. It is a reflection on the engagement with the workforce that the 225 is not in operation and that there is no contingency plan to bring it back into operation on the UK continental shelf or in Norway, even though it operates elsewhere in the world and with our own military.

All loss of life is an absolute tragedy and is devastating for families. I think particularly of those in the north-east of Scotland. My good colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan, worked in the industry and lives with the history and the memory of the tragedies that have happened in the North sea. I finish where I started. The safety of our workforce comes first. If there are safety concerns, helicopters do not fly.

3.3 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) very warmly on obtaining this debate

The hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) spoke about the importance of the oil and gas industry to north-east Scotland and to my constituency of Orkney and Shetland. He is absolutely right. He also spoke about the safety culture in the industry, and he is right about that as well. However, it is sensible for us all to remember why that safety culture is as it is. Let us not forget that it was the Piper Alpha tragedy and the inquiry that followed, conducted by Lord Cullen, that really brought that culture right back to where it needed to be. The danger is that the further away we get from an incident like that, the more likely people are to forget the reasons why we have the rules that we do.

As the hon. Member for Stockton North said, there is a lack of confidence among the North sea workforce about helicopter safety. Whether that is right or wrong, justified or not, there is no escaping that fact. It is a legitimate question for us parliamentarians to ask what can be done to restore that.

The oil and gas industry in the North sea and to the west of Shetland is absolutely crucial to the continuing growth and performance of our economy. The effective and safe operation of helicopters within that industry is absolutely central to it. I still have concerns about whether a public inquiry is the best way forward. My principal concern relates to my experience of the 2013 crash of the Super Puma off Sumburgh Head at the south end of Shetland; I was the constituency MP, although the four people killed were not constituents of mine. They came from different parts of the United Kingdom, from Inverness all the way down to Winchester.

It is surely unacceptable that five and a half years after that tragic accident, the families have still not had the closure that they will get from a fatal accident inquiry. This is not an isolated incident; the fatal accident inquiry on the Super Puma that crashed about 240 km to the north-east of Peterhead in 2009 was not held until 2013—more than four years after the accident. We are now at five and a half years, and we do not yet know whether there will be criminal proceedings or a fatal accident inquiry. As the deaths took place in the course of employment, holding a fatal accident inquiry is mandatory, unless criminal proceedings are to be held.

One of the elements of delay relates to the work of the air accidents investigation branch. I understand why the AAIB runs its business as it does, and why it is important that it is able to get information from witnesses in a way that will get to the truth of the matter as far as safety and technical issues are concerned, and that the integrity of the AAIB is protected in that way, but the police service in Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, which is ultimately responsible for making decisions on criminal proceedings or a fatal accident inquiry, do not start their work until the AAIB has completed and published its final report. The report on the 2013 accident at Sumburgh Head was not finally published until March 2016. It is getting on for three years since then.

In my correspondence with the Lord Advocate in Scotland, he tells me that the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service had to raise legal proceedings in order to get the data from the voice and flight data recorder from the AAIB. I understand the need to keep the integrity of the AAIB work intact, but we are dealing here with two public bodies, both broadly charged with the same responsibilities—public safety, investigation

and prosecution of crime, and the investigation of deaths in the course of employment. Surely there is a better way than having one public body take another public body to court to get access to relevant evidence.

Hannah Bardell: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is outrageous that families are left having to wait so long? I appreciate that there are many reasons for that, but the work of the AAIB must be done in conjunction and collaboration with other bodies, and it should not thwart any proceedings by the Crown. Families who have suffered deserve better.

Mr Carmichael: I agree with the hon. Lady up to a point. There will be occasions when it is absolutely crucial that the AAIB should proceed in the way that it is doing. It should not insist on proceeding in that way on every occasion, instead of exercising a measure of judgment and discretion about the information that can be shared at any stage with the police, the Procurator Fiscal Service and Crown counsel; that would indicate that we had two public bodies that were focusing solely on their work, rather than on the interests of the families.

The only people not given proper consideration in this process are the families. It is unacceptable that those families still do not know whether there are to be criminal proceedings or a fatal accident inquiry, five and a half years after the deaths of their loved ones. That does not allow them the closure that they absolutely deserve and need. That goes to the point made by the hon. Member for Stockton North about a public inquiry. When the sheriff has made his or her determination, there almost certainly will be a fatal accident inquiry, which will have the opportunity to make recommendations, and which might involve issues that would be appropriate for a public inquiry, but unless and until we get to the stage of having the FAI, we simply do not know that.

I hope that the Minister has heard what I have said about the work of the AAIB, and I hope that the Lord Advocate and those in the Crown Office in Edinburgh have heard. Even though they did not get to the starting line until March 2016, the fact that in February 2019 we still have no final determination from Crown counsel suggests to me that the Crown Office is also not beyond a measure of criticism. I know about fatal accident inquiries—I worked for three years in the Procurator Fiscal Service many years ago—and I know they are technical and difficult cases that require thorough preparation, but it is getting on for three years now; surely to goodness there is enough to bring a case to court, or at the very least for a decision about which course of action will be pursued.

We are at the point when all those charged with investigation and prosecution in the system need to take a long, hard look at what they do and how they do it. They should give more consideration to the families of those who have suffered in these tragedies.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Three hon. Members are trying to catch my eye. I want to start the wind-ups at half-past, so Members have about five and a half minutes each; if they could observe that limit, I would be grateful.

3.12 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): At the outset of my comments, Sir Henry, I want to declare an interest. On the evening of Friday 23 August 2013, I was employed by Stork Technical Services and was part of the emergency response team that responded to the accident off the coast of Shetland. My colleague Gary McCrossan from Inverness was one of those who died in the accident, along with Duncan Munro from Bishop Auckland, Sarah Darnley from Elgin, and George Allison from Winchester. I have not spoken about this publicly since then, other than a few times briefly, but that evening is etched in my memory and I will never forget the events of the days after. The response by the emergency services and by the company I worked for was absolutely exemplary. When dealing with such an incident, it is important to reflect on the experience inside a company and what it can be like.

In the three years that I worked in the oil and gas sector before I came to this place, I had on many occasions been through emergency response drills. In the previous company I had worked for, Subsea 7, I had had the opportunity to work in one of the best emergency response facilities, so in many respects I was well prepared. I also spent three years in the constituency of the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), working for his predecessor. I had dealt with many distressed families in many difficult emergency situations, but I do not think anything prepared me for the experiences of that evening.

I pay tribute to the emergency response teams who responded that evening, and to Gordon Craig, who is still the chaplain for the offshore industry; he gave a huge amount of support to the families affected, and also to the staff who responded. Sadly, because of previous accidents in the North sea, there was a huge amount of experience and support from within the industry on the day following the accident. Today we are looking at whether there needs to be a public inquiry. I say to all the policy makers here and in Scotland that we need a balance, and to consider all aspects of what companies do for profit and how they treat their staff, as the hon. Member for Gordon highlighted.

I was getting into the bath that evening with a glass of wine. Before I had put the wine to my mouth, my phone rang. I got out of the bath, and I was asked to come to work. There were about 15 of us around the table. We were largely sitting and waiting for information and pulling together responses. We were taking calls from family members who had seen the news about a helicopter ditching, but did not know which platform their loved one was on. Because of the nature of social media and the speed at which news now moves, it became a process of elimination; we did not know the names of those who had been killed even when those who had survived were getting off the helicopter. I remember sitting with another colleague, with a picture of Gary, and trying to identify whether he was among those getting off the helicopter who had survived.

Eventually the call came from Total. It was the Borgsten Dolphin platform operated by CHC that the workers had been working on. The response and support was exceptional. Total did an excellent job of including colleagues from the company that I worked for, and made sure we had the relevant support and information. A decision was made that evening that I and a colleague from the human resources team would drive overnight

[Hannah Bardell]

to stay in the highlands and meet Gary's family the next day. They were an incredible group of people. Although I do not have personal contact with them anymore, I want to pay tribute to the McCrossan family, and to the families of all those who have lost loved ones in not only this accident, but other accidents. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) rightly pointed out that they are still waiting for answers. It is a matter of deep regret that they are five and a half years on and still no further forward in finding out what happened.

We now have an industry that is incredibly resilient and has done a huge amount of work to engage with the workforce, yet it still does not have confidence in Super Puma helicopters. We have to consider carefully how the engagement happens. In the days and months after that tragic accident, I worked with many staff who worked both onshore and offshore. I saw the challenges of teams trying to resource jobs offshore with big operators; there were significant pressures. Safety is absolutely everyone's No. 1 priority. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland said, the further away we get from the Piper Alpha accident of 1988, the further away we get from remembering how devastating some of these accidents can be. Just as that was a turning point for health and safety offshore, so was the accident on 23 August in terms of helicopter safety.

When the Government consider this issue—I know that the Scottish National party Government in Scotland are also considering this issue—I hope that they consult families. What consultation has the Minister had with families and the workforce? There is no better way to understand an issue than to speak to those who work in companies and organisations. In the aftermath of that accident, there was a huge amount of regulation and many changes, from the size of escape routes to a reduced number of passengers. I spoke to some guys who worked offshore who told me about their experiences of flying. Perhaps they would be seated next to someone at a window who was a lot bigger than them. They would literally fear for their life; they had fears not only around mechanical failures, but around whether they would be able to escape from the helicopter.

We have to remember that helicopter is the only way to get to most offshore installations. At the time, many other options were looked at. Boats were considered, but fixed-wing planes are obviously not an option; helicopters were clearly the only one. It was not the way it is for the rest of us, who get on a plane, bus or train to come to London. Helicopters are literally the only way for offshore workers to get to their place of employment.

The Step Change in Safety helicopter safety leadership group, led by Les Linklater, continues to do an incredible power of work, and although in the past few years, since being elected, I have got further away from that work—and there is obviously limited interest in the oil and gas sector in Livingston—I have kept in touch with many of those I was involved with, who did such incredible work. That is why I take a particular interest in today's debate and what happens next. I hope that the Minister will look carefully at the scope for a public inquiry, and at whether that is possible and would be the right thing. I take the point that there are strong views on both sides, and that my Scottish Government

colleagues will also have engaged extensively with the workforce. However, the bottom line is that families have lost loved ones, and many still do not understand why. There is a list in the Library briefing of the many accidents.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but I am keen to call two more Back-Bench Members to speak, so if she could wrap up her remarks, I should be grateful.

Hannah Bardell: Absolutely, Sir Henry. I hope that the Minister will consider my request, and engage with the families.

3.21 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for securing this debate and bringing this important issue to the attention of the House.

I am speaking in the debate because not only is the issue important for the safety of offshore workers, but it has affected my family. My brother-in-law Peter Ross was killed in the Cormorant Alpha helicopter crash on 14 March 1992. Since then, this is a subject I have been watching. I am of the view that the flight—the pilot took the blame—should never have been attempted. The weather conditions were appalling and dangerous; yet the flight was attempted and 11 men including Peter lost their lives, and families were broken. My sister was left without her husband and my nieces lost their father. They were robbed of years together with a loving husband and father. Peter was 34, with so much of his life left ahead of him, but it was a life he was never able to experience. The tragedy continues to hurt my family to this day, and it hurts me every day. Whenever I look at the sea, I think of Peter and all those who have lost their lives in similar offshore helicopter tragedies, and I ask why they had to lose their lives and why more action is not being taken to ensure the safety of workers currently offshore.

I raised the issue of offshore helicopter safety recently as part of the inquiry by the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs into the oil and gas sector. I asked the Minister what action was being taken to improve safety, and the answer could not have been more disappointing. The written response stated that the Government work with the Civil Aviation Authority and the oil and gas sector to consider any issues regarding health and safety when they arise. That is not good enough. The Government are passing the buck on their responsibility to protect offshore workers and ensure they return home safely, despite the fact that 33 offshore workers and crew have lost their lives through Super Puma helicopter accidents in the North sea in the past decade alone. There have been many others, and some have been saved when mistakes have been learned from. Sixty-five workers and crew were rescued in the North sea in the period in question. I am glad for every one of them and their families, and the people they know and love.

Those events have been happening despite a continuing decline in the confidence that offshore workers have in the safety of offshore helicopter transport. An Airbus survey of more than 5,000 offshore staff in 2017 found

that 62% of those who had flown in helicopters were unlikely to fly in a Super Puma again if given a choice. That figure itself tells a story, and it is in spite of the recommendation by the Transport Committee in 2014 that there should be an independent inquiry into commercial pressures on offshore helicopter operations. Commercial pressure on offshore workers has increased following the fall in the international oil price in 2014, and we need to establish whether there is now commercial pressure of that kind on offshore helicopter operations, and whether it could affect safety.

I join the RMT and Unite the union in calling for an independent public inquiry into offshore helicopter safety. Not only is such an inquiry vital to restore confidence among offshore workers; it is long overdue, given the record of accidents in the North sea. I commend Unite for its Back Home Safe campaign, which I have joined in at many conferences. The campaign has been running over the past few years to highlight the need to improve offshore helicopter safety. I call on the Government to engage with the RMT and Unite and the offshore workers they represent. It is about time that concerns about safety were listened to and acted on, with a full independent inquiry. Let us not wait until more lives and more families are destroyed.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for a moving speech.

3.26 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on obtaining it. I have an interest in it because some of my constituents work on the oil rigs. I had the privilege of travelling in a helicopter a number of times during my service in the Ulster Defence Regiment, and indeed in the Army, as well as on a couple of occasions in Afghanistan through the armed forces parliamentary scheme. It both thrilled me and frightened the life out of me—I was between the two extremes of enjoying it and hanging on like grim death, especially when the helicopter turned so I was looking down at a guy, and then it went the other way and he was looking at me.

It might be an alien experience for us; nevertheless, I speak as a fan of the war film genre, and we have all seen the films where the helicopters are the first to be hit—and once they are hit, they are down. I know that war films are not a credible source—nor are war statistics, as the safety of nothing is guaranteed during war—but something that is credible is the fact that since 1997 four fatal accidents have claimed the lives of 38 offshore workers and flight crew, and there have been 16 non-fatal accidents. I am grateful to hon. Members who have recounted personal experiences of losing family members or working in the sector.

Offshore helicopters in the UK are primarily operated within the offshore oil and gas industry on the UK continental shelf in the North sea. In 2018, there were 70 active aircraft, of six airframe types, in the UKCS helicopter fleet. I mentioned earlier that constituents of mine work on oil rigs. They tell me their experiences, including expressing concerns about travel. Some 820,158 passengers were flown offshore in 2017, which gives an idea of the magnitude of the operation. Some of them were my constituents. The hon. Member for Clwyd

South (Susan Elan Jones) pointed out that many Members have constituents who work on the oil rigs. The flights I mentioned represent 69,005 flight hours, and I believe that when journeys are made at such a level, it demands attention. Given the fact that the offshore industry is already so heavily regulated for health and safety, it is shocking that the preferred method of transport is not more carefully monitored. Members have spoken about requests for more Government intervention and regulation.

Something to take into consideration is the fact that Airbus recently stated that it was looking to take advantage of new opportunities presented by the spread of offshore wind farms around the world. There is going to be expansion, and Airbus is saying it expects worldwide demand for up to 1,000 helicopters from the sector over the coming two decades. That equates to revenue of about £8 billion. So, the sector is going to grow and get busier—and the impact will be great.

Once a storm has begun, no amount of health and safety regulations can make a difference—only the voice of God can calm a storm, and helicopters and storms do not mix. Helicopters are not without their limitations. Conditions that hinder their operation include visibility that falls below 3 km, a cloud base of less than 600 feet, or wind above 60 knots, which perfectly describes conditions in the North sea. Flying a helicopter in extreme conditions is never easy, and it is time to do the right thing by the workforce, and act wherever possible to regulate and enhance safety during transportation to and from offshore operations.

As with many issues, there is a cameo from Brexit—has there ever been a debate that has not contained that word?—because we need to determine whether we will remain in the European Aviation Safety Agency post March, or whether to establish our own body or adopt a Norway or Switzerland position. Again, I look to the Minister for an answer to that. There is also a question that the Health and Safety Executive must answer. It has a major role to play, and I am unsure whether that question is receiving a satisfactory answer. We must push for movement in this area—again, I hope the Minister will give us some indication about that.

The industry has a key role to play. We must clarify what is expected from this debate and from the Minister, and every available piece of information should be used to determine safety on any individual flight. We in this House have a duty to ensure that those who bring the precious oil to land for this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are safe in their helicopters. I understand that helicopters are necessary, but we need to step up the safety measures, and I support the hon. Member for Stockton North, and all hon. Members who have spoken, in their call for that today.

3.31 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair in Westminster Hall, Sir Henry, and I commend the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for securing this debate.

This is a difficult debate to have, and those hon. Members who have spoken about their families and about personal incidents have been incredibly brave. The numbers are staggering: 38 workers and flight crew have been killed since 1997. Their families and friends

[Kirsty Blackman]

have lost somebody they loved—people have lost colleagues, friends and family members. The hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) spoke about the importance to our constituencies of the oil and gas industry and those who fly in helicopters, and everybody in and around Aberdeen knows someone who has been affected by this issue. Our thoughts are with those who have been affected, particularly if this debate raises issues that perhaps they were trying not to think about at this moment in time.

In addition to fatal incidents, there have been 16 non-fatal incidents, and it is important to take those seriously as well and to consider what caused them. The difference between a fatal and a non-fatal incident can be small and involve just a slightly different thing happening, and it is important that any assessment considers what happened during an incident, why it happened in the first place, and why it did not lead to fatalities.

I was a city councillor in Aberdeen when the events of April 2009 unfolded. Social media was already a thing, although it was not quite as widely used as it is now, and we began to see events unfolding. I remember watching in absolute horror during those events, and again in 2013. Everybody was terrified that any future incident would be a repeat of what happened in 2009, and in 2013 we saw that those fears were well-founded.

Mr Carmichael: May I add one further reminiscence? I was pulled back to this by the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) because as a student I assisted the senior depute who conducted the fatal accident inquiry into the Cormorant Alpha crash. That happened in March 1992, and the fatal accident inquiry was held in April 1993. Does that not show how we have lost our way in relation to the investigation of these incidents?

Kirsty Blackman: I agree that there has been a significant change in the length of time required for an inquiry. In order to learn lessons from these incidents, we must ensure that investigations take place much more quickly than they currently do, so that any required changes or safety improvements are made as quickly as possible to ensure that our industry is as safe as it can be. We are asking people to do a difficult and dangerous job, and to get into helicopters to travel to work. The least we can do is to come out here battling for our constituents and ensure that we have the best safety record and best safety measures for the future. The SNP wants to maximise economic recovery from the North sea, but we will do that only if the workforce are on board, are supported and protected, and have the workers' rights that enable them to go out and do their job.

I am aware that I do not have much time, so I will speed through a couple of points. The Scottish Government are reviewing whether to back calls for a full public inquiry into this issue, and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity and the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands met union representatives and agreed to raise the issues that were discussed with the Civil Aviation Authority and the Oil and Gas Authority. Aviation safety, including offshore safety, is wholly reserved, but the Scottish Government are asking for a collaborative approach to be taken on safety measures and anything that relates to an inquiry.

For us, the most important thing is that the concerns of offshore workers are heard. I spoke to Airbus about what happened with the Super Puma, and at every opportunity I said that it needed to consult the workforce, because for anything that it wants to do in future with the Super Puma, or any other helicopter, the workforce need to be involved. Airbus needs to hear people's concerns and not just talk at them, and I made that case in those meetings and will continue to do so.

To add to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), it is vital that any reduction in spend by companies who have had a lower oil price in recent times compared with previous years does not reduce the frequency of safety inspections or safety indicated repairs, and does not put safety at risk. As the hon. Member for Gordon said, safety is embedded in the culture, but we must ensure that when belts are tightened, safety continues to be the No. 1 concern of those in charge of such matters. Whether that involves the Oil and Gas Authority, the CAA, the UK Government, or the oil and gas companies, safety must continue to be at the forefront to protect our workers.

3.37 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Henry, and a privilege to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing this important debate, and I pay tribute to Members across the Chamber who have contributed with great knowledge and their own personal experiences.

Offshore helicopter transport, like maritime transport, is an area of transport with a low public profile but a huge economic impact. Unfortunately, the safety record in the North sea helicopter industry over the last decade includes 33 tragic deaths, alongside non-fatal setbacks that have caused significant damage to workers' confidence in the mode of transport that they are obliged to use to work in that industry.

Following the tragic incident at Sumburgh in August 2013, the Civil Aviation Authority, along with the Norwegian air authority and EASA, carried out a comprehensive review into helicopter safety. The review set out 32 interventions including—to name a few—the establishment of the offshore helicopter safety action group, the prohibition of helicopter flights in the most severe sea conditions, and changes to the way pilots are trained and checked. That was followed up by progress reviews in 2015 and 2016. The review was carried out alongside EASA, as well as the Norwegian aviation authority. Is it still the Government's aim to remain a member of EASA when we leave the EU? I have raised that issue with the Minister on a number of occasions, but he has yet to confirm the Government's position. What impact will a no-deal Brexit have on our ability to carry out such reviews?

Even with the improvements to safety since 2013, the core issue of workforce confidence still needs to be tackled. Offshore workers' perception of an industry governed by commercial pressure will not have been helped by the fact that thousands of jobs have been lost since 2014, pay has been cut or frozen, and longer shifts have been imposed. The Transport Committee highlighted

this issue in its inquiry following the tragic incident at Sumburgh. Trade unions across the sector have campaigned on this, and I pay tribute to them for the work they have done on behalf of their members, particularly the RMT and Unite the Union. One of the Transport Committee's recommendations was for an independent public inquiry to investigate commercial pressures on the operating environment of helicopter safety in the North sea, which has been supported by trade unions. I would be interested in the Minister's thoughts on that.

Following the fatal incident in the Norwegian sector, where 13 passengers and crew lost their lives, the Opposition welcome the grounding of North sea Puma fleets, despite the regulator issuing airworthiness certificates. That is testimony to the work of trade unions on behalf of their offshore members. However, the Super Puma continues to work in other parts of the international offshore oil and gas industry—for example, in Brazil and parts of Asia. Does the Minister agree that the Super Pumas should not return to the North sea without the prior agreement of a majority of offshore workers? If, as expected, the Super Puma continues to be grounded, what model will replace it?

In September 2018, Airbus announced that it expected the offshore wind transport market to add £8 billion to its balance sheet over the next 20 years, which includes demand for up to 1,000 helicopters over the next two decades. They will carry out tasks such as crew transport to offshore wind farms. Given the expected growth in this area, it is important that workers have confidence in the Government, the Civil Aviation Authority and others who are responsible for safety. Will the Minister work with unions to help repair workers' lack of confidence?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North highlighted, it is quite frankly staggering that there is no mention of offshore helicopter transport in the Government's aviation strategy. Will the Minister tell us why it is not in the strategy? Given the expected growth in this sector, does he agree that it would be a good idea to put in place a long-term strategy? I look forward to his reply.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his extremely knowledgeable and succinct winding-up speech. I now call the Minister, but bear in mind that the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) would like to have two minutes at the end to wind up.

3.43 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): Thank you very much, Sir Henry, and it is a pleasure to serve under your distinguished and esteemed chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing this very important debate, and I thank everyone who has had a chance to make interventions or speeches. Not only have representatives of different parties brought a great deal of knowledge and expertise to the table, but we have heard very affecting personal stories from the hon. Members for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney). I know I speak for everyone when I say that we are enormously grateful to those who have shared their personal experience, and we are enormously sympathetic to the tragedies of the families with whom they have come into contact; I absolutely recognise that.

Hon. Members have rightly said that the oil and gas sector is enormously important to this country. It is important not only economically, but socially and culturally to distinct communities in the country, especially around Aberdeen and the UK continental shelf. Overall, the sector supports something like 280,000 jobs and meets around half of the country's primary energy needs, but that statement does not cover the human aspects of its local and national impact. Offshore helicopter services provide a vital link—in fact, the only possible link—to ensure the viability of the oil and gas industry in what is widely understood to be one of the most challenging and operationally testing environments. As hon. Members have said, that is the context in which we should see the fatal accidents that have occurred in recent years.

As well as recognising the specific experiences of the Members present, I pay tribute to the families of the victims of those accidents and acknowledge their suffering. They include the 16 workers and crew members who lost their lives north-east of Peterhead in 2009, the four oil workers killed off the coast of Sumburgh in 2013 and, most recently, the 11 passengers and two crew members killed in Norway, one of whom was a British citizen.

As hon. Members have noted, the state safety programme for aviation in this country defines the acceptable level of safety for commercial aviation as one that results in zero fatalities—not a small number or a few, but zero. There will always be risks and hazards associated with operating in the North sea, but we are clear—just as previous Governments were—that the safety of those who rely on offshore helicopters is paramount. As noted by my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) and by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), that is widely recognised as being culturally central to the industry.

The UK is recognised as a world leader in aviation safety, but we cannot be complacent. I absolutely share the view of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland: it was the Piper Alpha disaster that engineered this change. We must face the appalling fact that an accident could occur tomorrow in the North sea, whether through pilot error or equipment failure in helicopters or other forms of transportation. We must be responsible and aware of that fact. I think it raises the bar and reminds us of the consistent pressure to maintain safety at the highest possible level. With that goes the suggestion that regulators and Government must learn lessons from tragic incidents, whether they are caused by equipment failure or pilot error, to ensure that they do not happen again. I am a private pilot, and we know that pilot error is largely responsible for fatalities and injuries in this sector. We owe it to those who now use the service as well as to those who have lost their lives.

The CAA has rightly been discussed in this debate, and it is important to recognise the work that has already been done in this area. In 2014 the CAA published a review of the safety of offshore helicopter operations. It is important to note that that is a comprehensive piece of work—it is nearly 300 pages long and contains almost three dozen recommendations. It considered all aspects of offshore helicopter operations, including the design and certification of helicopters, continuing airworthiness, operational procedures, organisational matters, pilot training, passenger safety, and survivability and resilience in the event of an accident. It was conducted in conjunction with the Norwegian Civil Aviation Authority and the European Aviation Safety Agency.

[Jesse Norman]

The review put forward 32 actions and 29 recommendations to helicopter operators in the oil and gas industry. It resulted in the introduction of a number of significant measures to increase safety standards for offshore helicopter flights, including flight restrictions during certain—especially adverse—sea conditions, improved emergency exit access, better emergency breathing equipment and changes to pilot training. Every aspect, including helipads and the like, was reviewed. During the review, the CAA engaged closely with pilot and offshore workforce unions, the oil and gas industry, helicopter operators, manufacturers, Government and regulatory bodies, and other experts in the field. It is right that it engaged with the appointed representatives of workers and—if my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon is right, and I am sure he is—the larger number of workers who were not members of unions but nevertheless wished their interests to be heard, understood and reflected upon. An independent challenge team, chaired by Rear Admiral Simon Charlier and assisted by experts including representatives from Transport Scotland and the British Helicopter Association, scrutinised the review and its recommendations, often robustly, and endorsed the 300-page report. That level of independent challenge was designed to ensure confidence that the process was robust, comprehensive and thorough.

I remind hon. Members that the CAA is a blue-riband regulator, and it is rightly admired across the world for its quality in all aspects of aircraft, airframe and air management certification and review. One of the outcomes of its review was the formation of the offshore helicopter safety action group, which brought together helicopter operators, offshore industries, regulators, unions and pilot representatives to enhance standards still further.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I have got an awful lot to get through, but I would be delighted to give way.

Alex Cunningham: That body meets extremely infrequently, and often at short notice. Somebody needs to give it a good kicking to encourage it to do more. Does the Minister agree?

Jesse Norman: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. I cannot speak about the frequency of the group's meetings, but anyone who is scrutinising this debate with the proper level of attention, as I am sure the group will be doing, will take his remarks alone as a good kick in the pants. If those meetings have been insufficiently frequent, I encourage the group to have more; I support what he has said.

Let me say a few more things, and then I will come to hon. Members' interventions. A number of hon. Members referred to the Super Puma helicopter, and I absolutely recognise the concerns of workers who have seen colleagues perish in that aircraft. It is important to recall that after the Norwegian accident, both EASA and the CAA placed operating restrictions on the Super Puma. When EASA cleared the helicopters to serve in October 2016, the UK and Norwegian CAAs maintained their operating restrictions to make certain the aircraft were safe to fly. They did not operate in a herd-like way. They played off each other, scrutinised each other and interrogated each other, and they did not reach the same conclusion. In doing so, they worked with, among others, representatives

from Unite, the RMT and the British Airline Pilots Association. They lifted operating restrictions in July 2017 only after significant modifications were made to the aircraft and training was undertaken.

The regulators clearly did not take that decision lightly; they did so only after they were confident that the aircraft could meet stringent standards and were fit to fly. Of course, the CAA continues to work with a range of stakeholders, including unions, to provide the assurances that are publicly needed. The regulators are content, subject to the additional checks that I have described, for the aircraft to re-enter service, but the decision rests with operators and their customers. To date, none has come forward.

I absolutely respect the initiative and the viewpoint of the hon. Member for Stockton North, who seeks a public inquiry. He has made similar representations to the aviation Minister. We take these matters extremely seriously and we have given the question careful consideration, but we are not yet persuaded that that is the right thing to do. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland was very wise in pointing to the potential conflicts of jurisdiction that already exist, and he said that he was concerned about the delays and lack of closure for the families.

Mr Carmichael: On that point, may I bring the Minister to the interaction between the air accidents investigation branch and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service? Surely, without compromising the integrity of either, it would be possible to have a better information-sharing regime that would minimise delays for the families. Would the Minister take that away and look at it?

Jesse Norman: That is a very interesting idea. I feel slightly as though I should withhold my own judgment, because I am not the aviation lead; Baroness Sugg is. I will absolutely take that issue up with her, because I recognise the concerns that the right hon. Gentleman describes.

It is clear that more needs to be done to provide reassurance about the safety of the helicopter fleet. As has been mentioned, after every accident the air accidents investigation branch conducts an independent and transparent investigation and publishes a very detailed report with a set of safety recommendations to the industry and the regulators.

Let me turn to some of the points that have been made, many of which are very important. My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) rightly reminded us that pilot error is the leading cause of death and injury in civil and commercial aviation. I echo the emphasis of my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon on embedding a safety culture.

To come back to a point made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), it is not quite right that commercial activity is antithetical to safety. I have lived and worked in communist countries, and I can tell him that the safety records in those places, which were notionally devoted to the wellbeing of workers, was absolutely lamentable. There can be commercial pressures in any safety-oriented situation, and they must be offset by a rigorous internal culture. That is why the emphasis that we and the oil and gas industry place on that is of such importance.

A point was made about the role of the CAA. The CAA not only goes beyond the EASA recommendations, but is itself audited by EASA. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East asked whether the Government wish to stay in EASA following Brexit. As I have repeatedly assured him—of course, this is a matter still for discussion—EASA is in many ways an offshoot of the CAA, and we would like nothing better than to have a comprehensive agreement that includes an appropriate relationship with EASA, whatever the legalities are, because we recognise what it does.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether offshore voters should have a majority vote on the introduction of new helicopter airframes. I cannot comment on the practicality of that. I would say, however, that offshore workers have, in effect, already spoken: they have made it clear that they do not have confidence at the moment. I think that is right.

I have very little time, and I want to allow the hon. Member for Stockton North a chance to give a final response. I thank him for securing this important debate, and I thank everyone who has made contributions—especially those who have brought their personal experiences to the table. The entire framework of the British Government recognises that those who rely on offshore helicopter operations must have their safety preserved. That is of the utmost importance. We also believe that all parties must continue to take whatever steps they can to minimise the risks in those operations and ensure confidence among those who travel in these aircraft.

3.57 pm

Alex Cunningham: I am grateful to the Minister for his response, and I thank everybody else who has taken part in the debate.

I know people think that I put a lot of emphasis on what the trade unions say, and I will certainly continue

to do so, but I am told that there is less engagement on safety these days. The role of safety officers—particularly offshore—has been diminished. I therefore welcome the support of the Minister, who has said that he will put the boot in at an appropriate place and try to encourage greater engagement through the offshore helicopter safety leadership group.

I was touched by what the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said about the fact that the families have not had closure. The fact that this is ongoing contributes to workers' lack of confidence. They want closure as much as the families do so they can understand what happened and get their heads around it.

I am grateful for the personal stories. My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) talked about his family involvement, and that emphasises that we are talking about people's lives. The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) talked about her experience of serving on crisis teams, when people were dying in terrible accidents. I understand her role, and I commend anybody and everybody who is involved in that sort of work when such tragedies happen.

I am grateful for the supportive comments—on behalf of the Scottish Government, perhaps—about a public inquiry. Perhaps a fatal accident inquiry is the way forward. We still need answers about the future of helicopter safety and helicopter travel as new models come into the new industries, such as the wind turbine industry, as well as the old. I appeal to everybody to continue their work to ensure that safety is paramount and that workers get the answers they need.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered offshore helicopter safety.

Defence Spending in Scotland

[JOAN RYAN *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered defence spending in Scotland.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Ryan. As the Minister reminded us before we started, I think that the last time I secured a Westminster Hall debate, the House had adjourned early, and it has done so again now that I have secured another.

The title of the debate is “Defence spending in Scotland”, but it could be “Defence spending in Glasgow South West”, and I will make no apologies for that.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Stephens: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman in a second. As I am sure the Minister with responsibility for defence procurement knows, I remain a strong advocate for the Clyde shipyards—the greatest shipbuilders in the world. It has been a pleasure to see that they have started building the HMS Glasgow—the first of three Type 26 frigates—and to see the fantastic design work being carried out on the Clyde. I hope that the Minister will be able to confirm that, although there are three ships currently in the contract, the eight that were promised by the UK Government will be built on the Clyde. As the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) is so anxious to intervene, I will give way.

Douglas Ross: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Although the title of the debate is “Defence spending in Scotland”, I think it is going to become “Defence spending in Glasgow South West” within 30 seconds. Could I therefore take this opportunity to ask him whether he agrees that there is considerable defence spending in Scotland, particularly in my constituency, with the imminent arrival of the P-8s and £400 million of investment from the UK Government and Boeing into RAF Lossiemouth? That is important to my area and to the whole of Scotland.

Chris Stephens: I support that investment in RAF Lossiemouth. It was argued for by the hon. Gentleman's predecessor, as I am sure he would agree, and I think we both agree that we want defence spending in Scotland. Later on in the debate, we may come to the actual figures, which I look forward to discussing and debating with him.

I cannot allow the debate to go by without referring to the letter that the procurement Minister received yesterday from the Chair of the House of Commons Defence Committee, regarding the fleet solid support ships. Many Members across the House are concerned about the Government having advised them that those are not warships. In the light of the parliamentary answers that many of us—myself included—have received about the combatants and the weaponry on those ships, I really do not understand the argument that they are not warships. I take the view that if it looks like a warship and acts like a warship, it is fair to call it a warship.

I commend to Members a blog from the Save the Royal Navy website, which makes clear its support for the letter from Chair of the Defence Committee to the Minister, who may wish to remark on that. My view, which is well known, as I am sure he will agree, is that the fleet solid support ships should be built in the UK. There are enough shipyards across the UK, including in Scotland, that could block-build those ships. If the Aircraft Carrier Alliance can block-build, the fleet solid support ships should be block-built using the same model.

I have many family ties to the defence industry. One of the employers that I will mention today is Thales, which used to trade as Barr and Stroud. Today is the anniversary of my grandfather's death; he was employed by Barr and Stroud, where he met my grandmother, and they were married for 61 and a half years, so there are clear family ties to that employer. It was based in Anniesland in the city, but has moved to Govan, the former site of the Stephen shipyard—that is a different spelling and no relation—which is famous because Billy Connolly is a former employee. I have family ties and a real connection to the defence industry in Glasgow.

It is important, as the hon. Member for Moray outlined, that Government spending helps to support and promote prosperity across these islands. Ministry of Defence spending has the potential both to have a positive impact on Scotland's economy and employment, and to help to balance the export deficit. I want to see the Government give a vote of confidence to manufacturing and engineering skills in Scotland by investing the defence pound in Scotland, and by encouraging foreign companies that are looking to maximise UK content to do the same.

At present, the lion's share of MOD industry spending on Scottish industry goes, quite rightly, to shipbuilding and repairs. As one of the vice-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair, I have no particular problem with that, although I hope that in future, the Ministry of Defence will look at how it can help the shipyards become more efficient. When BBC journalists looked for a frigate factory that a former Secretary of State for Defence insisted was on the Clyde, they found only rubble and ash.

While the shipbuilding industry must be supported—far be it from me to argue against that—I want to look at defence spending elsewhere. As the Minister knows, the Ministry of Defence is currently procuring key new land platforms, including the multi-role vehicle protected—MRVP—and the mechanised infantry vehicle, the MIV. That will be a significant spend, and the platforms will be vital to delivering the Army's strike brigades, which are part of the backbone of its new structure.

The latest available figures on Ministry of Defence spending in Scotland show that in 2017-18, MOD expenditure in Scotland was £300 per capita. Scotland has had an increase in expenditure within UK industry, but of all the nations and regions of the UK, Scotland finds itself with the fourth-highest spend. As someone who watches Scottish football—the hon. Member for Moray will appreciate these comments—I know that a team who finish fourth are not currently guaranteed a UEFA place. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that figure.

In fact, spending in Scotland was less than half of the spending in the south-east and south-west of England—two regions that account for over half of MOD expenditure

within UK industry. Approximately 10,000 jobs in Scotland were supported through MOD expenditure in 2017-18. A recent parliamentary question revealed that of the £1.59 billion that the MOD spent within Scottish industry, over £900 million was spent on shipbuilding and repair. It is important that no area becomes too reliant on a single industry.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Stephens: Before I mention Thales in my constituency, I will give way to the hon. Lady.

Kirstene Hair: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is talking about spending in Scotland. As he will be well aware, the MOD recently confirmed its commitment to RM Condor in my constituency. Can he confirm to my constituents and to me that in an independent Scotland, the Royal Marines at RM Condor would be 100% safe, and that the Scottish National party would spend exactly the same amount that the UK Government have committed to the base's long-term future?

Chris Stephens: I am more than happy to support the hon. Lady's constituents and the Royal Marines in Angus and elsewhere. As she knows, her predecessor in Angus, Mike Weir, was supportive, too.

Thales has more than 700 employees in Scotland, the vast majority of whom are at our site in Govan, in Glasgow. Thales's Glasgow links date back to 1888, which makes the Glasgow part of the company the oldest part in the United Kingdom. As the procurement Minister knows, an early-day motion recently celebrated the centenary of Thales providing optronic systems to submarines—indeed, optronic systems for land, sea and air—and I went to an event to celebrate that centenary. The work carried out by that employer in Glasgow is important. Thales is a major contributor to the Scottish economy, investing more than £850 million since 2000, and supporting a strong and diverse supply chain. Preliminary findings from a report by Oxford Economics found that Thales UK activity supports an additional 2,000 jobs in Scotland, and its total gross domestic product contribution in Scotland is more than £100 million.

On land platforms, the team at Thales in Glasgow established an armoured vehicle centre of excellence, with a view to nurturing the company's rich engineering heritage and commitment to developing its capabilities well into the future. The centre builds on highly skilled engineers' and manufacturing employees' decades of experience in complex military vehicle integration. Thales Glasgow has the capacity and capabilities to support Scotland's growth in the defence sector outside its traditional maritime contribution.

Combined, the two vehicles that have been contracted for so far could create and sustain 100 jobs in Thales UK, 180 jobs through the supply chain and up to 200 jobs indirectly throughout the UK. Thales' offering to the MOD's MRVP programme is the Bushmaster MR6—a military off-the-shelf product with reduced development costs that offers value for money and lower through-life costs. The fact that there are production lines in Australia for vehicle assembly, and in Glasgow for equipment and system integration, reinforce Thales's

ability to achieve cost and risk reduction. The Bushmaster would support 50 highly skilled engineering, design and manufacturing jobs in Glasgow, and there is the potential to create an additional 30 jobs over the lifetime of the programme. It could also support up to 100 jobs in the supply chain across the UK, as I say.

In the context of Brexit, the Government, we hope, are looking to strengthen trade ties with countries outside the EU. I would argue that Thales does that, particularly through its work in Australia. The MRVP programme offers the chance to help combat the trade imbalance with Australia, and supports the development of closer trade and defence equipment ties with that important ally.

On the MIV programme, Thales has supported the prime contractor over the past two years. It has all the expertise and resources to support the Boxer. Thales brings with it its recognised UK mission system integration, survivability and electronic architecture pedigree, developed over many years as a trusted partner of the Ministry of Defence.

I hope that the Minister is sympathetic to my representations on behalf of my local employer, Thales. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

4.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing the debate. I do not know whether something about him means that the whole Chamber leaves when he has his debates—perhaps they should all have stayed to listen to his contribution—but I am glad that he is rightly standing up for his constituents and his constituency. I will come on to some of the specific points he made in more detail in a moment, but I will first provide some context for defence spending in Scotland.

Last year's report on the contribution of defence to UK prosperity, which was produced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), showed that defence benefits every single part of the United Kingdom. The sector has annual turnover of £22 billion and supports some 260,000 jobs. Scotland very much shares in that national success, benefiting directly from every pound that is spent on defence. To illustrate the point, it is worth looking at two of the key areas where defence spending in Scotland is concentrated. The first element relates to our spending with industry in Scotland. Last year, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West said, that spending amounted to £1.65 billion, supporting 10,000 jobs. That is equivalent to £300 per capita, which is above the UK average. I know that he was complaining about some other regions, but I represent Yorkshire, and Scotland is doing a heck of a lot better than Yorkshire on defence spending.

We cannot talk about the defence industry in Scotland without recognising, as the hon. Gentleman did, the incredible expertise of the Scottish shipbuilding sector. With a history dating back more than 150 years, it has long been the envy of the world, and it remains a global leader. In the past few years, Scotland has played a major part in the building, assembly and successful delivery of HMS Queen Elizabeth, the most powerful surface vessel in British history, as we all know.

[Stuart Andrew]

The MOD has already placed a £3.7 billion contract to build the first three state-of-the-art Type 26 global combat ships on the Clyde, in the place—I can now confirm—where all eight will eventually be built. The first of those City-class frigates has been named HMS Glasgow, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman is delighted about, and the last will be HMS Edinburgh, again recognising Scotland's contribution. Coupled with our order for five offshore patrol vessels, that work will sustain some 4,000 jobs in the Scottish shipyards and throughout the supply chain until the 2030s.

Chris Stephens: I am grateful to the Minister for confirming that all eight of the Type 26 ships will be built in Glasgow. He might get representations from his colleagues in Scotland to name the other ships after different areas of Scotland, but I will leave that to them. Will the Minister kindly update us on the Type 31 frigates? He knows that there is interest in those being built in Glasgow and other places in Scotland.

Stuart Andrew: I was going to come to that, but I will touch on it now. The Type 31e is subject to an open competition at the moment, as the hon. Gentleman knows, so I cannot go into too many details, other than to say that we have three bidders in the competition, which is an exciting and challenging one as we try to change how we procure our frigates. I look forward to seeing the competition progress.

As I was saying, the fact that we have been able to secure those jobs in the Scottish shipyards, with work into the 2030s, is something that no other industry in the United Kingdom can boast or be assured of, so it is not surprising that many MOD prime contractors have sites in Scotland, including Babcock, BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, Leonardo, Thales, Raytheon and QinetiQ. That goes to prove that the defence industry in Scotland is about more than just shipbuilding, as the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out.

In the land sector, beneath the prime contract level, many companies across Scotland have provided high-technology sub-systems to the Army's critical warfighting platforms, which include Challenger 2 main battle tanks, Warrior infantry fighting vehicles, Foxhound patrol vehicles and the new Ajax reconnaissance fleet. Such on-board technology ranges from world-beating, 24-hour, all-weather sensors and sighting systems to the integrational design of complex battlefield communication equipment.

Looking forward, the land sector also holds much near-term potential for the Army's exciting fighting vehicle modernisation programmes. Scottish companies are already bidding competitively in the Challenger 2 life extension programme, the mechanised infantry vehicle programme and the multi-role vehicle protected programme package 2—that's a bit of a mouthful! For example, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West said, Thales—a company that I have visited on many occasions, even in the short time that I have been in my role—has a site in his constituency and is one of two finalists, bidding with its Bushmaster vehicle. Thales is also tendering for a range of smaller electro-optical sub-system upgrades for the existing armoured fleet to contribute to the British Army's

warfighting edge. I repeat, however, that the competition is open, so I cannot comment other than to say that I have heard him.

We should also not forget that small and medium-sized enterprises throughout the supply chain in Scotland benefit from our investment. I have really enjoyed seeing the innovation there is among SMEs not just in Scotland but right across the country. Innovative smaller companies such as Denchi Power in the town of Thurso in Caithness provide much of the essential very high capacity advanced battery and charging technology for the British Army's combat radio systems. In the past financial year, our Defence Science and Technology Laboratory alone invested £4.84 million in research and development contracts with Scottish suppliers.

The second main element of our defence spending consists of investments in critical defence assets, stretching far beyond our submarine and RAF bases. Few are aware that Scotland has some 50 defence sites, including Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides, Buchan in Aberdeenshire and Saxa Vord in Shetland. Those are the locations of our military radars, which provide critical long-range coverage of the northern approaches to the UK and neighbouring NATO nations. As the threats from the likes of Russia rise, so too does the significance of those sites.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West mentioned fleet solid support ships, an issue I have had to deal with on many occasions in this role. Those ships' primary role is to replenish naval vessels with bulk stores. They are non-combative naval auxiliary support ships, which are manned by civilian Royal Fleet Auxiliary crews and fitted with weapons systems purely for self-defence, so they cannot be designated as warships. I will probably continue to have long correspondence about that with the members of the Defence Committee, and I look forward to replying to their letter.

The relationship between defence and Scotland is mutually beneficial. Scotland is as integral to the United Kingdom's security as the rest of the United Kingdom is to Scotland's. Yes, the UK depends on the deep commitment of our Scottish personnel and benefits enormously from the unparalleled expertise of the industries based there, but Scotland also benefits from being part of the United Kingdom as a whole. It benefits from the UK's broad spectrum of capabilities, it benefits from the sheer scale of defence spending by the UK, which can call on the fifth biggest defence budget in the world, and it benefits from the influence the UK is able to wield on the world stage to make a genuine difference.

Douglas Ross: Will the Minister confirm that another benefit of Scotland being part of the United Kingdom is that, when the SNP made Scotland the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom, the UK Government and his Department were able to mitigate that Nat tax for our armed forces personnel?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who is sitting next to him, raised at Scottish questions just a few weeks ago. Of course, we will have to analyse the latest situation. If we need to make that mitigation, we will do so. The fact is that armed forces are sent where they are needed—they do not choose where they live—so we will step in where necessary to ensure that they are not disadvantaged.

As the dangers to the United Kingdom increase, it is even more vital that Scotland remains a pivotal part of UK defence. That is why we are upping our defence spending there. When it comes to the military footprint in Scotland, force levels will continue to grow. A further 550 military personnel and their families will be based in Moray by 2024. Significantly, numbers on Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde will also increase, to 8,200, while the base benefits from further investment of £1.2 billion over the next decade. HMNB Clyde will also become the base port for all the Royal Navy's submarines, including its fleet of attack submarines, and the UK's submarine centre of excellence. That is only fitting, since by the 2030s it will welcome four next-generation Dreadnought-class nuclear deterrent submarines too.

Meanwhile, this year, RAF Lossiemouth, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), will welcome its fourth Typhoon squadron, making Scotland home to half of the RAF's Typhoon force. Thanks to its close proximity to the north Atlantic, where enemy submarines are most likely to operate, Lossiemouth will also be a base for our nine P-8A maritime patrol aircraft, with a £132 million operational support and training facility being built to support them. That will create a further 200 jobs and, once fully operational, bring some 550 additional RAF personnel on site. I know my hon. Friend has been a good advocate of that.

Since becoming Minister for Defence Procurement, I have been pleased to observe the truly unique relationship with Scotland at first hand, and I am determined to do everything in my power to ensure that it continues to go from strength to strength.

Chris Stephens *rose—*

Stuart Andrew: I am coming to my last paragraph, but I can see that the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, so I will give way.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for a lot of what he has said, but I thought he would expand a bit more on the fleet solid support ships. Given the comments he rightly made about Scotland's contribution to the Ministry of Defence, can he justify the fact that those ships might be built somewhere else in the world, rather than in Scotland or, indeed, anywhere else in the UK?

Stuart Andrew: I will happily answer that question. The whole point of the national shipbuilding strategy is to make our shipyards as competitive as possible. For far too long, our shipyards have depended too often on defence for their work. The whole point of the strategy is to try to make them as competitive as possible and to challenge them. The Type 31e frigate competition that the hon. Gentleman mentioned is one such challenge to industry to consider how it can become more competitive, so it can go out to the wider world and start winning competitions. That is why I am really pleased that there is a bid from the UK as part of the fleet solid support competition. We will see whether it is successful, but the point is that we want our shipyards to be competitive. That is the way to secure their future now and in the long term.

Next year, Scotland will be home to all the Royal Navy's submarines at HMNB Clyde, to one of the British Army's seven adaptable force brigades and to one of three RAF fast jet main operating bases. That is a mighty testament to a relationship that works—a relationship that makes Britain a global force for good. That is why I believe passionately that Scotland should remain an integral part of this United Kingdom, so we can all work for the good defence of our country and around the globe.

Question put and agreed to.

Pensions Dashboard

4.28 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the pensions dashboard.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. For many people—particularly younger people—pensions are not a priority. In the early years of anyone's career, their financial demands usually concern paying off student debt and paying for accommodation, mortgages and travel, no doubt with a bit of socialising thrown in. Only when people gain responsibilities such as a partner, a spouse, a mortgage or children do their minds turn to providing for the future.

Some people are fortunate enough to be provided with a pension through the terms of their employment. That is particularly true for those who work in the public services. Unfortunately, in the past, those who worked for private employers and the self-employed were unable to access the same financial products. There were a variety of reasons for that, including affordability, knowledge of pension products and simple ignorance about how to start a pension. I am pleased that the Government have addressed those problems and that in order to allow employees—our constituents—to understand the level of their pension contributions, the Department for Work and Pensions has proposed the pensions dashboard, which we are speaking about today.

A pensions dashboard is an online service that allows people to see information from multiple pensions all in one place. It is a welcome step towards better financial awareness for everyone.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. The fact that it is so well attended shows exactly how important the subject is to our constituents. My hon. Friend will probably recognise that when the pensions dashboard was first suggested, it was seen as something that might not happen, but now we are on the cusp of it. Does he agree with me that it would be good to see such data sharing across the whole financial services industry? It benefits consumers and gives them power over their own information.

Dr Offord: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I certainly would like to see that across a range of financial instruments. Recently, I was required to find the level of my ISA trust fund. In the past I would receive a statement only every six months, but nowadays I can go online and use my PIN to verify my identity and see my daily amount. I can see the value of my trust fund here today. When I say trust fund, I mean the one I have paid into over the years, rather than one that was provided by my parents.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Like me, he has probably had a large number of constituents write to him wanting the dashboard to be as simple and clear as possible, and to contain as much information as it can. Would he agree that the Minister should look at that, so we get a sensible system that people actually understand?

Dr Offord: I believe that proposal is a good one, but whether it is looked at by the Minister or the steering group—I will come on to that—is another matter. As

the debate unfolds, perhaps some of those questions will be answered. I always say that the dashboard should be made as simple as possible, so that people can engage with their pensions and their future, which is a good thing.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I congratulate him on securing the debate. I entirely agree that it is a very good idea to have all this information in one place, but does he agree that there must be appropriate regulatory compliance concerning the way the data is held?

Dr Offord: I do agree, and the hon. Gentleman has anticipated some of my speech. That is a good point, and I will come on to it in proper detail.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Is it not true that we need to get the governance of the pensions dashboard correct? We have just seen that a hotel booking website has had to end its misleading sales activities. Is there a risk that without the right level of governance, something similar could happen to the dashboard?

Dr Offord: Once again, my hon. Friend has anticipated my speech. He is absolutely right; we need to get this right and ensure that people have confidence in the system, so that our constituents are not only keen to invest their money but reassured, after recent financial problems, that their concerns will be addressed. We will do that as part of the process.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing such a significant debate. Does he agree that the Government must lead the implementation of the pensions dashboard, if they are to compel all pension providers to take part and if the dashboard is to be a truly useful tool for many retired people aged 55 and over who do not know the size of their savings?

Dr Offord: I hope that the dashboard provides for those people. I was about to come to a statistic that indicates that many people do not know the size of their pension pot. That has repercussions, particularly when people retire and they suddenly realise that they will not have the level of income or the kind of lifestyle that they had expected or previously experienced. Some 25% of people over the age of 55, including those who are retired, say that they do not know the size of their pension pot. The dashboard will address that. It will offer those people and others the ability to access information about their financial contributions from multiple pensions, any time they want to, on their smartphone, iPad or computer. Effectively, it will bring our pensions into the 21st century.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for securing this important debate. I have been supporting and pressing for the pensions dashboard for many years, since the time of the coalition. Does he agree that it is crucial that in the next pensions Act, the Government make it a legal requirement for all pension providers to go into the pensions dashboard and provide all the necessary information, otherwise the dashboard will fail? Does the Minister—or, rather, the hon. Gentleman—agree that at this late stage, that is critical?

Dr Offord: That is a very important point. Unfortunately, I am not a Minister, but the debate provides the opportunity to put that question to the Minister. Perhaps the Minister in summing up will provide the reassurances that the hon. Gentleman seeks.

Once again, the hon. Gentleman seems to have pre-empted my speech, because I was about to name him and thank him for coming along. I was going to say that it is very pleasing that the proposal has cross-party support, and that I welcome his support and attendance, along with that of my hon. Friends the Members for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey), for Solihull (Julian Knight) and for Henley (John Howell).

Mr Jim Cunningham: What about me? [*Laughter.*]

Dr Offord: Of course, if I had had any forward notice I would have thanked the hon. Gentleman as well. I am particularly pleased to see the SNP here, because the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) signalled his approval for the social security statutory instruments we debated on Monday, so I thank him and the SNP for that.

From the comments I have heard from the Opposition today, I understand that the proposal that we are debating is not only welcome, but something that all parties are agreed on. With that support, the Government have already engaged in a consultation about how the pensions industry can create the dashboards. In the absence of a clear industry lead, it is proposed by my hon. Friend the Minister that a new single financial guidance body should be convened to oversee an industry delivery group to enable successful implementation.

As I see it, there are two issues that some hon. Members or people outside the Chamber may be concerned about. The first is whether the pensions dashboard should be held in public or private ownership. Like some other hon. Members, I have a Merseyside pension scheme from my time of employment in local government, and as a result I would prefer the dashboard to be in private ownership. Merseyside is notoriously difficult to engage with and refuses to discuss its scheme with organisations or the financial advisers that I have had over the years. However, I acknowledge support for the provision of a non-commercial dashboard supported by the Government; some hon. Members may also agree with that.

The Department for Work and Pensions research has built on the recommendation of the pensions dashboard project that a non-commercial service, endorsed by the Government, must be made available. As key stakeholders have commented, multiple dashboards in the private sector would complement a Government-sponsored offer, which should still be available for those who would prefer it, or who may not be targeted by the market.

It was suggested by the pensions dashboard project group—and, earlier last year, by the Work and Pensions Committee—that the single financial guidance body, which launched services to the public last month, would be a sensible place to host such a dashboard. The industry delivery group will need to consider how best to implement commercial dashboards alongside the non-commercial one. *Which?* magazine and others across the industry have suggested that a gradual expansion, starting with a single, non-commercial dashboard, is likely to reduce the potential for confusion and help to establish consumer trust.

The second issue of contention is that passing the pensions dashboards on to the private sector will mean that there is no guarantee of compliance from all providers, and will centralise huge amounts of financial information for the private sector to access. In answer to that, I say that in developing the infrastructure for pensions dashboards, industry must adhere to the rights of the individual and principles as set out in the Data Protection Act 2018, which reflects the general data protection regulation. That includes the individual's right to data portability and principles of accuracy, storage, access and security. There would be no aggregation of the user's information in the storing of the data in any of the components in the dashboard's ecosystem, other than by the pension scheme or an integrated service provider operating on behalf of the provider. That supports the overarching delivery principles of keeping data secure and putting the individual in control of their data. Access to the data would be available only to the user unless specific consent is given—that goes back to my point about Merseyside. Dashboard operators would not be allowed to access the data for any purpose unless they had the specific consent of the user.

I anticipate that the delivery group, working with the regulators, will seek to agree data standards for pension providers and dashboards. Those data standards will need to support whatever level of functionality is required through different phases of implementation and ongoing development of the dashboard service. The pensions dashboard is so important because of the number of people who have now invested in their own pension pot. In the five years from 2012, the percentage of eligible employees participating in a workplace pension rose from 55% to 84%.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important debate to the House. Does he agree that the auto-enrolment programme that the Government introduced has ensured that many low-paid and younger people are also investing in their retirement? As a young person, I would say that is something we would always push into the future. The system must be accessible to young people as much as to older people, and we must ensure that they are educated in the system that is introduced.

Dr Offord: I must have left my speech on the photocopier, because once again, I have been anticipated. My hon. Friend is absolutely right; among those aged 22 to 29, participation has increased from 35% to 79% over the same period. That is certainly something we can all be pleased about. Automatic enrolment, which was also launched in 2012, has driven that increase and created millions of new savers, with nearly 10 million eligible employees having been automatically enrolled. Since April 2018, those savers are contributing at least 5% of their eligible income into their private pension pot, inclusive of employer contribution, and next year that will rise to 8%, including employer contributions.

In addition to those young people, it is worth mentioning the number of females who are now enrolled in pension schemes. Compared with the figure for 2012, an additional 3 million women now have a workplace pension thanks to auto-enrolment. As I said before, in the 22 to 29 age group, participation in the private sector has risen from 35% in 2012 to 79% in just five years. In total, the

[Dr Offord]

number of people who possess a workplace pension reached a record high of 41.1 million in 2017, up nearly 50% since 2012.

I ask the Minister to tell me in his summing-up speech whether he will provide not only me, but perhaps the House of Commons Library, with the auto-enrolment figures for all constituencies across the United Kingdom. I am particularly keen to see those figures for my Hendon constituents.

In conclusion, I believe pension freedoms have given people greater choice about when and how they use their pension savings. That is truly a transformation of our savings culture. The initiative displays true Conservative values of creating opportunity, nurturing aspiration and assisting people to take responsibility for their own futures. I hope the pensions dashboard is considered by other Ministers and inspires them to take similar actions in their own Departments.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I will just say to the Back-Bench speakers that if they take about four or possibly five minutes and manage themselves, the Opposition Front-Bench speakers will have five minutes each and the Minister will have 10, and everybody should be able to get in.

4.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing it. I am happy to make a comment within the timescale that you have set out, Mrs Ryan,

Pensions are a thorny issue; many people made their financial plans based on the promise of a pension that has not materialised. There are also those who invested, only to lose their money and get only 30p in the pound of their investment, but that is a debate for another day; in fact, we had a debate on that last Thursday in the main Chamber; it was on Equitable Life, and those who had paid into a pension but did not get their money. It is easy to understand the concerns that some of us have about people's need for a pension; the hon. Gentleman referred to the need for a pensions dashboard.

I can well recall—although it was not yesterday—my mum taking me down to the Northern Bank, as it was, to open my first account when I was 16. I also remember that when I turned 18, she took me to fill in the policy with the insurance man and said, “Make sure you're putting money aside every month for that purpose.” That was thriftiness, but it was also really good direction from my mum, as always, because it was important that we knew why we did those things. I am a wee bit older now, and I am glad that I signed up for those things many years ago, because I will benefit from them in the years ahead.

Today's debate is an attempt to ensure that people are not left in the lurch in the way that women born in the 1950s and the Equitable Life savers have been. It is an issue that it is certainly worth people considering if they are working hard and seeking to invest, so that someday they do not have to work, but can enjoy life without having to miss out on the things that they have while working a nine-to-five job. It is my sincere hope and

desire that the work that the Treasury Committee and others are doing to prevent another Equitable Life scandal will be successful, but irrespective of that, a dashboard with real-time information has to be useful for those who are planning their future, as the hon. Gentleman said.

I must say that the key decisions that came from the Government consultation give rise to some concern. One concern relates to data security. The fact that all financials are held and accessible by the industry independently raises concern. I hope the Minister can reassure me on that. My concern is heightened by the breach in Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority data security, which led to the addresses of my staff members being released. That shook our office and caused great concern, given that we hail from a political party in Northern Ireland, and given its history. Such data security breaches underline my concerns. The Government must ensure that there are guidelines in place to reassure people, including my constituents and me.

I also have grave concerns regarding proposals that would result in pension fund members being targeted by those who want their business. Although I agree that multiple dashboards would improve consumer choice, it is essential that alongside those—I think the hon. Gentleman referred to this—there be a non-commercial dashboard, hosted by the single financial guidance body, and offering an impartial service to those who prefer that, or who may not want to be targeted by the market. We must cover all choices and tastes.

Another essential issue for me is that the cost of this dashboard should not hit the pension or the consumers; there should rather be an obligation on the industry to bear the cost. Although the autumn Budget has made available funding for 2019-20 to facilitate the industry's making dashboards a reality, it is clear that that is to get the dashboard on its feet, as opposed to making it a Government service. That is another consideration.

I am conscious of time, so I will conclude with this point. In principle, I support the idea of people having greater knowledge of their financial status. There are so many people who come into my office with their pension annual statement, not understanding what it means—not only older people, but young career people who have been made to sign up to a pension, but have no idea what the money that they pay, or their employer pays, is used for. It is surprising how many people do not know.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): That is why we need proper enterprise education in schools. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is when it should start, and that it should not end until people enter the workplace?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman; just as the hon. Member for Hendon thought that someone had read his script, my next words are on the very subject to which the hon. Gentleman refers. The subject is not covered in school, but it clearly should be, because these young people literally have no idea what their pension means. He is absolutely right, and his intervention underlines the responsibilities that we have a duty to perform. I sincerely believe that a pension dashboard can help this generation, but the safety and security of financial information is paramount.

I look forward to the Minister's response; I feel that some of the assurances I have sought in this small contribution are assurances that he can provide, and if he does, he will set a lot of minds at rest.

4.48 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing this debate; I thought he did a brilliant job of explaining why the dashboard is so welcome and so necessary, so I will not take up too much time going over old ground, but I want to comment once again on why the dashboard is so important and so necessary.

While it is true that we have 9 million new people coming into the workplace pension scheme through auto-enrolment, and those people can hopefully be more engaged in their pension savings throughout their working life, historically that is simply not what has happened. Quite frankly, many people have absolutely no idea what sort of pension savings they have built up over 20, 30 or 40 years of work. Many companies that they have worked for will no longer exist, and the insurance companies that held their pension schemes may have been amalgamated or no longer exist at all.

Those people will suddenly find themselves coming up to their retirement not really having any idea of what sort of pension savings they have, other than those savings made with a main employer that they were with for a long time. It is not particularly surprising that research shows that one in five adults will admit to having lost at least one pension pot. I think that probably understates it, because there will be people who will not admit that they cannot remember what pension savings they have, and there will be people who do not know that they do not know what pension savings they have.

The Pensions Policy Institute research suggesting that consumers have lost track of about £19.5 billion in pension pots really reinforces why we need the dashboard, why it needs to be all-encompassing and, as was said, why we need to make sure that all providers are properly committed to providing the information. The dashboard will not be much use if whether it is any good depends on which provider a person was linked with in the workplace; what would be the point? It needs to work for absolutely everybody.

I thought it was perfectly sensible that the Government decided to take a slightly different approach and push the private sector to lead more on the dashboard's development; it had been doing most of the running on that, anyway. However, whatever the final dashboard or various dashboards look like, it is vital that the state pension element be included in it, to give people that full picture of their retirement saving. I liked the idea from my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who is no longer in his place, of looking at ways to link up the dashboard with broader financial products, but we should probably walk before we can run, and make sure that the dashboard is up and running before we start making it more complicated.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister. First, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the issue of data security and identity risks, which I think are very real. The Government Gateway is doing a lot of good stuff to protect against those risks, but we

will need to be pretty satisfied, through the regulatory framework, that data is secure, and that there will be no danger.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It may help the House if I address the point raised by my hon. Friends the Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), and for Hendon (Dr Offord), and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). For those who have not had the opportunity to see it, chapter 4 on page 29 of the consultation sets out in quite a lot of detail the efforts we propose to take on data security. The matter is clearly subject to consultation, but without any shadow of a doubt, it will not be proposed that the dashboard be a data storage device. Pension companies will provide one individual's data back to that individual, rather than it going through a conglomerated site, which would be eminently more hackable, for obvious reasons.

Paul Masterton: I thank the Minister for that intervention, which was very useful and clarifies the point nicely. My other questions are on the industry delivery group. Is the Minister in any kind of position to explain the process for setting that up, and when it is likely to be set up? The main point is to make sure that the members of the group have the right mix of experience and backgrounds to deliver.

The pensions dashboard is another example of good pensions policy built on a consensual, cross-party basis. As more people come into the pension system because of auto-enrolment, it will be absolutely critical that they are able to keep track of what they have saved in the long term, over their working life.

4.53 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing the debate. To state the obvious, pensions are critical, but they can also be extremely complicated. People have an average of 11 jobs over their working life, so they are bound to build up several different pension pots over time. There are more than 40,000 private pension schemes in the UK, so bringing all the information together in one place and making it easy for people to access is sensible, though clearly a big step. That is why the pensions dashboard was supported cross-party, and by the industry.

However, there are real concerns about delegating the operation to the private sector. I will emphasise the areas where we need clarity urgently. First, the Government state that they expect people's state pension entitlement "to ultimately be part" of the dashboard, but do not elaborate. Given that that is a major segment of many people's total pension pot, will the Minister say by what date the state pension will be part of the dashboard?

Secondly, the Government say that they expect "the majority" of pension schemes to be included on the dashboard within three to four years, but then say they would legislate to ensure that occurs within

"a reasonable timeframe agreed by industry".

To make better progress and to aid future pensioners, will the Government set a three-year timeframe in legislation and require all pension schemes to comply with it? I understand how big this task is, but we need to be ambitious on the timeframes.

[Nick Smith]

Thirdly, the Government say that they expect “a standard level of identity assurance”

for the service. I thank the Minister for his intervention, but given that people’s most sensitive financial information will be centralised, should the safeguards here not be made as strong as possible, just as they should for our consumer banking services? That is really important.

Finally, it was reported today that the Financial Conduct Authority has only 10 staff, out of a total of 3,700, working on investment scams, which is way off being enough. Does the Minister believe that is adequate, given that nearly £200 million was lost to scams last year?

Accurate and straightforward information is essential to helping people navigate this important but sometimes complex field. We need to make sure that they have that information, so that they have peace of mind when making critical financial decisions for the future.

4.56 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) for securing the debate. Speaking as one who probably had many thousands of jobs over my career, I think it is terribly important that we make clear how the pensions system works. This dashboard does just that.

As the Government announced when launching the consultation on the dashboard last December, the platform will put individuals in control of their data. I have to be absolutely honest: I was never clear about the data on my pensions at any given moment, and I used to have to sit down for some time to sort it all out, so this change makes sense.

I have no doubt that the dashboard will be a positive development for Clacton, where, like most places across the country, we have an aging population. In fact, we have the third-highest percentage of retirees in the country. There are 27,485 pensioners in Clacton—a number that now includes me—and by 2030 that is expected to increase by more than 20%, to 32,982. That means that at least 5,497 individuals out there working hard for their retirement will end up living, by sheer good fortune or whatever, on the glorious sunshine coast of Clacton in my wonderful constituency.

I want every one of those people to have a comfortable retirement, just as I want those who are already retired and living in my constituency to be comfortable; they are, after all, 40% of my electorate. As a matter of fact, I will be holding an older people’s fair in June, to ensure that they have all the support that they need. However, I also recognise the range of steps that the Government have taken to help older people during their retirement. Most important is the triple lock, which we are very sensibly retaining, and which means, as we well know, that the basic state pension will rise in line with inflation or earnings, or by 2.5%, whichever is highest. There are many beneficial policies for older people.

However, while I welcome these changes, I am worried about the prospects of future retirees. Even with more people saving, the workers of today are just not saving enough, despite their continuing hard work and the fastest wage growth for 10 years. In the future, when the savers of today retire, they are likely to come under

greater pressure from a combination of factors, including reduced wealth and higher expenditure on social care and housing. We must mitigate those pressures, and I believe that the pensions dashboard gives us the opportunity to do just that.

The Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association recommended in its “Hitting The Target” report that “the UK should develop and implement a series of targets” on retirement income

“which build on the current analysis of what people need in retirement.”

According to the report, only 23% of people are unlike me and know how much they need to save to achieve an adequate retirement income. Workers of today must be encouraged to save more, and 70% of those workers say that targets would help them to do just that.

Unsurprisingly, I therefore argue that those targets must be incorporated into the Government’s version of the dashboard, and I ask that the industry does the same when developing its offering. In fact, that should be the minimum of our ambitions for this potentially transformative platform.

I ask the Government to approach the development of the dashboard platform with one aim in mind: ensuring that everyone saves more, but especially the young. The ease of access to data that the dashboard will provide should encourage that. Only 40% of millennials are likely to achieve an adequate retirement income. We are exposing ourselves to huge potential pressures on the welfare and social care systems—issues that we are already struggling to grapple with today—if current savers move into retirement without adequate income. Make no mistake: I do not believe that the dashboard is a silver bullet. However, it is at least a start. A well crafted and ambitious pensions dashboard is central to what I have described.

5 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing the debate. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for insurance and financial services.

I welcome the concept of the pensions dashboard. My hon. Friend the Minister knows that I am a huge fan of it. The world of work is changing. The Government estimate that people will have up to 11 jobs during their working life. That potentially means 11 different pension pots during that time, so it will be very difficult for people to keep track of the funds and work out how much money they will have when they stop working. I cannot claim to have had anywhere near as many jobs as my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling), but having had two jobs before this one, even I find it difficult to keep up to date with the pension funds and who administers them now. The issue is not just that I have changed jobs, but that the companies that administer the funds have changed because the funds have changed hands. It is really difficult to keep up with that.

Figures from the insurance company Aviva show that there is about £400 million-worth of unclaimed pension savings. That highlights the fact that people do not know how much they have or where their pensions are.

The Department for Work and Pensions estimates that, without the dashboard, 50 million pension pots will be dormant by 2050. I am therefore sure that, across the Chamber, we will agree that there is huge merit in the pensions dashboard, which will allow savers to view all their pension savings, including the state pension, in a single online place of their choosing. Certainly the feedback that we have had in the all-party group is that there is strong consumer support for that.

I congratulate the Minister on his tenacity in persevering with the pensions dashboard. I know that it has not always been straightforward, but he has seen this as a really good concept, and that is to be applauded.

I reiterate many of the points made by other hon. Members. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made an interesting point about his mum. My dad was a financial adviser, and I remember him saying to me when I was 17 and had my first job, "Put £10 a month into your pension pot. You'll never miss it." He was paying me only £15 a month at the time, I think, but I did not really miss it. There was good economic sense in doing that at the time. We need to get people engaged early in life. The more we can do that, the more their pots will accrue. With an ageing society, it is more important than ever to help people keep track of their pension savings, as I have said.

Having echoed those points, I want to raise just three points with the Minister, and I would be grateful for his remarks on them. First, I agree with the DWP and the Association of British Insurers that competition is key, so multiple dashboards should be available. That will encourage a greater level of innovation, personalisation and consumer orientation. The proposed collaborative approach between the industry and Government is absolutely the right one to take.

However, there is a worry in the industry—this point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon—that the state dashboard might be done first and then be followed by subsequent dashboards at a later date. Will the Minister comment on the current thinking on that? I think that it could lead to confusion, with people switching and so on, so it would seem sensible to launch them all together.

Secondly, I have heard concerns raised about the funding of both the dashboard and the single financial guidance body. The feedback is that it is important that all providers pay their fair share. There are worries that the proposed model, which uses only the Financial Conduct Authority levies, means that not all will contribute equally. I am thinking in particular of occupational pensions. Again, I would be grateful if the Minister commented on that.

My final point is something of a personal crusade. There is talk of a midlife MOT for people so that they can check where they are in life—how well they are doing and how prepared they are. I suggest that we go further than that and introduce checks every 10 years from point zero, where people are given feedback about their pension pots. If people see that the money starts at zero and they have to build it up by being in work and accruing a fund, I think it will encourage them to work. They will see that they are actually working towards their future by being employed and that if they want a better quality of life in retirement, putting more in their pension pot during their working life will assist that.

To conclude, I welcome the proposals and again thank the Minister for the work that he has done to get them on the table.

5.5 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Ms Ryan, I apologise for joining the debate slightly late. It is a pleasure, though, to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on this important debate. I entirely agree with much that has been said so far.

The key thing is that the pensions dashboard is a modern solution for modern needs, at a time when having a single-employer career and a defined-benefit pension is largely a minority and public sector exception to the rule. In today's world, as a result of the pension freedoms introduced by this Government, there are many opportunities for individuals both to access their pension and to pass it on. That means that, alongside the figure that my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire cited for unclaimed pensions, there is not only greater opportunity for people in how to use the pension pots they have accumulated, but greater uncertainty about how to use them and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) said, about how to access the relevant information. For all those reasons, a pensions dashboard is a very good thing.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to respond to just one thought. There are two aspects to the pensions dashboard. One is the technology, on which members of the ABI have made significant progress. No doubt we will hear more about that, because it is very encouraging. The other aspect is the preparation that is needed from pension providers. That is important because if the dashboard is up and ready but the information from the pension providers is not there, it will be as much use as a new car without wheels. That would be a very sad thing for the current cross-party consensus in the House that a pensions dashboard will be very useful for many people. I therefore encourage the Pensions Minister to say a few words about what the Government might do to encourage pension providers to ensure that when the technology is ready, everything on their side of the equation will be ready as well.

5.7 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) for initiating the debate. We have heard today, and I think we can all agree, that a pensions dashboard is a positive step. The utility of an online tool that shows users facts and figures about their pensions, such as how much money they can expect their pension pots to hold, is clear, particularly in view of the fact that research shows that 47% of the UK's population do not know how much their pension pots contain. Given that people have, on average, about 11 jobs in their lifetime, pension pots can be challenging to keep track of, as we have heard.

I know from my own constituents that there was some alarm when the UK Government appeared to distance themselves from the pensions dashboard pilot, before going on to announce that they would introduce multiple pensions dashboards. Nobody would argue that the UK Government should not work in partnership

[Patricia Gibson]

with the pensions industry to deliver a pensions dashboard, but it really should be the Government's responsibility. For the purposes of clarity and simplicity, there should be only one dashboard. If, as is proposed, there are multiple dashboards, the only thing we know for sure—and experts in the industry agree—is that there will be confusion and risk, and the whole thing may become ineffective. Ultimate responsibility for the delivery of a clean, simple, comprehensive and user-friendly pensions dashboard must rest with the Government and not the pensions services sector.

A proper pensions dashboard would allow people to see the value of their state, occupational and private pensions in one place, thereby helping them to keep better track of their pension income. In my correspondence and communication with the Minister on this matter, he has demonstrated no firm commitment to ensure that state pension data is included from the outset. I am keen to hear, unequivocally, that that has been reconsidered.

The Minister has offered me no commitment that providers will be compelled through legislation to contribute information or supply data to a pensions dashboard, as the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) pointed out. I am keen to hear that the Minister has also reconsidered that. According to experts in the field, not compelling providers to supply information will mean that the most important pensions data is not captured by the dashboard. It seems that private companies will develop a model for themselves. Now I hear that the pensions industry will take a lead on this matter. That risks the entire dashboard being incomplete and far less useful than it should be.

Many pensions experts have expressed concern that without strong commitment from the Government, the project may fail in its aims. If there is missing data in the pensions dashboard, it will be as useful as a recipe with only some of the ingredients listed. It seems that the UK Government will merely facilitate a dashboard, which I take to mean—perhaps I am wrong and the Minister will correct me—that it will be entirely in the hands of private companies and the information it contains may well be incomplete.

I know that the Government think that their plans for dashboards are revolutionary and radical—or transformative, as the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) said—and it is true that the potential is there, but I fear that it will not be met. I remind the Minister that a single dashboard is essential, not only for the reasons I have already given, but because it will provide a safeguard against scammers through restricted access. We know that consumers who have been scammed have been tricked out of an average of £91,000 of their pension savings. Those who work in this field have warned that unless the public are absolutely clear how many dashboards there are, multiple dashboards could make it easier for scammers to trick the public into divulging personal data, despite what the hon. Member for Hendon said.

We know that data security will be key in giving consumers confidence to use the dashboard to plan their retirement. I heard what the Minister had to say about data security, but I believe that there are ongoing concerns. I ask the Minister to take those concerns on board and to ensure that all those who are retired or are

planning to retire can have confidence in a single pensions dashboard that helps to support their understanding and management of their financial future. I believe that the Government must have ultimate responsibility for this, and they must not be seen to abdicate that responsibility to the private sector, given all the concerns I have raised.

5.12 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on raising this crucial debate at a crucial moment. To state the blindingly obvious, pensions are about a decent income in retirement, and ensuring security and dignity. To achieve those objectives, it is crucial that people know precisely what they have saved thus far, and what they need to do at the next stages to ensure that they are saving enough to enjoy a decent standard of living, and security and dignity in retirement.

The pensions landscape has been troubled, most recently through scandals around British Steel. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) was absolutely right. I will never forget the story of the shift supervisor in south Wales who wept as he told how he had been mis-sold a bad deal. Not only would he suffer as a consequence, but the 20 people he was responsible for supervising all followed his lead and all stood to lose. Pension cold-calling was an utter outrage. I will come back to that in a moment.

Are there still problems? Yes, there are. However, it is also right that we record that welcome progress is being made, cross-party, on four fronts. First, progress is being made on auto-enrolment. The Minister has heard me say before that I was proud to chair the policy discussions when Labour, then in government, appointed Adair Turner to carry out his inquiry, leading to the establishment of auto-enrolment. I welcome the continuity of that policy under this Government.

Is auto-enrolment perfect? The hon. Member for Hendon raised this issue earlier. No, it is not. There remain problems. Because of the threshold, 37% of female workers, 33% of workers with a disability and 28% of black, Asian and ethnic minority workers do not qualify. Auto-enrolment does not cover the self-employed or workers in the gig economy. Having said that, 10 million more people are now saving for their pension, and that is a thoroughly good thing.

Secondly, the Act that the Minister and I took through the House last year, which established the single financial guidance body and banned cold-calling, was a welcome step in the right direction. Thirdly—again, we have been working cross-party on this—the ground-breaking notion of collective defined contribution schemes marks significant progress. The historic agreement reached by Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union, covering 143,000 workers, delivered a pension outcome infinitely better than if the workers concerned had had to fall back on DC schemes.

Fourthly, the dashboard is a sign of progress. As the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) said, the dashboard is important, because to enjoy a decent income in retirement, one needs to know what one needs to save. There have been some fascinating initiatives taken within the industry. NOW: Pensions provided three examples for consumers: “If you want an old banger for the rest of your life in retirement, choose this

one; if you want to buy a new car in five to 10 years' time, choose this one; if you want to go somewhere exotic on holiday, choose this one." That is very interesting information, which helps to guide people, so that they know what they need to save. Crucially, in the first place, they need to know what they are entitled to, so the dashboard is absolutely key.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) was right when he said that there are billions of pounds locked away and unclaimed, which people are entitled to. Hopefully, the dashboard will help to overcome that problem, too. There is no question but that this is a welcome step in the right direction. I stress that we stand ready to work with the Government to give effect to primary legislation as quickly as possible. Yesterday, we spoke about the importance of progress on CDC pensions. The sooner a pensions Bill can be brought forward that focuses on those two areas in particular, the better. While the devil is in the detail, there is such substantial cross-party agreement that we want to get this legislated on, acted on, and taken to the next stage.

The dashboard is a welcome step in the right direction. There has been a great degree of dialogue and an extensive consultation, which is now closed. Some useful points were made in that consultation. The plans for the SFGB-run dashboard are welcome. I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that a non-commercial approach would be preferable. Indeed, one dashboard would be preferable. Against the background of what the Government are proposing, will legislation to compel providers to supply data be in place before the SFGB-run dashboard is live? That is key to ensuring that savers are not given a half-baked product at launch. Will the regulations that compel providers to comply cover all dashboards, or just the SFGB one? When will the state pension data be available to view on the dashboard? Will the Minister reassure us about the point made by the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire in relation to data security?

In conclusion, this is a historic and welcome step in the right direction. The Government need to listen to the concerns that have been raised, including in the consultative process, in order to get this right. The sooner that we can move forward to legislate and bring the dashboard into being, the better.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Thank you, Ms Ryan, for chairing this debate. I thank the 16 colleagues who have supported my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord). He has brought forward a debate that is clearly topical and important. In times when some might argue that Parliament is not debating matters, here is an example of a cross-party approach, to try to address a problem for our times with a modern, FinTech solution. I believe that has application to one and all.

There is no doubt that the pensions dashboard will be part of the FinTech revolution. It is a reform that can harness innovative technology to tech-charge pensions. It will provide accurate, secure and easy-to-understand information about people's pension pot in one place. Fundamentally, it is a democratiser. It will bring a traditional 20th-century—some would say 19th-century—industry into the 21st century, so that the information is available to one and all on an iPad, smartphone or

tablet. That is surely the right thing to do at a time when, as hon. Members have outlined, auto-enrolment has been transformational. Nearly 10 million people have auto-enrolled, and 1.4 million businesses are in a position to provide auto-enrolment to their workers.

I accept the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon, and I will put the auto-enrolment statistics in the Library for all Members. I will also see whether I can make a short written ministerial statement about putting it there. In his constituency, 14,000 people are benefiting from auto-enrolment, thanks to more than 2,000 employers on his patch who are supporting individuals in that way. The stats on how many individuals have the benefit of auto-enrolment, and how many business are supporting it, are available to hon. Members for each and every constituency.

As was rightly outlined by hon. Members, there is cross-party consensus. That is the right way forward, because pension policy works on a cross-party basis. The consultation closed on 28 January, and we hope to respond to it by approximately mid-March. It answers some of the points made by hon. Members. We hope that the dozens of responses submitted will provide further answers, and that the Government response will also provide some answers. Hon. Members will understand that I am constrained in how I can respond to matters raised today by the fact that I am making a live, formal response, but I will endeavour to respond to the best of my ability.

On the point about compelling individual providers, paragraph 180 of the consultation clearly sets out that it is the Government's intention to proceed to compulsion. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) raised the issue of the timetable for data provision by providers. I was interested to hear the suggestion of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent of a robust three-year time limit. Several providers responded to the consultation, and we will go through those responses in some detail.

There can be no doubt, however, that compulsion is coming, and that the only issue is the timeline. Certain providers could provide the data quite quickly. By and large, they know who they are, because they are the modern master trust providers that are already up to speed. Others will take longer. There is a legitimate debate to be had in this House, as we introduce the Bill, about whether we put in place a specific time limit for data provision, or whether that is done in secondary legislation, and with merely indicative outlines.

I will briefly deal with the Financial Conduct Authority. I am conscious of the evidence given at the Work and Pensions Committee today, and I have spoken to the Chair, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). I accept that there must be a better way to regulate pension transfers, and to give individuals advice on how they handle their money; there was examination of that point by the all-party Work and Pensions Committee. I welcome its views.

The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) said that simple is good. There is no doubt that the view of the Government, and of the vast majority of providers, is that simple is the way ahead. If the dashboard cannot be accessible on a laptop or mobile phone, and give an understanding of what assets an individual has in their

[Guy Opperman]

pension, there will be difficulties. We need to make a traditional, paper-based business accessible to the individual, and that is certainly what we will seek to do.

I do not have time to go into the detail of the difference between commercial and non-commercial providers of the dashboard. As set out in some detail in the consultation, however, it is definitely the Government's view that there should be a commercial and a non-commercial provider; they would provide individual dashboards. To harness industry innovation and maximise consumer engagement, the right way forward is to have an open standards approach that allows for multiple dashboards in the future.

However, the delivery body—it should be the single financial guidance body, as we set out in the consultation—should be the provider of a non-commercial dashboard that is effectively state-run through a third party. Such provision is obviously dependent on the delivery model and the delivery group that is set up. That works hand in hand with the response to the consultation, so I cannot give more detail, given where we are at this stage. I hope to update the House in the formal consultation response in March.

Nick Smith: The Minister did an elegant soft-shoe shuffle around my question about whether the FCA had sufficient capacity to deal with financial scammers. It would be unfair to press him on it now, but I ask him to challenge the FCA privately about whether it has enough people working for it to ensure that rogues are held to account.

Guy Opperman: We all wish to ensure that the difficulties that the hon. Gentleman's constituents went through with the British Steel pensions scheme do not happen again. I assure him that I met the FCA on Monday. It had an interesting time today in front of the Work and Pensions Committee. The views of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead are clear, and I will liaise with him on an ongoing basis. We know what direction we are going in, but with regard to how we proceed, the devil is in the detail. That relates to not just the transfer, but the advice to the individual thereafter, which is complex. There are various versions of a way ahead on that.

Several other issues have been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) made the point about funding. In other countries, funding has been provided through a levy system on the pensions business, as has traditionally been the case in this country. I will take away his point about occupational pensions, but I certainly anticipate that we will go down the levy route, unless others persuade me otherwise.

On my hon. Friend's other point about the timings of the non-commercial and the commercial dashboards, again relates to the response to the consultation, and is that a matter for the delivery organisation. There is no question but that we desire all organisations to be up to

speed as soon as possible. As for how we do the non-commercial and commercial dashboards at the speeds that we are talking about, that is something that we genuinely cannot say at present, but I take the point on board.

My hon. Friend knows that I am a passionate advocate of the mid-life MOT, and I am happy to discuss it in the House on an ongoing basis, because it is definitely the right thing for the future. Various companies, particularly Aviva and Hargreaves Lansdown, are pioneering it; more specifically, the Department for Work and Pensions is considering conducting one for some of its staff.

I am conscious of the time, and that I must give my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon a minute to respond to the debate. I thank hon. Members for their many recommendations. I hope that the dashboard can be used across all financial products, so that our banking apps, and information about our pension providers and our savings, all become available to us in that way in the longer term. I welcome the cross-party support that clearly exists in the House for it, and I look forward to developing it with hon. Members.

5.29 pm

Dr Offord: I thank all hon. Members who attended the debate, even though the House has adjourned.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about saving from an early age, which is something I did with my first TSB account; the dashboard will encourage that. My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) spoke about the £19 billion in lost pensions, which is a sum that could help many people across the country, if it could ever be identified who the money belonged to.

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) talked about the importance of there being clarity about providers, and the inclusion of the state pension, which is a good idea. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) spoke about individuals being in control and the triple lock, which are both good things.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) raised the issue of the mid-life MOT; I would certainly like to see such an MOT for every decade. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) spoke about the pensions value accrued over his career, and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke about the single dashboard provider. The inclusion of state pensions would be interesting, as I said.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) brings great experience to the debate, particularly as a former trade unionist. He spoke about the achievements. Finally, I thank the Minister for all his work. He has made pensions interesting.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 6 February 2019

DEFENCE

Ministry of Defence Votes A Annual Estimate 2019-20

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): The Ministry of Defence Votes A estimate 2019-20, will be laid before the House on 6 February 2019 as HC 1852. This outlines the maximum numbers of personnel to be maintained for each service in the armed forces during financial year 2019-20.

[HCWS1303]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Leaving the EU: Reciprocal Healthcare Legislation

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Current European Union (EU) reciprocal healthcare arrangements enable UK nationals¹ to access healthcare when they live, study, work, or travel in the EU and vice versa for EU citizens² when in the UK. They give people retiring abroad more security; they support tourism and businesses and facilitate healthcare co-operation.

These arrangements ensure that UK nationals living and working in the EU, European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland can access healthcare in exchange for paying taxes and social security contributions. The UK also funds healthcare abroad for a number of current or former UK residents. This includes healthcare for UK state pensioners who spend their retirement in the EU and needs arising healthcare when UK residents visit the EU for holiday or study through the European healthcare insurance card (EHIC) scheme.

The Government's priority is to secure a withdrawal agreement with the EU. However, as a responsible Government, we are preparing for all eventualities, including the possibility the UK leaves the EU without a deal. If necessary, the UK would like to make arrangements with individual EU member states to ensure that there are no immediate changes to people's access to healthcare after exit day and that there is a strong basis for ongoing co-operation on health issues. The UK is therefore seeking to maintain reciprocal healthcare rights for pensioners, workers, students, tourists and other visitors in line with the current EU arrangements, including reimbursement of healthcare costs, for a transitional period lasting until 31 December 2020. This is only possible with agreement from other member states and we have commenced discussions on this issue.

The Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill (the Bill) is being brought forward as a result of the UK's exit from the EU; however, it is forward-facing and not intended to deal only with EU exit. The Bill is intended to support the implementation of comprehensive reciprocal healthcare arrangements with countries both within and outside the EU to enable possible future partnerships.

The Bill can be used to implement complex bilateral arrangements with a member state that may differ to current EU arrangements, or to make unilateral arrangements to assist UK nationals to access healthcare

abroad in exceptional circumstances and in the interests of patient safety. The Bill also provides the legal basis to fund and process data relating to healthcare outside of the United Kingdom.

The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 will convert EU law as it stands on exit day into UK domestic law and preserve the laws made in the UK to implement EU obligations. This means that EU regulations providing for EU reciprocal healthcare arrangements will become part of the UK's statute book on exit day. Without further legislation, in a no-deal scenario the regulations would not be coherent or workable without reciprocity from member states. Therefore, on 7 February, the Government will bring forward two statutory instruments under section 8 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, to prevent, remedy or mitigate deficiencies in retained EU law relating to reciprocal healthcare.

These instruments also afford the UK an additional mechanism for ensuring there is no interruption to healthcare arrangements for UK nationals³ after exit day in those member states who agree to maintain the current arrangements for a transitional period. Through these instruments, the UK can transitionally maintain current EU reciprocal healthcare arrangements for countries where we have established reciprocity during an interim period lasting until 31 December 2020 and no later. The arrangements would not apply to member states who do not agree to maintain the current reciprocal arrangements with us.

Together with the Bill, these instruments are focused on supporting a smooth transition as we exit the EU. Both of these legislative vehicles are necessary to ensure the UK Government are ready to deal with reciprocal and cross-border healthcare in any scenario. They afford the UK Government flexibility of action and ensure the UK is able to respond quickly to protect people's healthcare.

The Bill and the forthcoming statutory instruments are intended to support further preparations the UK Government are making with regard to reciprocal healthcare arrangements. The Government have issued advice via the Government and NHS websites to UK nationals living in the EU, to UK residents travelling to the EU and to EU nationals living in the UK. This advice explains how the UK is working to maintain reciprocal healthcare arrangements, but that their continuation depends on decisions by member states. It sets out what options people might have to access healthcare under local laws in the member state they live in if we do not have bilateral arrangements in place, and what people can do to prepare. Our advice to people travelling abroad after exit day is to purchase travel insurance, as we already recommend now. These webpages will be updated as more information becomes available.

The Bill and the statutory instruments feed into a broader body of work by the Department of Health and Social Care and across the UK Government, to ensure health and social care systems are well prepared as we exit the EU.

¹ This is a short-hand term for persons who are the responsibility of the UK. They may or may not be UK nationals.

² This is a short-hand term for EU27/EEA/Swiss-insured individuals i.e. persons who are the responsibility of an EU or EEA member state or Switzerland.

³ Please see footnote 1.

Kark Review

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): On 23 May 2018, the House was informed that the Government had asked Tom Kark QC to carry out a review of the scope, operation and purpose of the fit and proper person requirement. Tom Kark has now completed his review having engaged on these issues with a range of interested parties, including the Care Quality Commission, NHS improvement, NHS England, and parliamentarians who had expressed an interest. We are today publishing his report on the review of the fit and proper person test as it applies to directors within the health services in England.

Our senior leaders are critical to the delivery of high quality and safe care in the NHS. We owe them our thanks and respect and we need to support them and ensure that they have the right skills and competencies to do these most challenging roles. The review underlines the importance of supporting the vast majority of NHS directors to do a good job and what more could be done in strengthening the leadership in the NHS.

Tom Kark has made seven recommendations and the Government accept in principle the recommendations to develop specified standards of competence that all directors who sit on the board of any health providing organisation should meet, and to create a central database of directors. We will consider all other recommendations including a mandatory reference requirement and a recommendation to introduce a power to disbar directors for serious misconduct. Tom Kark has also recommended that the fit and proper person test should be extended to clinical commissioning groups and appropriate arm's length bodies.

It is important we consider this review alongside other proposals on leadership and development for NHS managers. I have therefore asked Baroness Harding to look at how best to implement these recommendations through the system wide workforce implementation process which she is chairing and which is set out in the NHS long term plan. We have asked Baroness Harding to consider a range of options and to ensure that she draws on the views of key partners.

I am keen to see the NHS open up to a diverse range of talented individuals from outside the NHS, beyond the traditional NHS background, and more with clinical backgrounds. Excellent NHS directors are vital to delivering a high standard of care and are committed to serving the needs of patients and service users. It is important that we focus on leadership and enhancing the strength of NHS managers as a profession, while dealing appropriately with the small minority of directors whose conduct raises concerns about their suitability for their post.

I would like to thank Tom Kark and his team for their work in delivering this important report.

A copy of the report has been deposited in the Library of both Houses.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Enforcement against Unauthorised Encampments

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): We are fortunate to live in one of the most welcoming countries in the world, which has a proud tradition of promoting respect for the rule of law, for property, and for one another. The Government are committed to creating a just and fair country, where equality of opportunity flourishes and the life chances of all are enhanced.

Recent debates in this House have addressed the topic of unauthorised traveller encampments and Members have voiced their constituents' concerns regarding the impact on both settled and nomadic populations. Ministers across the Government have been deeply troubled by these concerns, particularly by the widespread perception that the rule of law does not apply to those who choose a nomadic lifestyle, and the sense that available enforcement powers do not protect settled communities adequately.

Unauthorised encampments can cause settled communities significant distress, and for some they perpetuate a negative image of the travelling community, the vast majority of whom are law-abiding citizens.

Recognising these concerns, the Government launched a consultation in April last year on the effectiveness of enforcement against unauthorised developments and encampments. Through this consultation, we sought views from a number of stakeholders—including local authorities, police forces, travelling communities and the general public—on whether there is anything we can do to ensure that existing powers can be used more effectively and if additional powers are required.

A cross-Government response to the consultation will be issued in due course. From an enforcement perspective, the consultation responses signalled clear calls for the Government to take action. We have identified a set of measures to extend powers available to the police, which we believe will enable unauthorised encampments to be tackled more effectively.

First, we will look to amend section 62A of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to permit the police to direct trespassers to suitable authorised sites located in neighbouring local authority areas. Currently, the police can only direct trespassers to sites within the same local authority area. Extending this power would make it more likely that the police and local authorities could act where a shortage of site capacity exists.

Secondly, we will look to amend sections 61 and 62A of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to increase the period of time in which trespassers directed from land would be unable to return. Currently, the power prohibits a trespasser from returning to the area of land for three months. We plan to extend this time period to 12 months. This would provide greater protection to land targeted by the same group of trespassers on a regular basis.

Thirdly, we will look to amend section 61 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to lower the number of vehicles needing to be involved in an unauthorised encampment before police powers can be exercised. The number is currently six or more. We would like to change this to two or more. This will

increase the opportunity for police intervention and make it more difficult for trespassers to split into smaller groups to avoid enforcement.

Fourthly, we will look to amend section 61 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to enable the police to remove trespassers from land that forms part of the highway. The police are currently restricted in dealing with these encampments unless there is a suitable pitch in the same local authority area. We would like to remove this restriction so that it is easier for the police to tackle problematic encampments.

I am pleased to announce that the Home Office will soon launch a public consultation on these measures.

Our original consultation responses were clear that the majority of respondents believe we should consider criminalising unauthorised encampments, as has been done in the Republic of Ireland. This view has been echoed in the wide ranging debates in this House. I am therefore pleased to announce that we will conduct a review into how we can achieve this.

In taking this forward, the Home Office will work closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Ministry of Justice, and also the Welsh Government, recognising that local government is devolved in Wales.

I thank Members across this House for their engagement on this important issue.

[HCWS1302]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Unauthorised Development and Encampments

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Government have today published their response to the consultation on powers for dealing with unauthorised development and encampments. This statement should be read alongside the written ministerial statement on improving the effectiveness of enforcement against unauthorised encampments made today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department.

Since 2010, the Government have taken concerted action to address these matters, including issuing revised planning guidance on enforcement, updated policy, and reforms to temporary stop notices. In March 2015, the Government issued advice on dealing with illegal and unauthorised encampments to all local authorities, the police and landowners to encourage them to work collaboratively to tackle unauthorised encampments, and to remind them of the array of powers which exist for tackling such situations.

In terms of wider Government support for the provision of traveller sites, the new homes bonus provides an incentive for local authorities to encourage housing growth in their areas, and rewards net increases in effective housing stock, including the provision of authorised traveller pitches. In addition, the £9 billion Affordable Homes programme will provide a wider range of homes to meet the housing needs of people in different circumstances and different housing markets,

including funding for new traveller pitches. We have also seen that the number of caravans on authorised sites has increased from 14,498 in July 2010 to 19,569 in July 2018, showing that the locally led planning system is working.

But the responses received in our consultation were clear that significant problems are created by many unauthorised encampments. Responses highlighted the sense of unease and intimidation residents feel when an unauthorised encampment occurs, the frustration at not being able to access amenities, public land and business premises, and the waste and cost that is left once the encampment has moved on.

That is why the Government are today setting out a comprehensive range of further measures across multiple Government Departments and agencies, which will help to achieve the Government's overarching aim of fair and equal treatment for travellers, while respecting the interests of the settled community. The package includes:

- a set of measures to extend powers available to the police, to enable unauthorised encampments to be tackled more effectively

- a review into the potential criminalisation of unauthorised encampments

- new statutory good practice guidance to support local authorities use of powers to deal with unauthorised encampments and a commitment to keep these powers under review, particularly in instances of deliberate and repeated breaches of planning

- a commitment to further work to ensure that measures are in place to address issues around the clean-up costs which can occur following an unauthorised encampment

- up to £1.5 million of funding for local authorities to support planning enforcement through the next round of the planning delivery fund, helping them deal with unauthorised development

- a commitment that the Government are minded to extend the period of time that a temporary stopping notice can be in place for

- guidance making clear that the Secretary of State will be prepared to review cases where concerns are raised that there is too high a concentration of authorised traveller sites in one location

- a commitment to consult on options for strengthening policy on intentional unauthorised development, helping to maintain confidence and fairness in the planning system

- work to make information on permanent and transit sites freely available in open data format so that local authorities have a single clear source of data on the availability of such sites

- a reiteration of the planning obligations which local authorities already have to make transit sites available and for joint working between authorities on the setting of pitch and plot targets.

Finally, I am keenly aware of evidence showing that members of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities have significantly worse health and education outcomes than the rest of society, and of the prevalence of domestic abuse in these communities. I will ensure that my Department's forthcoming response to our review of domestic abuse service provision takes into account the support needs of victims from this community, and I will work with my colleagues across Government on a strategic approach to improving outcomes for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, as well as settled communities.

[HCWS1305]

TRANSPORT

HS2 Construction Partner: Southern Stations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I would like to update the House on the progress of High Speed 2.

As part of this Government's industrial strategy we are investing in High Speed 2, a transformational infrastructure project that will improve people's journeys, create jobs, generate economic growth and help to rebalance our country's economy. HS2 is more than a railway and the project's vision is to be a catalyst for economic growth. It has cross-party support and support from councils, LEAs, metro Mayors and businesses who can see the transformational potential.

HS2 is making progress and the benefits are already being seen, notably in the investment and job creation in the west midlands in advance of HS2 services, and around 7,000 jobs have been supported so far, rising to around 30,000 at peak.

Parliament has approved the powers to proceed with phase 1 of the railway, between London and the west midlands, and we are making significant progress. Early works are well under way: HS2 Ltd has revealed the designs for new stations in Old Oak Common, Birmingham Interchange and Birmingham Curzon Street; enabling works on the route are progressing; decommissioning and preparatory works are taking place.

As has been seen with Stratford station in east London, railway stations have enormous power to transform their local surroundings. It is why I approved the

appointment of a master development partner (Lendlease) on 22 February 2018 to assist HS2 Ltd in delivering the new Euston station development. This will not only provide unparalleled levels of accessibility, ease and convenience for our passengers, but ensure work with local communities to help unlock wider regeneration, new jobs, homes and opportunities.

Last year, the tender shortlist for a construction partner for the two southern stations was released. In a clear signal of how work is progressing, this morning I am pleased to announce the intention to award these important positions to a joint venture between Mace Ltd and Dragados S.A. for Euston and a joint venture between Balfour Beatty Group Ltd, VINCI Construction UK Ltd, VINCI Construction Grands Projets SAS and SYSTRA Ltd for Old Oak Common. They will bring their global construction management expertise to these vitally important pieces of national infrastructure.

This demonstrates how progress is continuing at pace in order to deliver stations that will be embraced by their local communities, drive economic growth and improve rail journeys for passengers, while at the same time delivering this phase of the project to schedule and cost.

The progress we are making with HS2 is clear evidence that the Government are delivering the infrastructure our country needs to build a stronger, fairer, more prosperous Britain.

[HCWS1300]

Petitions

Wednesday 6 February 2019

PRESENTED PETITIONS

Petitions presented to the House but not read on the Floor

The future of maintained nursery schools

The Petition of the parents, carers and staff of Grasmere Nursery School in Luton; received 5 February 2019.

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by the Government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc—[Presented by Kelvin Hopkins.]

[P002414]

Petitions in the same terms were presented by:

The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Charles Walker):

The petition of the parents, careers, staff and governors of Greenfield maintained nursery school in Waltham Cross.

[P002336]

The petition of the parents, careers, staff and governors of Arlesdene Nursery School maintained nursery school and Pre-school in Hertfordshire

[P002337]

The hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Jonathan Djanogly):

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors and local community of Huntingdon Nursery School, maintained nursery school in Cambridgeshire.

[P002398]

The hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell):

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Rowland Hill Nursery, maintained nursery school in Haringey London,

[P002402]

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Woodlands Park, maintained nursery school in Haringey,

[P002403]

The petition of The parents, carers, staff, governors and other local community contacts of Kintore Way maintained nursery school in Southwark.

[P002406]

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Pembury House, maintained nursery school in Haringey,

[P002407]

The petition of The parents, carers, staff and governors of Ribblesdale Nursery School, maintained nursery school in Clitheroe, Lancashire,

[P002409]

The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy):

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Church Hill and Low Hill maintained nursery schools in Waltham Forest.

[P002411]

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury, the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer):

The Petition of the parents, cares, staff and governors of Moss hall maintained nursery school in Barnet.

[P002412]

The hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins):

The Petition of the parents, carers and staff of Gill Blowers Nursery School in Luton.

[P002413]

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Chapel Street, Gill Blowers, Grasmere, Hart Hill, Pastures Way and Rothesay maintained nursery schools in Luton.

[P002415]

The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Charles Walker):

The petition of The parents, carers, staff and governors of Rye Park, maintained nursery school in Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire,

[P002397]

The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Jim Cunningham):

The petition of the parents, careers, staff and governors of Hillfields maintained nursery school in Coventry.

[P002416]

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Sale of Jackson Lane Car Park

The Humble Petition of residents of Wellingborough, Northamptonshire and the surrounding area, Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the proposed sale of the Jackson Car Park, should be refused on the grounds of the loss of public parking in the area which will have an enormous effect on local businesses, doctors surgery, the chemists, the Salvation Army, the Afro Caribbean Association, the Daylight Centre, the Society of Friends, the Job Centre and the United Reformed Church.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Borough Council in Wellingborough to take in account the concerns of the petitioners and refuse to grant the sale of the Jackson Lane Car Park to a private developer.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.—[Presented by Mr Peter Bone, Official Report, 12 September 2018; Vol. 646, c. 829.]

[P002263]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak):

Parking is the responsibility of local authorities and it is for them to determine what is appropriate in their own area. Central Government have no remit to intervene in local authorities' day to day affairs.

However, under the Community Right to Bid legislation community groups have listed car parks as assets of community value. The scheme allows communities and parish councils to nominate buildings or land for listing by the local authority as Assets of Community Value. Any asset can be listed if its principal use furthers, or has recently furthered, their community's social well-being or social interests which include cultural, sporting or recreational interests, and is likely to do so in the future.

I should point out that the listing of Assets of Community Value is a matter for the local authority and as such the Department does not comment on individual cases.

If successful, listed and made available for sale, community interest groups then have six weeks (the interim moratorium period) to lodge a non-binding expression of interest. This triggers a moratorium of a further four and half months (six months in total—the full moratorium period) to delay the sale of the asset. This affords community interest groups sufficient time to prepare and raise money to bid for it.

What the scheme does not do is compel the owner to sell to a community group, or set the price at which the owner must sell. The scheme seeks to balance the rights of private property owners with the interests of the community where the local authority agrees that the asset in question is an Asset of Community Value.

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**not later than
Wednesday 13 February 2019**

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